Finding a Place in the World

by Pandoras_loss

Summary

Alternate post-Apocalyptic universe Supernatural.

A new life. A new family. A new universe, one that is desolate and hopeful. The scenery may change, but the job never really does. What does it mean to be a Winchester? What does it mean to be a hunter? What makes life worth living? For Dean, Sam, their counterparts from other universes, Cas, Beth, and the rest of their family, trying find their place in the world now that the mission from Chuck is over, proves anything but easy. When one job finishes, another begins, and soul searching on who and they are and what they want is only the start of it.

Notes

It is strongly advised that people read This Is Your Choice (Part 1), Regrets Lead Nowhere Good (Part 2), Finding Survivors (Part 3), Rising Up Through the Ashes (Part 4), God's Plan (Part 5), Working Holiday (Part 6), and The Mission (Part 7) first.

I do not own the rights or credit for creating Supernatural or the characters from the show, including: Sam and Dean Winchester, Castiel, Gabriel, John Winchester, or Mary Winchester to name a few.

Original characters created by me: Elsbeth (Beth) Foley, Rogue Winchester.

Chapters are written in the the first person when the point of view comes from Beth, and
alternating chapters are written in the third person when the point of view comes from another character that is the focus. Typically, the focus of the third person chapters is mentioned in the first or second sentence.

There is bad language and graphic violence in this. There is also sex.

This first chapter is from the point of view of solo-Dean (the one they stopped Crowley from taking to get the First Blade and now the longest surviving Dean on the team).
Finding a Job

Chapter Notes

This is from the solo-Dean's POV.

Dean surveyed the camp. It looked exactly the way it had on the show. Made it seem a little like he was on the set of a movie or something. It was surreal. The thing that made it different from all the other jumps he’d done was that this was it. There was no task for him to complete before moving onto the next place. He was home. It was a little weird to think of a universe as home. He’d spent his entire life living somewhere else, thinking that life was it . . . Earth, Heaven, Hell, Purgatory, the Fairy Realm he never wanted to go back to again . . . but it turns out that there were a lot of universes just like his. This universe had its own versions of those places, but this one was also almost empty, which made it seem bigger.

He guessed it didn’t look empty right now, because this camp was pretty full . . . full of a bunch of kids, but the next closest place with any kind of population was . . . probably McGregor, Iowa at 5 hours . . . not in the snow. It was almost 6 to Lebanon, 8 to Sayner, Wisconsin, and 10 to the camp in Colorado . . . again, not in the snow. There weren’t a whole lot of angels left. He didn’t know how many demons were left. He’d say there were a lot, like billions, if you went through everyone who’d ever lived or died here, but probably only a fraction of what there had been.

What was he supposed to do now? He guessed that the second he conned Purgatory Dean into letting him join this mission he’d officially quit hunting. He hadn’t hunted in he didn’t know how long. He’d had to know everything you needed to be a hunter, so he could put up wards or fight off other versions of him or talk to other versions of him that were hunters, but actually hunting . . . he hadn’t done it. What he was supposed to do here wasn’t hunting. Hunting was investigating a case, saving people, killing the monsters, and rolling out of town.

Here you were more likely to find a monster than another human. You had to test everyone you came across. Even humans here were monsters more often than not. If you wanted to kill monsters, you could get coordinates from Jody, who got them from Bobby, head out to kill the monsters and keep them from being a problem for some unsuspecting future victim you may never meet.

There were big threats out there to go up against, like the witches in New Orleans, but the Winchesters from this universe had already cleared a lot of those things . . . on this continent at least. He wondered how other countries were doing . . . maybe as well or not as well. It was hard to know. Maybe there were more Alphas out there who’d started their own armies for Eve in places like Asia or Europe.

If you wanted to save people, you had to search for them house to house, block to block, town to town and bring them to one of the camps . . . maybe you might get to kill monsters that way, but that wasn’t really hunting, or at least not the kind of hunting he was used to doing.

What were his other options? He could stay here, and maybe help train the kids he didn’t really think should be hunting how to hunt. He could go out and train the kids how to hunt, like they were on work experience . . . the thought of it almost made him want to laugh if it wasn’t so sad. He guessed it was something they needed to learn to do, because it was the only way to survive, but hunting was . . . well, he knew on a fundamental level how screwed up it was to train kids how to
hunt even though he'd been raised that way. Maybe it was because he'd been raised that way that he knew, and here he'd be complicit in doing the same thing to these kids, but then what choice did he have? When monsters outnumbered people, these kids needed to know how to fight, and there's no way he'd let them go out there to confront monsters without him.

Maybe if he approached it like that instead of training them to actively go out there and look for trouble by hunting, he could live with it. But these kids wouldn't be fooled by that. They'd notice that he was the one always stepping in to confront the monsters to keep them from having to do it, and they all wanted to be hunters, so maybe they'd start trying to sneak out and do it on their own. Hunting was the new norm, which meant it wasn’t really hunting at all. Hunting was something you did under the radar, not something seen as . . . he didn’t know, it was like an elite task force here.

If he started taking kids out hunting, maybe he'd do more harm than good by not actually letting them hunt. He could stay here and help teach. Teach what, he didn’t know . . . apparently the Dean from here was teaching auto repair, so he guessed that was covered. He could help in the kitchens . . . try to find ways to make whatever it was they ate here pass for real food. If he did that, he could be here at the camp 24/7 in case the camp came under attack. He could go out to find supplies, and while he was doing that, he guessed he’d be trying to find people and kill monsters . . . again not really hunting. He could . . . what else could he do? If he moved to Wisconsin, he could be a baker or fisher or farmer, and all of those were laughable to him, but if he didn’t do those, he could be head of security. He wouldn’t do that, because he thought he was needed here, but they were options. Helping Bobby in the bunker was an option.

He had so many options and they all fit within his area of expertise, and he wasn’t used to that. He’d always had a skill set that was perfect for one thing, and now . . . now he could do anything he wanted. It was a hard realization to come to now that he saw it laid out in front of him. This was it. This was his reality now.

He wondered what he was supposed to do right now, to be honest. They should probably do something instead of just standing up here . . . felt like the kids were appraising them to see if they were worthy. Beth . . . well, she’d just gone off on Chuck, and that meant she probably had a reason for it. He didn’t know what happened there, but he’d find out later. Anyway, she didn’t need to prove she was worthy here. She’d done that for these kids over and over again. He could . . . what else could he do? If he moved to Wisconsin, he could be a baker or fisher or farmer, and all of those were laughable to him, but if he didn’t do those, he could be head of security. He wouldn’t do that, because he thought he was needed here, but they were options. Helping Bobby in the bunker was an option.

Now probably wasn’t the time for him to suggest a run through of the training course here, but he’d bet by tomorrow he and the others would all have to run through it. And that brought him back to the dilemma of what he was supposed to do now, this second . . . something. He didn’t have Rogue to take care of anymore if her Dad was back. Wasn’t sure how he felt about that. Had kind of gotten used to the idea that doing that was his job. What about Beth? He’d gotten used to thinking the same about her, and just when he had, things had changed.

What was he supposed to do here? He didn’t even know where he was staying. Looking over at the others . . . Cas was . . . well, Cas was alive, and he was finding out from Gabriel what had happened. Even for Cas, it had to be a shock to the system to die and then show up back here only to find out you'd been gone for months, not seconds. ‘Evil’ Sam wasn’t saying anything to anyone, but the new ‘good’ Sam was watching him. Sucked that Purgatory Sam and Dean were both dead
and had stayed dead. Dean had kinda liked them, but he guessed that they knew the risks when
they signed on for all of this. John and Mary were talking to one another and holding onto their
kids instead of letting them go mingle with the other kids here . . . He bet that despite what Mary
had told Beth when they signed on for this, she wouldn’t let her sons be raised as hunters . . .
maybe when she’d thought Beth and the Mark of Cain Dean would be raising them here, she’d
been okay with it, because it’s where they lived, but now that she was here and had a choice, he bet
she took them to one of the other camps. The other two Deans . . . neither one of them looked like
they knew what to do here any better than Dean did . . . Except he had probably a better idea of
what was going on around here than either of them.

He’d had a chance to see the whole show, and the Mopey Dean who wasn’t as mopey as he had
been before he started watching the show hadn’t finished it. Dean was still going to call him the
Mopey Dean. He knew Beth called that Dean the Despondent Dean . . . same thing. They should
still stick with calling him what they knew him as even if he wasn’t mopey anymore.

The MoC Dean had memories of picking through Beth’s head when he was a demon, so he was
probably the next best informed about this place. But he had a lot of crap to work out now that he
didn’t have the Mark and wasn’t part of 2 people in one . . . Dean was thinking they should still
call that Dean the MoC Dean, because it made the most sense even though he didn’t have the MoC
anymore. It’s what he’d had when they met him, so that’s the way his name should stay. It was too
confusing otherwise.

Dean guessed he’d probably still be called the solo-Dean even though the MoC Dean didn’t have
his brother here either. Dean was all right with that. Made him think of Han Solo. Kind of made
him laugh when he thought of Chewie . . . Maybe that’s what he should do . . . explain the ogre to
the kids. That’s what he was going to do when he felt someone pull on his pant leg. Looking down,
he saw a group of kids . . . they were younger, maybe 6 or 7. “You can be ours.”

He took a knee to be closer to their height and said, “I can be your what?”

They looked at the other Deans on display and said, “Rogue’s Dad spends most of his time with
the teens. You can train us like Adam used to train us.”

They looked over their shoulder at one of the kids who was a little older to see if they’d gotten
their lines right, or Dean guessed that’s what they were doing. The older boy looked like he was
maybe 12 or 13. Dean recognized that kid. “Adrien, right?”

The kid threw him a wary look before taking a few steps forward. “I’m guessing that if you’re here
with Beth, you’re not a shifter or Leviathan . . . still gotta go through the tests.”

Dean rolled up his sleeve to expose his forearm and went to reach for his silver knife that he’d had
on him throughout the mission. The one Beth had given him had disappeared between universes,
but since he’d had this on him when he left his universe, it’d stayed with him. He wondered if she’d
gotten her knife back and then wondered if she did, if he could he still have it. When he was done
running the sharp side of his silver knife across his forearm, Dean looked up at Adrien to see if the
kid thought he’d passed, and Adrien shook his head. “You don’t have to cut yourself. If you do that
every time you’re tested, you won’t have much of an arm left.”

Dean smiled briefly before saying, “I’ll keep that in mind.” His eyes landed on the knife Adrien
had gotten out to test him. “That yours?”

Adrien gave him a single nod and answered, “Beth gave it to me.”

Seems she had a habit of giving away cool knives, and then Dean remembered when Adrien
must've gotten it. “When you guys were attacked by the weredemons?” Adrien didn’t give anything away, so Dean said, “You got any Borax?” Adrien pulled out a water gun and shot Dean in the face with it. Wiping his face, Dean asked, “We good?”

“Well, you’re not a shifter or Leviathan . . . too big and too male to be a changeling or a mother changeling. You’re not a djinn. Don’t look like a vamp. You’re not –“

“How do you know I don’t look like a vamp?”

“Vamps have a look. You don’t have it. Could check you for fangs, but unless I cut myself, you wouldn’t show them without a fight . . . unless you were about to bite one of us. Just behead you if you tried.”

Dean tried to hide his smile and then said, “What about a demon?”

“Borax was mixed in holy water.”

“Not bad.”

“Well, I don’t have an iron knife, and the water gun gives you a safe distance . . . I can understand how you might know about the weredemons if my Dean and Beth told you about it, but how’d you know who I am just by seeing me?”

“Gabriel had me watch a show about this universe. You were in it.”

Adrien smiled, and the excitement it expressed transformed him into the kid he actually was.

“Yeah? Like the one Beth watched?”

“You know about that?”

“Yeah, we know as much about them as we do any of the things we learn in school.”

“To keep an eye on them?”

Adrien smiled again, but it was a smile that said he was wise beyond his years. “No. How well do you know your family? They’re ours.” Looking down the line of new adults, Adrien asked, “Which ones are yours?”

Dean ducked his head briefly before saying, “None of ‘em . . . I left my brother behind. My parents died a long time ago. I mean the blonde woman and the guy she’s talking to look like my Mom and Dad, but they aren’t them. The kids they’re with are me and Sam when we were kids . . . the others call me solo-Dean.”

“Solo-Dean, huh? Bet that’s annoying. Probably went by Dean Winchester your entire life until you met them.”

Dean smiled. “Yeah.”

Leaning closer, Adrien whispered, “That name means something here.”

“I know.”

“No, I mean it really means something. Maybe not to the adults, but to the kids . . . it used to be something demons told us to keep us in line . . . ‘Be good or Dean Winchester will get you’ . . . now we use it to keep the smaller kids from getting scared . . . ‘Don’t worry. If someone scares you, tell them Dean Winchester will get them, and if they don’t know who Dean Winchester is,
they will, because he’ll end anyone that hurts you or takes you from us.”

“Living legend?”

Adrien smiled again. “Yeah . . . yeah, that’s a good way to describe it. Can you live up to that?”

“I, uh . . . I’m not a living legend type. I hunt. That’s what I know. Not used to people knowing what I do.”

“But the people you save do, right?”

“I guess. Think most of them probably forget all about me when I –“

“No, nobody forgets the person who saves their life . . . You’re coming from a life like the one we used to have, right?”

“You mean with electricity, showers, things like that?”

“Well, we have showers and electricity . . . from wells we dug and generators we have to keep going, but yeah.”

“That obvious?”

“Well, you look like a hunter, just a . . . one that’s used to an easy life.”

Dean breathed out a laugh. “An easy life, huh?”

Adrien grinned. “Maybe . . . You know the difference between what you’re used to and now?”

“What?”

“You have to work harder for things that used to be easy, but they mean more and so do the people in your life.”

Okay? “What’s that have to do living up to my name?”

“That’s the only difference. Keep doing what you’ve always done. That’s what will make you a living legend around here.”

“How do you know –“

“Because if you bragged about being a hunter, I’d think you were full of it. You didn’t. You downplayed it, just like the Dean I know . . . so do you want the job or not?”

“What job?”

“Taking over on the training for the younger kids.”

So, this was his interview? “What about Beth and Dean? Thought maybe –“

Adrien smiled again and said, “Everyone 10 and under is my responsibility, so I had to make sure you were up for the job.”

“Who’s in charge of you?”

“Ben.”
Dean looked around the rest of the kids. “Braeden?”

“Yeah.”

He’d almost forgotten about Ben being here. “And Ty is in charge of everyone?”

“No, Dean and Beth are, but Ty and Jenna keep us in line.”

“Might have to leave the camp from time to time.”

“I know. We all know. Maybe now you can alternate on it though, so somebody is always here?”

Adrien gave him something of a hopeful look, and Dean found him saying, “Deal . . . you wanna show me around?”
Sam’s attention flicked from the Evil Sam to solo-Dean. It looked like some of the kids were taking solo-Dean on a tour of the place? Sam could use a tour right now. He wanted to get as far away from his mirror image as possible. It was only an hour ago that he was thinking that he was glad he never had to see this guy, and now there he was. Why would Chuck do that? Ultimate trickster seemed about right. God was a big let down, and Sam found himself thinking . . . well, maybe the only person who could get by with talking to God that way was Beth, but Sam was all right with what she’d said.

How could the evil Sam be allowed another free pass? Everything he did . . . Sam looked around at the kids here. A few of them he recognized from that show, and here they were. Not only did it make everything he’d watched seem more believable . . . but it also made what the evil dick wearing his face did seem more real. The only good thing that he could find about the evil Sam being here is that now Sam could definitely say he wasn’t that guy.

Watching it on TV had made him think that he could’ve been that guy, because he could see the similarities. The evil Sam’s flaws were Sam’s flaws, but exaggerated. It made him question who he was and what he was capable of doing, but seeing the evil Sam alive and in the flesh meant that while he was capable of doing bad things, he hadn’t, or at least he hadn’t done what that guy did. He guessed that he had destroyed his own universe, but he hadn’t been as ruthless about it. Plus, he’d died for his sins . . . that Sam . . . the evil one . . . he’d been given chance after chance and finally his chances had been used up, or they should’ve been, but there he was, still surviving . . . Sam bet God bringing that guy back was something that would make the evil Sam feel vindicated for his actions. ‘Oh, look, I can do whatever evil I want and get by with it, because God said it was okay.’ It wasn’t right.

To distract himself, Sam nudged his brother’s arm. “Hey, what are we supposed to be doing here?”

“I don’t know . . . think maybe Beth is giving us her stamp of approval with the kids? We’ll need it if we’re going to get free passage.”

“Oh, hey,” Sam and his brother looked over their shoulders at the evil Sam. “Uh, sorry, I tased you.”

Who was that apology supposed to be directed towards? Evil Sam had been looking at Sam when he said it, so Sam said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

The evil Sam seemed a little confused. “You’re brother wasn’t in Purgatory?”

“No, he was, like . . . 3 ½ years ago.”

The evil Sam looked even more confused. “But you’re the only one here other than –“

Sam’s brother caught on quicker than Sam, or maybe Sam had been playing dumb, because he wanted to know what this tasing business was about. If the evil Sam went around tasing other Sams, that felt like something he should know more about. “They died.”

“What?”

The evil Sam seemed genuinely surprised by that, so Sam’s brother elaborated. “They died . . . in our universe. Amara got out. She made everyone sick. They and Cas died . . . Cas got brought back, I guess because Chuck told you if your team made it to the end, he’d bring you all back, but
he didn’t bring them back. They’re gone.”

Taking a slow deep breath, the evil Sam said, “So, they took your place in the afterlife in your universe? I know that was important to them.”

Sam’s brother was quick with his doom and gloom perspective. “I don’t know, man. Guessing not. I’m surprised Cas is here. Kind of figured that since they jumped in on one of those branches and the branch got cut off, they disappeared with it. Weren’t supposed to be there, so . . . “

Evil Sam nodded slowly, while he absorbed that. “What else did I miss?”

Sam felt the need to say, “Well, your brother was the demon.”

“What?”

“Yeah, the original Demon Dean made a deal with God to get on the team. Your brother was in charge of the demon half, and the Mark of Cain Dean was in charge of the human half when he got cured.”

The evil Sam ran his hand down his face before looking at his brother. That’s right. You tortured your brother again, and he remembers all of it. Glancing at Chuck, Evil Sam said, “Why would Chuck do that?”

“Think we have a few things to find out . . . after Beth gets done talking to the kids.”

Sam’s brother came right out with it. “You gonna go after her?”

Evil Sam watched her and then shook his head. “No, I needed to be stopped. She did the right thing.”

Yeah right. Sam didn’t buy that for a second. Sam was guessing that whatever universe the Evil Sam had been killed in had a living Sam in it, which meant that Evil Sam had probably been in Hell where he belonged, which meant he was probably worse now. They should check him for being a demon. Sam would do it right this second, except he didn’t have any holy water on him. He glanced at Dean to see if he had any, and Dean had no idea what Sam wanted, so Dean gave him a weird look before saying to the evil Sam, “What are we supposed to be doing here? Got any idea where we’re staying?”

“Uh, we’ll probably have to do some tests. We’ve trained the kids to do tests on everyone. Then, I’ll show you where the hunters stay.” Looking around the throng of kids, Evil Sam spotted Ben and signaled for him to come over to them, so he could get Ben to do the tests. Sam kept a close eye on the holy water test when it came time for the Evil Sam to do it, but the guy passed. It didn’t matter. He had to have come back from being dead worse. Sam was keeping his distance and an eye on the guy. When he and his brother finished with the tests, the evil Sam asked if they had bags. Sam’s brother answered in the negative and said that they hadn’t had time before they left.

“Okay, I’ll take you to the stores, so you can get some clothes. There are guns and ammo in the hunters cabin. You can take what you want. Knives and things like that are in one of the sheds at the back. You can take what you want from there too when we’re done.”

Opening the door to the hunter’s cabin 20 minutes later, Evil Sam said, “This is where the hunters stay when they’re here. There’s enough room for everyone . . . You can have whatever beds you want. Shower is in the house. You can eat in here if you want, or you can eat in the house or cabins, but the food is served from the extension at the back of the house . . . Uh, I’ll go see what they’re doing for dinner tonight and maybe get started on helping them. It’s a full-time job trying to
feed 1000 kids 3 times a day.”

As Evil Sam walked away, Sam looked around the room and found a light switch . . . one central light bulb for the entire place. He guessed there were oil lanterns up on the support beams at the foot of the beds. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it until he heard his brother say with some enthusiasm, “Never got to go camp.” His brother seemed to genuinely like the rustic charm.

Looking at the beds, Dean added, “Look at these, Sam. They’re homemade . . . sturdy.” Throwing the clothes he was carrying onto one of the beds, Dean jumped on it and laughed. “I knew it. Best mattresses you can find. No way you have to pay for something like this anymore. Can just take what you want.” Getting up, Dean went to investigate the boxes of guns and ammo. “Same goes for this stuff. This is like . . . Christmas.”

Sam found himself smiling. His brother was out and out happy. It was good to see. “Kind of cold.”

His brother waved it off, while he dug through the guns to get the ones he wanted and said, “Go light a fire. There’s a fireplace at the back. I know today is probably going to be mostly orientation or whatever, but what do you think we’ll do tomorrow?”

“I don’t know . . . could either go out on the road or find jobs around here.”

“Hey, you think Beth will take us to the other camps?”

Sam didn’t know. “We could ask . . . You thinking of moving to one of those?”

Dean looked around the room. “No. I was thinking it might be good to see what we’re dealing with out there, not of moving anywhere. I mean anyone we find we’ll be dropping off at the nearest camps or the camps with the most space. Should probably know where those are. Wouldn’t mind setting a base up here to come back to when I’m not hunting. What are you going to do?”

Sam hadn’t thought about it a whole lot. “Maybe I’ll see how I fit in around here. I know they need teachers. Not just here, but other places . . . Not really sure about going out there a whole lot though. I doubt anyone would be all that happy to see my face.”

Dean shrugged. “I think the evil you might not have been so evil after he learned his lesson if he lasted as long as he did after that last episode we watched. I mean why else can he walk without a limp?”

That was a decent point. “But he still went evil again on the mission.”

“Yeah, but the people out there don’t know that. It’ll spread around here pretty fast, cause kids talk, but I don’t think there’s a whole lot of gossip going on between camps.”

Sam picked a bed and finally put the clothes he was carrying on it. “I don’t know Dean. I think I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around all of this.”

"Think you’d have to be crazy to be dropped somewhere like this and think you had it all figured out. I don’t. I’m thinking hunting right now, but that’s because it’s what I know. Might stay around here. Might do both . . . stay here and go out. If it’s really as dead out there as I’ve heard, then I don’t know if I could stay out there for long stretches. After you’ve lost everyone and everyone you see is dead, it’s hard to get used to not being isolated anymore, so I haven’t been great about it, but since we met them, I’ve gotten better. I know I need to be around people. Have to see what it’s like out there first before I decide. That’s why I want to check out the other camps, so I can get a sense of what we’re dealing with here.”

“Can I go with you?”
“Yeah. Why wouldn’t you? It’s just a tour of what’s left of the US. Think we’ll need Beth or Cas or someone from here to take us though. We’ll need them to get our foot in the door most places.”

“Or we could pretend to be the Sam and Dean they know.”

“Could, but I want to be myself, not that guy . . . I was talking to the solo-Dean, and he said when he and the Purgatory Dean joined the team, the Purgatory Dean had a silver coin he showed Rogue, so she knew which one he was, and her Dad had a silver amulet . . . solo-Dean had a silver knife. Wouldn’t be a bad idea to do something like that. Maybe get a silver Zippo, so all I have to do is show it, and they’ll know I’m me.”

Yeah, Sam liked that. “Maybe I could get a silver pen?”

“Yeah . . . and get a hair cut. The evil Sam’s hair is longer than yours . . . maybe don’t let it get that long.”

Sam laughed. For the first time in his life, his brother may actually win that one if it meant people wouldn’t think he was the evil Sam. "Hey, is that why solo-Dean has more stubble than the rest of you?”

“Yeah, I think he kept it, so Rogue would know which one he was. I think that’s why she calls him Dog Dad.” It might take some time, but maybe they would all find ways of individualizing themselves.
Back from the Dead

Cas waited until Beth was done talking to Ty before going up to hug her in a full embrace. The second he did, she might’ve burst into tears, and he understood the sentiment. He didn’t want to let go of her and probably wouldn’t for a while. He hadn’t thought he’d ever see her again. Dying a prolonged death instead of a quick one at the end of an angel blade was an entirely different experience for him. His mind and his actions may not have been his own at the end, but he’d had enough time before that to think about the ones he would be losing. All he’d wanted was to see his family again.

He thought maybe he’d been able to withstand Amara’s sickness as long as he had because of one thing, thinking about his family, but especially Beth and the way she’d withstood the darkness in Heaven. It’d been an example he’d tried to follow . . . He’d let that be the light he needed to guide his way . . . He understood the symbolic role he’d played in her life better now. Of course, he hadn’t been able to withstand the infection indefinitely, but maybe Beth wouldn’t have been able to withstand what happened in Heaven if she’d been prevented from seeing him again. Maybe memories weren’t enough, and you needed to see the people you loved for it to really have an impact.

“I’ll take my grace back.”

“Why?”

“Gabriel told me –“

“I don’t want you to do it if it’s something you feel obligated to do for me.”

“I am enjoying being able to feel how I feel right now . . . relieved and happy and hopeful . . . maybe when it passes, and I get used to what it is like to experience the losses in this universe again, I could take it back. Besides, I do not want to die a prolonged death again . . . it is a human experience I needed, so I can understand, but not one I found all that pleasant.”

She laughed briefly. That’s good. She needed to laugh. He found it did make situations a little better. He had something he wanted to say that would maybe darken the mood again, but he felt he had to say it. It’s something she’d said to him many times over the years, and maybe now he understood why. “I’m sorry I worried you.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there.”

“You and the others finished the mission, or I wouldn’t be here. I should have gone on the training mission.”

“That wouldn’t have done you any good, Cas. I cheated in the universe where you died so we could move on from there.”

He burst out in a quick laugh. Why did that not surprise him? “How?”

“I stayed fully stocked on time spell ingredients through the entire mission, so I might’ve used them to go back to 1958, let Henry through the portal, and then killed Abaddon before she could.”

“So, they still grew up the same as the others.”

“Yeah . . . the only ones that won’t are the kids with John and Mary.”
“And you brought them in place of the Sam and Dean I lost?”

“Not in place of them . . . the Dean from there was in a bad way, so he was going to leave his brother there. Sam came with him anyway. They both remember everything that happened, so that Dean remembers you.”

“I should go see him.”

“Have to let go of me first.”

Cas smiled, thinking of the time she’d hugged him for longer than necessary after Zachariah had killed him. He understood that better now too. Maybe he wasn’t quite ready to give up his humanity. Letting her go, he looked behind them saying, “Where is the one who had to end my life?”

“Uh, I think Ben took he and Chewy for a tour.”

Chewy must be the ogre, because Cas didn’t see that up here on the porch anymore. “Do you want to help me find him?” When she looked up at him for an explanation, Cas said, “You look like you are not ready to talk to Dean yet.”

Glancing past him at her Dean and Rogue, she shook her head. “Neither one . . . I told her that her Dad was gone and not coming back. I didn’t think he was. I don’t know what to say to him right now either. I think maybe I should let him come to me when he’s ready, but I’m not sure.”

“Well, then let’s find the other Dean. If you bring your weapons bag, maybe we could run through the course a couple of times, so you can feel more at home.” It’s something she always did to clear her mind if she was upset and something she did a lot when she was readjusting to being back here after her training mission.

“Yeah, okay. Think that’s just what I need. I’ll even do the knives, just not with knives. See if any of the kids notice.”

“Can you throw things now?”

She laughed again and said, “Yeah . . . I picked up a new skill on the training mission. John made me learn it. It might’ve taken him years to teach me, but he did. I used it on the mission when we went after Chewy’s parents. I guess I’ve still got it.”

Cas was looking forward to seeing that. When they found Ben, he was showing the Dean they were trying to find one of the kids’ cabins and explaining how they’d built it. That Dean looked like he was taking it all in and struggling to comprehend what he was seeing at the same time. Cas supposed that would make sense. That Dean wasn’t used to this at all, but more than that, that Dean hadn’t seen his Ben in years. Seeing Ben older, without his mother, and training to be a hunter must be strange.

Beth interrupted their tour. “Uh, hey, thanks Ben. You mind if we steal him for a while?”

“Sure . . . He’ll be staying in the hunters cabin, right? He was asking.”

“Yeah, I think they all will be until they figure out what they want to do now that they’re here . . . Remind me again. Is there school tomorrow?”

Ben grinned before saying, “No. Tomorrow’s Sunday, our one free day a week.”
Beth looked at the other kids to see if he was trying to trick her. They nodded to back up what Ben had said. She glanced in Cas’s direction, and he shrugged. “I have no idea. We could always ask Jody.”

Leaning into his shoulder, Beth muttered, “Even if it’s not, I think I need a day off before launching straight into a full day of teaching.”

As soon as she said that, Ben said, “Okay, tomorrow is Monday.”

Beth gave Ben a sly smile. “I knew that . . . You’re lucky you came clean before I walked out of here. If you hadn’t, then this cabin would be working all three meals tomorrow instead of just breakfast.” At the groans that rose out around the cabin, Beth added, “And tomorrow is a new holiday . . . No school. You guys can come up with a name for it and decide what we do to celebrate. I want ideas by tonight.”

They went from being disappointed to looking excited, and as soon as the three adults got outside and were out of earshot, Cas said, “You didn’t know tomorrow was Monday, did you?”

“Nope, but I think we could all use the extra sleep instead of jumping straight back into the getting up early to help with breakfast routine around here. I’m going to go start on the training course . . . give you two some time to talk.”

She headed off to the right with her bag, and Cas glanced at the Dean that’d killed him. “I wanted to say thank you.” Dean went from looking awkward about being around Cas to giving him a confused look. “I was suffering and could no longer control myself, and you brought that misery to an end.” Dean hung his head, and Cas added, “There is no reason to feel guilt. If you are clinging to it, don’t. It all worked out in the end.”

Gabriel had told him what this Dean’d had to do. Cas suspected that if this Dean was in any way like his Dean, the guilt might be slowly destroying him. It would explain why Beth had told Gabriel that after killing Cas this Dean had changed, became more withdrawn, and had found it harder to battle the Mark of Cain. Cas wanted to try and right that. He had a similar speech he wanted to give the Dean he’d died trying to help. That Dean at least had his brother though. This one did not. Looking around Cas said, “This camp is a place for new beginnings . . . You’re probably missing your family, but if you let them, every one here will accept you as part of theirs.”

Dean cleared his throat to contain his emotion and gave Cas a nod to let him know he understood before looking past him in the direction Beth had gone. “Training course? You think that’s something the kids need to see us do to know we’re up for this life?”

“It definitely is, but it doesn’t have to be today. Tomorrow would be better. She just needs to do it to clear her mind and readjust to being here again. It calms her.”

“That’s what calms her?”

“Yeah, anything that requires focus does. Her favorite is the security obstacle course.”

“Things did get better when she started hunting again.”

“Were they bad before that?”

“Not bad. I don’t know how to explain it.”

“You know the best way I’ve found to be her friend?” Dean looked over at him and Cas said, “The things she does aren’t always things you might want her to do, but you have to let her do them . . .
and always be ready to catch her when she falls.”
Somewhere to Live

Chapter Notes

This is from the MoC Dean's POV.

Ben had given Dean an invitation to eat dinner in their cabin, and Dean chose to accept it. It seemed like a better idea than eating with a bunch of guys who looked like he and his brother. Sleeping in the same cabin as them tonight might be a bit much too. He was considering staying in this cabin. There was a spare set of bunk beds. They looked like they were big enough for the kids to be able to keep them even after they were adults, so he should fit. Didn't feel right letting the kids sleep out here on their own. If something attacked the camp, then the hunters staying at the house or hunters cabin would be too far away to do anything about it.

He’d been to the stores before he went to get his food for the night, so when he came into the cabin, he tossed the clothes on the bed. “You’re staying here?!”

Dean didn’t know that kids name. Sitting on the bottom bunk of the unoccupied bed with his dinner, Dean answered, “Uh, I was thinking about it. There are too many of me in the hunter’s cabin. Think I need some space from them for a while.”

Really what he meant was maybe that he needed some space from himself . . . who he was, his life, his brother . . . all of it. The talk with Cas had helped earlier. Before that, he’d felt a little weighed down by his past, everything that’d happened in the last few months, and what he was supposed to do now, but what Cas said about new beginnings had struck a cord for some reason. He didn’t have to be himself . . . He didn’t have to be a fuck up. He could do something totally different and make a difference, do more right than wrong again. It’d been way too long since he’d been able to do that.

He’d tried with Beth. Things had been on the right track, and then he ended up somewhere else, killed Cas, and things started going off the rails for him. But now, in a moment that he’d probably feel for a while until he got brought back down again, it felt like a weight had been lifted. No more Mark. No more demon. There was still guilt there for the things the demon did, and there was still no Sam, but he’d try to get through those by thinking of this as a fresh start.

He didn’t want to get pulled into all the problems the other Deans probably had going on right now. He’d rather be out here taking care of Ben and the other kids. See how it went for a while. He didn’t really know what to expect. Kind of felt a little like a guy running an orphanage. He guessed he was, but there were 10 orphanages just like this one around here, and this was just one camp. He’d probably stay here. It’s where Cas and Beth were, Jody too. He could have friends here, but he wasn’t sure that he’d stay here all the time. Maybe he liked the idea of going on supply runs, looking for things to get for the camp and trying to find new people, saving who he could . . . deal with monsters if its what he had to do, but he was looking forward to not having to kill things for a while.

If he was being totally honest with himself, he still didn't feel quite right. Maybe a little empty. Maybe it was because he didn't have the Mark anymore, and that'd taken over his life, or maybe it was because he didn't have Sam anymore, and Sam had been his entire life. Maybe it's because he didn't have a purpose or a goal . . . other than not fucking up. He needed more of a goal than that.
“You can eat over here with us.”

Dean looked up and saw Ben. “Not really sure –“

“It’s best to take your seat before the rest of them get back with their food, but there’s room for everyone, including you.” Getting up, Dean brought his plate with him and went to pull out one of the empty chairs. “No . . . take that one.”

Dean looked at it a little surprised. “You want me to take the head of the table?”

“Oh the foot. Depends on how you look at it.”

Dean laughed. “Okay.”

Sitting at the other end, Ben said, “Dillon says you’re thinking of staying here with us?”

Dean glanced at where the kid he’d said that to had been, but he was gone. Must be out getting his dinner. “Uh, I was thinkin’ about it. That a problem?”

Ben broke his roll to dip into the venison stew and shook his head. “No. Should know the schedule and some of the rules. The little kids go to sleep around 9. Lights out for the teenagers at 10 . . . that’s on a school night, but since tomorrow’s a holiday, add an hour tonight. The only nights the teens get off are on bonfire nights, and then we stay out all night with the adults and the kids in charge of the younger kids take over. Our bathroom is in that extension, the way I was telling you earlier. There’s a shower set up, like a camp shower with curtains to separate them . . . 5 in at a time, girls get Monday, Wednesday, and Friday . . . Boys get Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday . . . That’s still 50 kids to shower in a day, so no more than 10 minutes each, and they take them either before school or after training.

School starts at 8:30. Breakfast is at 7:30 . . tomorrow we’ll have to get up at 5 to start helping with breakfast, because I lied to Beth earlier . . Uh, you could probably sleep in if you want and if you want showers every day or longer showers, you could probably shower in the house the way the other adults do. We finish school at around 3:30 and then we have hunter training until dinner. Dinner starts being served at 600. You can go whenever you want to get it. No snacks in the cabin. We don’t want rats. Then we do homework. The other adults usually come out to help with homework and play games with us.

The area around your bunk has to be tidy, because if there’s a fire or something, we don’t need to be tripping over it to get out, but you can do whatever you want with your space. Unless it’s a pocketknife, nobody is allowed to have a knife in here . . No loaded weapons in the cabin . . . The kids all have cubbies by the door for their personal weapons. I don’t think that’ll be a problem for you, but just so you know if you see any kids with weapons in here, they aren’t supposed to have them.

In the event of an attack, our rifles and semi-automatics are over there in those crates. Dean talked Beth into giving us ammo too, and those are on the other side of the cabin. They’re labelled, so we know what they are depending on what’s attacking us. We make more if we need it on Saturdays during hunter workshops. Our bunkers are in those two corners. The smaller kids go there in the event of an attack. The teens stay out here and defend them unless the adults tell us to get in the bunkers too, like with the daeva attack . . . There are flares in there just in case that happens again. The bunkers just about fit us all, but they’re not a comfortable fit. We’ll have to figure out something better when these kids get bigger. We have practice drills all the time . . sometimes they’re for an attack. Sometimes they’re for things like a fire or tornado . . . If there’s a tornado, we’re supposed to go in the bunkers too. We haven’t had any problems with those yet, but just in
Okay. It was pretty regimented, but at the same time, they had a lot of freedom. It’s not like they had grown ups looking over their shoulders all the time. It was the kids’ responsibility to stick to their routines, or Dean guessed it was the teenagers jobs to make sure the younger ones stuck to their routines. “What do you do for fun?”

“Like I said. The games at night and bonfire nights are fun. Most of us have fun during hunter training, even the ones who don’t want to be hunters have fun during hunter training. They make school fun. Saturdays with the hunter workshops are fun. We do things like make ammo or learn first aid . . . all that’s fun.”

Dean knew they didn’t have TV or anything, but it seemed like everything was hunting and school and very little else. “You guys ever go fishing or –“

“No, the outpost in Wisconsin sends us fish, so we don’t have to do it.”

Dean smiled. “No, I was thinking more like . . . I don’t know . . . Like what you do on the bonfire nights, except maybe its just for teens and all you do is fish . . . for fun.”

“Are you thinking of doing something like that?”

Dean shrugged. “If it’s weekend, then why not?”

Looking down at his stew, Ben thought it over and then nodded. “Yeah, something like that might be good, but there are over 500 teenagers in this camp, and there are only 2 adults we listen to . . . Beth and Dean . . . Cas too . . . it’s a toss up on whether we’ll listen to Sam . . . depends on the day, but if he really went evil on this mission, then I think I’m going to keep my kids away from him for the time being.”

“Your kids being all the kids in here?”

Ben shook his head. “No. My kids being 15 and younger in the whole camp . . . I know he’s your brother, but –“

“I get it, and he’s not my brother.” He’d seen what their Sam was capable of doing first hand. He wouldn’t want these kids around him either until he was sure that Sam wouldn’t go off again.

“Okay . . . if you want to keep it small, then maybe start by doing this fishing thing with the teens in one cabin and then the next weekend do something with a different cabin . . . and take Beth, Cas, or our Dean with you.”

Always kind of wanted to take time out and just go fishing. Never had the chance to do that until now, and if he did, he’d actually be doing something good for someone else. Now that he’d come up with it, he was kind of looking forward to it . . . just wasn’t sure how to find enough fishing poles for everyone. 500 teens . . . 10 cabins . . . so like 50 teens per trip . . . Well, it’s not like he had to pay for anything here. He could just go to a sporting goods place and take what they had. Living here might not be so bad.
Going Through the Motions

Okay, who was staying and who was going? Cas and my Sam were staying here with Dean and Rogue. Mark of Cain Dean was staying. Mary, John, their kids, solo-Dean and the Sam and Dean from the Amara ravaged universe were coming with me. They were the ones who wanted to see what the planet looked like now. I’d finished this trek a week ago, or it’d seem like a week to the places we were going. To me, it felt like I don’t know how long. I really should’ve kept track of dates. Anyway, I was taking them to all the camps. I suspected that the people I was bringing with me were looking for new homes, so we might be losing some of them, but I wasn’t going to pry. That’s what I was expecting, but if they all came back at the end, I’d be okay with that too.

Now who was driving? We’d need 2 snow plows. I was driving one. John and the two Deans could fight over the other one. I missed driving. I was actually looking forward to just putting my headphones on, drowning everything out and trying not to think. I couldn’t justify taking snow plows out like this without us coming back with something, so along the way, we were going to be filling them with whatever we found. I had a list of items we needed the most. Those were essential. Everything else was a bonus.

“You guys will be okay?”

Dean focused on Rogue in his arms and gave me a little nod. We’d been back for a week from our mission, and he still couldn’t look at me. He was staying with the others out in the hunter’s cabin. We were alternating nights with Rogue. He didn’t seem mad, just . . . defeated? He was quiet, disengaged from what was going on with the rest of the camp, and spent all his time with her. It reminded me a lot of what I’d seen him do in that video my Dad had given to Rogue of her first 3 months of life with her Dad.

I felt the need to hug them both, and he weakly brought his arm up to pat my back, like it’s what he thought he should do but wasn’t necessarily something he was feeling. I don’t know what Amara did to him. It wasn’t what I’d originally thought, like she’d left some of the demon behind or something. It was something else. Or it was because of what I’d done when I thought he was dead. I didn’t know. I hadn’t exactly told him what she did to me either. It was a conversation I don’t think either of us were ready to have. We would. We just needed time to come to terms with our own respective issues . . . I think. I hope? We had a month to figure it out, or that’s how long I thought this would take. I actually thought it might take longer, but I was aiming for a month, because I really wanted to try and stick with the every other month thing.

It would seem that Mary apparently won out on driving the other truck. I think she took my cue and headed for a truck to drive before the others noticed. The kids and Sam rode with her. I was a little unsure what to do with both Deans and John riding with me. This was going to be a long drive. “So where are we heading first?”

“Oh, I think we’ll go to the Denver camp first. The last time it was more of a field trip for the kids. This time I want to get a list of supplies they need to get their science operation up and running.”

“They can’t get it themselves?”

“Probably best if they don’t . . . at least not until they’re fully trained. Max, Ivan and Yuri are doing that, but it takes time. I mean not only do they have to learn what it takes to build the defenses they’re going to need to keep their camp safe, but they need to know how to defend it. Until they can do that, the only people going out should be Ivan and Yuri . . . for food and the necessities.”
The Dean next to me asked if we had to get them supplies before we went to the next camp, and I hadn't really thought about it, so I tried to answer him the best I could on the fly. I needed to sound like I knew what I was talking about. “We’ll get them some things, like cleaning supplies and things like that, but not the things they're going to need for the labs. They need to get the place disinfected and up to pharmaceutical grade standards before they do anything else. I want them to focus on antibiotics first before they start on harder medications to make. And it won't always be like this. Right now they need our help, but eventually, they’ll be able to get things they need themselves, and the trick will be getting them to trade with us. Wisconsin gives us things we need because of what we did for them. The same goes for Kansas, but Iowa and Colorado? I think once they know what they’re doing and get more confident, they’ll have more of a ‘If we give you this, what can we get out of it?’ mindset. It’s human nature.”

John leaned around Dean to ask, “And this place has electricity?”

“Uh, well the science building where a lot of them are going to work does. It’s contained to just that building, so it’s not hooked up to a power grid or anything. Ivan told Jody they found some generators. They should be using those for the rest of the camp.”

Then the Dean on the other side of John, Despondent Dean said, “And after that it’s Kansas? Bobby’s there?”

I bet both Deans and Sam were looking forward to seeing him again. I wondered what a young John Winchester would think of him. I also wondered what Bobby would make of seeing a young John Winchester . . . kind of wondered what he’d make of seeing Sam and Dean as kids. I mean he didn’t meet them until they were a little older than they were now, but I bet when he saw them, he’d be blown away. “Yeah. They’re in the middle of rebuilding everything, so they’re pretty busy too.”

John wanted to know why they were rebuilding. “Uh, the leaders we left in charge were good men when they were werewolves, but after they got the cure, they turned it into a dictatorship. I don’t know if you met Adrien and Jasmine, but their Dads were both murdered under that dictatorship when they tried to leave . . . They were the first, but the regime killed all the werewolves who stayed werewolves to protect the camp, and they also killed two of our youngest and most promising hunters, so when we found out about it, I asked God to destroy the camp, went in with my Dad, and we cleared out the leadership. Now Bobby is in charge.”

It got quiet after that, so I put on my headphones and focused on the road. The snow really was nearly gone. I’d say another 2 weeks, and we’d be looking at soggy mess, but the farmers should be happy. I think it was almost planting season, wasn’t it? Mid-April. It’d taken a while, but I guess Michael died in December, and we’d had years of snow to melt, so that’s why. I appreciated what Michael had tried to do though. He was the only one who actually tried to help us, and by us, I mean the human race. Yes, what he’d done had hindered us being able to find people, because it took so long to drive in the snow. Yes, people froze. No, we hadn’t been able to grow food outside of a greenhouse in all this time. But he’d triaged the situation . . . made a judgement call to save the most people possible, and look at what he got for his efforts . . . tortured, lost his faith in his family, God . . . no wonder he’d been pissed at God.

Michael had understood how things really were . . . even when he was trying to teach Dean that Sam hadn’t changed, he’d been right . . . about Sam . . . about God. In not saving me the way God wanted at the time, Michael had been refusing to play God’s game anymore . . . and you know what? Dean found another way to bring me back. We’re the ones we had to rely on . . . or we were until everyone I knew died, and I stuck around to keep doing all of this alone. Poor Michael. He’d been the unsung hero of this entire thing.
I didn’t want to think about that anymore because of how things had turned out for Michael, so I focused my thoughts on what we had to do to start getting ready for when the Croats migrated further north, not that they’d necessarily go back to where they were from, but they’d probably spread out as soon as they could. Luckily, the Leviathan had cleared a large number of them when the Leviathan camp in Georgia still existed. The Leviathan that were leaderless now were probably roaming around the country eating Croats instead of doing it from an organized location, and that helped too, but there were still a lot of Croats left, or I thought there were. I hadn’t seen any in a while.

After we’d done the tests and had gone through the barbed wire fence they were using to keep the Colorado camp protected, John stated the differences first. “Lot more people here.” Yeah, if our camp had roughly 1000 people, including adults, this one had about 2,500. “And there aren’t any children here.”

“No, these are mostly the people we saved from Fort Knox and some the other hunters saved from Eve’s camp up in Washington. No kids in either place. If there had been, we would’ve taken them to Kansas or Wisconsin.”

“But not Iowa?”

“No. We saved most of the people in Iowa from a monster trading depot or Eve’s camp in Washington . . . There’s some space there for a few people, but it’s mostly full now.”

Ivan, Yuri, and Max were there waiting for us in the middle. Ivan wanted to know how his wife was, so I filled him in on everything about her that I could. He got to talk to her once a day, but he wanted to make sure she was really okay and not just saying that over the phone to keep him from worrying. Then he looked beside me towards the two Deans. “The people on the gate need more chores, or they are both human?”

“Yeah, they’re both Dean, but neither one is our Dean. I’ll explain everything, and you can give us a tour. I’ll need to talk to Dr. Brennan before we go, so I can get a list of things they need for the facilities here. How’s training going?”

We walked and talked, and I did what I was supposed to do . . . acted the way I was supposed to act. My heart just wasn’t in it. I was kind of going through the motions the way I seemed to do all the time now. I gave suggestions on what they should maybe do and reminded them about Croats coming back in the Spring, so I think Ivan and Yuri decided to get started on some kind of a wall. They had the manpower here to do it, and they could build it however they wanted. I think it’d end up being more of a citadel in the mountains than what had been done in Wisconsin. I was sure they’d come up with something practical that would go up relatively easy, but be of the highest standards . . . maybe even a little harsh from the outside to give off an intimidating vibe and keep people or monsters from thinking it was a target worth their time. Croats wouldn’t care about that, but as long as they kept training these people how to defend themselves, they should be okay, or I hoped they would be . . . should probably make more trips here to make sure they were.

We decided to stay a couple of days, so we could help Ivan and Yuri go out for more immediate supplies to keep the camp happy. More weapons, more food, more supplies to build their wall, clothes and medical supplies too. They were running low on all those things. When I was sure they’d be okay for another couple of months, we headed out. The Despondent Dean and Max shared a moment . . . an awkward, lingering moment. The laughing and giggling last night in our shared house had made me spend all night on the roof, smoking and drinking a bottle of the best vodka the Russians had to offer.

I wasn’t jealous. It’s just the voice and all the rest of it . . . reminded me too much of something I
hadn’t had in too long with someone who looked just like him . . . That playful intimacy, I missed it . . . sex for the sake of it . . . not because you were grieving the loss of someone who was your whole world . . . a mistake I shouldn’t have made, I guess, because it’d ruined everything, not just with Dean, but with me . . . I wasn’t the same. I’d ruined me too . . . and it wasn’t desperate sex trying to find a way to connect with my Dean posing as a demon . . . it wasn’t fooling around with someone that looked like my Dean trying to find him in the MoC Dean either . . . at least it had been meaningless sex . . . if it’d been sex to express what they meant to one another, I think I probably would’ve found a way to ski down the nearest mountain, so I could get an extra hit of adrenaline and have to focus on something else.

I hated it . . . the idea of sex . . . having it, not having it, everything about it. I felt so alone and the thought of it mostly it made me just want to cry, so I hated it . . . didn’t know what do about it. Drinking sounded like a good option, but it wasn’t enough. Neither was smoking . . . I think the only thing that would fill this black void I found myself traveling through was adrenaline, but no . . . now I had to be a responsible adult and go through the motions . . . onto the next camp, I guess. Nobody in my team wanted to stay here. I wondered why, but didn’t ask. I thought it was a pretty spot, picturesque . . . felt safe, because of the mountains. The people here were okay even though I didn’t really know them. They were cautious, which was good, but accepting after they knew you weren’t a monster or working for one. I guess we’d see what everyone thought of Kansas.
At a Loss

Dean watched the snow plows pull away from the camp and looked down at Rogue to force himself to smile. “You have to tell her.”

Not looking away from his daughter, because he didn’t want the world to go blurry, Dean nodded at Gabriel’s advice. “What am I supposed to say?”

“Maybe use this time to figure it out. She has some things to tell you too.”

“I know . . . have no idea what they are, but I know her well enough to know something’s wrong.”

Gabriel left to go do something else . . . maybe annoy Cas in his history class, so Dean took Rogue back into the house to find some kind of a game to play with her. He got her rings set up, and she said, “Dead.”

“No, I’m not reading that . . . not for a while.”

“Dad sad?”

He looked up at her and smiled. She’d asked him that a few times a day, every day for the last week. “No, what makes you think that?”

Today she decided to finally answer the question he’d been asking in response to her question. Crawling over to him, she got on her knees and then pointed at his eyes. “Dad sad . . . I protect.”

He laughed. “You’re gonna protect me, huh?” She nodded, so he asked, “From who?”

“Dad.”

“You’re gonna protect me from me?” She nodded, and how smart she was freaked him out sometimes. “You don’t have to –“

“I protect.”

“You already are.”

“I grrr Mom?”

What? “No, I don’t want you to be mad at your Mom. It’s not your Mom’s fault.”

“Mom say Dad no back.”

“I know. She didn’t think I was coming back . . . Don’t be mad at your Mom. She didn’t do anything wrong.” She seemed unsure, so Dean added, “If you hit your Mom when she comes back or make her sad, I will . . . uh, I won’t read All My Friends Are Dead for a month. That’s a long time.”

“Want read.”

“I know. So, don’t hit your Mom or make her sad.”

“Read?”
Dean sighed. He guessed that he’d have to read it now if he wanted to make this grounding thing a real threat. “Yeah, I’ll read it now.” Wasn’t sure how he was going to get through it, but he’d read it now.

Did he feel guilty about the things he’d said to her as a demon? Yeah, of course he did, but that wasn’t the problem. The problem was that it was gone. To ‘free’ him of his imprisonment, not only had Amara taken the Mark, which he was fine with because he never wanted the damn thing in the first place, but she’d also taken his connection to Beth . . . everything, right down to the soul mate thing. He had no idea what Beth was thinking, but it’s not because she was blocking him. It was just gone.

Everything he’d had that made him closer to her . . . everything he’d spent years building up with her . . . everything that’d set him apart from the rest of them that looked like him . . . it was just gone. Probably gone in the Mark of Cain Dean too, or at least the soul mate thing was, but Amara had spent extra time to get rid of the connection from Dean . . . now if Beth was hurt, he couldn’t heal her. If she died, he wouldn’t. He had no idea where she was right now . . . well, she probably hadn’t gotten very far, but that wasn’t the point. He wouldn’t know where she was this whole month she was planning on being gone.

It was like this part of him that he’d gotten so used to having, the part of him that he’d taken for granted, but that had been there even when they were re-living their lives . . . the thing that made him go back to her . . . that lightning in a bottle . . . it was gone. Now he knew that’s what’d given him the strength to keep fighting . . . in this world, in any world, in a world where Sam was what he was.

And not having it changed the way Dean saw Beth . . . It took some of the spark away. He was still attracted to her, but now it was like he’d have start all over again if he wanted to build up what he felt for her again. The other Deans around here weren’t the only ones who had a new beginning. He did too, and he didn’t even know how to start it or if he could.

Not having the connection or even being just soul mates stripped everything he’d felt for her down to the bare bones. What if it wasn’t the same and never lived up to what it was before . . . what if he made her feel worse, because he made her think she wasn’t enough on her own? What if he wasn’t enough on his own? What if she’d been right, and that’s the only thing that’d kept them together? He didn’t know. He had no idea how this would play out.

He was grieving what they’d had, and she was still here. He didn’t know how she couldn’t know it was gone. If Gabriel said he needed to tell her, then she must not. How could she not know? Dean guessed that there were other Deans around here she was connected to on some level. Maybe she was confusing them with him? What did that say about how easily he could be replaced? He wasn’t mad at her. He was pissed at God and Amara and mostly felt too heartbroken by it to fight or do anything other than take care of his daughter.

One thing he wasn’t grieving was Sam. That divide ran too deep to ever be mended, and he didn’t want to mend it. Sam was going out with Gadreel tomorrow to go back to his hunting, but not really hunting, just directing Gadreel what to kill gig, and Dean was more than all right with that. There was a part of him that wondered if Sam had known . . . the same way Beth had known on some level that he’d been the demon. Sam had finally been able to go all out on him, and despite it having been clouded by demon perception it wasn’t something Dean would be able to forget. It wasn’t the pain Sam had inflicted on him or anything like that. It’d been seeing Sam like that . . . in all his glory.

So, now he had no Sam and no Beth, just Rogue. The thing with Sam was unfixable. He didn’t
want Sam in his life anymore, and he never would’ve thought he’d think that, but it was true. He couldn’t even fake it. He’d spent the last week ignoring anything his brother had to say until his brother got a clue and stayed out of his way. The thing with Beth . . . maybe that was fixable, but by the time it was fixed, Dean didn’t know if it’s something he’d want. He’d never had to do that . . . be in love with someone who loved him the normal way. He had no idea what that would be like or if it would feel the same.

He guessed he had time to figure it out and figure out how he was going to tell Beth. Maybe first, he needed to find a way to convince her that what he’d said when he was a demon was just something he’d said because he wanted to hurt her the way she’d hurt him. She’d been right. He might’ve been a demon, but he could be hurt. Now that he was human again though, he understood why it’d happened. She hadn’t thought he was ever going to come back. She hadn’t thought the demon him was coming back either, and she’d sought comfort with someone who looked like him.

What if she did the same thing after he told her they weren’t . . . well, they weren’t anything anymore? How would he feel? He didn’t know. Was normal love as all consuming? Would he be more understanding if she chose one of the others? Would all that intense worry he used to feel about her leaving him for someone else go away?

He wondered what she had to tell him. He wondered if she would. How did things like that work in a normal relationship? Is the only reason she ever told him things because their connection made her do it? Was the only reason she’d put up with him and said he was enough or wanted him to have something that was just for him because of them being soul mates? Was it because of the connection they’d made, that God had let them make just to let it be taken from them? He guessed he’d find out . . . maybe . . . if it was even something she wanted to try with him.

Try. It’s what he should do for Rogue’s sake, wasn’t it? Or was it? What if nothing was the same and it made them both bitter? That wouldn’t be very good for Rogue, would it? Now he questioned everything. He guessed the only thing he could do was try and if didn’t work out . . . well, if it didn’t work out . . . the idea of it not working out was what had kept him from approaching Beth much this last week. It probably meant something if he wanted it to work out so much that he couldn't even talk to her. Maybe he didn’t have to start all the way back at the beginning. Is how he felt now what normal love felt like or did it grow to be what he’d felt before . . . everything was just messed up.

He definitely needed this month to figure it out. Maybe if he missed her that was a good sign? He’d missed her all week, and she’d been here. Maybe if he didn’t see her in a month, he’d know if it’d been her he was missing or having a soul mate? If he kissed her now, would she still feel like home, or would she feel like any one of a 100 other women? He was too afraid to find out . . . at least right now.

She’d been such a massive part of his life that he didn’t know what he was going to do if he’d really lost her. If he talked to her, would she still know the right things to say to make him feel better? Would they still be able to talk in code? He was missing his friend as much as he was his partner and lover all rolled into one. Who knew if they’d be those things again. Maybe they still were. He guessed he wouldn't be able to find out now until she came back . . . if she came back. What if she died out there, and he never saw her again?

They wouldn't end up in the same Heaven together . . . probably have to bump into one another in the Roadhouse up there to ever see each other again. Would they just have awkward conversations and not really know how to look at one another the way they hadn’t the last week? Then what? Would they go back to their respective Heavens when it got to be too awkward? Would he still get to relive the memories he'd made with her, like that Christmas at the cabin with Adam? If he did,
would he feel the same about those moments as he had when he lived them the first time?
Probably not. Nothing ever worked out the way it should.
Reuniting with Fallen Family

Sam had really liked the camp in Colorado. It needed a lot of work, but it’s not like they didn’t have the time to put the work in on it. A bonus was that nobody there knew who the Evil Sam was. They’d never seen him or heard anything about how the Evil Sam was the reason the world came to a screeching halt. He could have a fresh start there. It’s just that he didn’t want to make his decision at the first place they stopped. Taking his time to make the right decision seemed like the way to go.

He wasn’t going to stay in South Dakota. The kids watched him as closely as they did the evil Sam because they weren’t sure he wouldn’t be just like him, so he thought it’d be better for him to go. It’d make his transition into this life a little easier, and it’d definitely be easier on them. He wasn’t looking to cause problems. He wanted to help fix this planet, not just to make up for what the Evil Sam did, and not just for himself and his own universe, but because it was the right thing to do. This planet needed help, not more problems. And he didn’t want recognition for doing it either.

Now that he’d seen how truly empty this country was on these long drives between camps, he missed the anonymity that hunting allowed in his old life. He was used to there being people everywhere. All you had to do was blend in with them and nobody would think you were different or special, just someone else paying for gas or groceries. Here there were so few people that if you started doing some good, everyone would know it. He didn’t want that. He wanted to keep some modicum of his old life, the anonymity side of it at least. That probably meant no hunting. Hunters received a lot of . . . celebrity status? No, he’d rather make an impact, but one that helped him blend in with everyone else. He just wasn’t sure what that was yet.

Something Sam wasn’t expecting to feel was a mixture of excitement and nervousness the closer they got to Lebanon. Bobby was there . . . alive. Sam wondered how similar he was to the Bobby he knew. Bobby seeing the Men of Letters bunker was something Sam had wished could’ve happened, but by the time he and his brother found out about it, Bobby was long gone. What would it be like to see him again? What if Bobby was different? What if he was the same, and they lost him again? What if Bobby was the same, and he thought Sam was going to be like the evil Sam, because the evil Sam was all Bobby had known?

Sam was drawn from his thoughts when his Mom said, “So, this place in Kansas? You know it?”

“Oh, yeah . . . well, I know the bunker. It’s where me and my brother lived in our universe the last 3 years or so, but I don’t know what the camp will look like.”

“Do you think we could stop by our old place?”

What old place? The one in Lawrence? “Uhh, we probably could, but maybe you might want to drop the kids off at the camp first. We’re driving too fast for them to do anything, but all these things walking around and chasing us after we pass aren’t people. They’re Croats . . . people infected with the Croatoan virus. They’re essentially . . . well, I guess they’re like zombies in Night of the Living Dead or Dawn of the Dead, but a lot faster . . . more like in the remake, a remake, I guess you haven’t seen, but, uh . . . their sole purpose is to infect others. After you drop the kids off, something tells me that Beth wouldn’t mind taking you back . . . if you want to see what it’s like now.”

His Mom didn’t give away what she would do. She just went back to being quiet. The only time she’d really said anything was when she was talking to her sons. Her sons were both relatively quiet. The kid Dean was taking care of baby Sam, talking to him, making him laugh . . . keeping
him occupied.

About 20 minutes later, his Mom said, “But we’re going to Wisconsin after this?”

“Uh, no . . . Iowa.”

“So, it’d just add a couple of hours out of our way to swing by Lawrence on our way there. I don’t see the point in driving to the camp, dropping the kids off, making a 7 hour round trip . . . just to see the place. I’m not talking about stopping. I just want to see it.”

Okay. “Why?”

“I want John to compare.”

“Compare what?”

“What he saw and what we have now.”

Okay, maybe that meant something to someone, but it didn’t make a whole lot of sense to Sam. “What did he see?”

“What our universe would have been like if we’d stayed.”

Oh. “You think maybe you made the wrong choice?”

Looking around the countryside, Mary asked, “Don’t you?”

“No.” Maybe he’d been a little faster with his answer than she thought he would be, but Sam knew without a doubt he’d made the right choice. Even if he wasn’t sure how, he was looking forward to making the best of it, and he honestly believed he could. To elaborate on his answer and maybe put her mind at ease, Sam added, “If you’re talking about as a personal choice, and not the greater good, then I know the lives your sons were facing. Now they don’t have to go through any of the things my brother and I went through.”

“What if they weren’t supposed to have your lives? They wouldn’t have if I’d slept through the night, would they?”

“Well, what did John see?”

“I don’t know. He hasn’t really said a whole lot about it since he’s been back. I just know he came back different, and I know Beth seems to think it was worse than here.”

Then it probably was. “Did they not stop the Apocalypse? I’m guessing if they didn’t know not to agree to be vessels then –“

“You know that’s what Beth said, and that’s why the Dean with the Mark stabbed her.”

Sam was glad he never had to deal with the Mark of Cain again, the erratic mood swings and violent outbursts, always feeling on edge because you’re never sure when the Mark would take your brother from you again . . . He didn’t miss that at all. And he wasn’t entirely sure if Mary had just threatened him. Seemed like it. Didn’t matter. He stood by what he’d been saying. “Well, if that’s what she said, then she was right. If we hadn’t been raised the way we were, we wouldn’t have been prepared for any of the things that happened when Lucifer got out of his cage. Dean would’ve said ‘yes’ a lot sooner. And he wouldn’t have meant as much to me as he does, so I wouldn’t have been able to take back control of Lucifer when I was his vessel . . . I’m not saying it
was an easy life, but it’s one we needed. Your sons don’t have to worry about any of that now.”

“What about our other children?”

What? “What other children?”

“From what I hear, we were going to have two more children.”

He hadn’t known that. “Well, then the same thing applies to them as far as the Apocalypse goes. It’s just that the archangels would’ve had more choice in who they went to for their vessels . . . And one of the 4 had to have gotten the Mark, or you wouldn’t be here . . . Maybe it was to stop Lucifer? And maybe another one got it off of whoever got it. What I do know is that now your children . . . the ones that have been born and the ones that haven’t are all better off now, and so is your universe.”

It looked like she was done talking now, and Sam was okay with that. It gave him time to figure out what to say or do when he saw Bobby again. Didn’t look like it made much difference, because when he saw Bobby he didn’t say or do any of the things he thought he would.

After they went through the checks at the gate, Bobby was already outside the bunker waiting for them. Every one here seemed to hug Beth. Cas wasn’t much for hugging in Sam’s universe, but the Cas here hugged her whenever he thought she looked sad, and now Bobby was hugging her too, like she was a long lost prodigal daughter, not someone he’d seen just last month.

Was it just something about Beth, or had she been training them in how to hug for years? If it was the second, Sam found something about it funny, especially with how terrified almost everyone in this camp seemed to be of her, so he laughed. That was the first thing he did when he saw Bobby, not say or do anything he’d thought he would. It drew Bobby’s attention, and then Sam saw a look he recognized, one fuelled by Bobby’s paranoid nature. Looking past the group, towards the front gate, Bobby said, “I need to be hiring some new guards, or . . . it looks like you’ve got some explaining to do.”

If Sam remembered right, it was pretty close to what that Ivan guy had said in Colorado. Sam was starting to think his brother might’ve been right about them needing Beth to get through these first introductions. Beth went on to give a rambling speech about the how and why there were now not just 2 Deans, but 5 and John and Mary and another 2 Sams. When she pointed out the kids, Bobby took one look at kid Dean and shook his head in disbelief. “Well, I’ll be damned . . . add a couple years and . . .” Bobby looked up at John. Giving him an obligatory nod as a hello, Bobby gruffly followed it up with, “John . . . make sure you get it right this time.” Looking around at the rest of the group, Bobby’s gaze landed on Sam next. “What the hell are you smilin’ about?”

Sam laughed in awkward relief. “Nothin’ just wasn’t sure if you were like our Bobby or not. Think I can put that one safely to rest.” Bobby didn’t say anything, so Sam said, “And, uh, we lost him.”

“Lost him how? You leave him behind, or –“

Sam’s brother put him straight. “No, we lost him . . . a few years ago . . . Leviathan.”

A look of understanding crossed Bobby’s face before he looked at solo-Dean too. “Yours too? Look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

That Dean smiled briefly. “Couple of years ago for me.”

Looking back over his shoulder towards the bunker, Bobby said, “Well, I got my eye on them Leviathan . . . ain’t lettin’ any of them come near here . . . Based off of events I know that were
supposed to happen . . . I’m guessin’ you boys already know the bunker. Come with me, and I’ll give ya a tour of the rest of the camp . . . Then we’ll have a drink, and you can tell me what you think of our world.”

Well, if nothing else had made the reality of their new lives hit home, seeing Bobby did, or at least it did for Sam. He knew there were other people here who should be dead and weren't, but Bobby . . . Bobby was a different story all together. Didn't seem to bother him much that none of them were from here or the adopted sons he'd helped raised, Bobby was going to treat them the way he always had . . . maybe that right there was worth making the choice to come to this universe. They got to have Bobby back. All Sam'd had as far as a Mom went was a picture, but Bobby, a Bobby exactly like this one, had helped raised Sam. Sam was grateful for the chance to see his parents, but they needed more guidance than parents should, which he guessed meant that while he would get to know them as people, they weren't his real parents . . . Sam felt like the Bobby he'd just met was family more so than the John and Mary Sam had been trying to shoehorn into the role. And maybe that made this feel a little more like home.
Dean threw his bag in the truck to call the seat he wanted if Beth was going to drive again and turned when he heard someone walking up behind him. It was Sam. “Uh, Dean, I’ve been thinking about it, and I think I’m going to stay here. Bobby could use the help, and I talked to Beth, and she said if I want to get the school here up and running, I should. She’ll coordinate with me on lesson plans once I’ve found the right people to teach, and we’ll work something out with the school in Wisconsin, so they can all learn the same things.”

Yeah, Dean had been expecting this ever since they got here. Sam had been enthusiastic about everything Bobby told him, like the farm and rebuilding the school and even their plans to start making ammo here for the hunters. And if Dean left Sam here, at least he knew Bobby would look after him. Taking a step back is what Dean had said he wanted, but now that the time was here, it was a little harder for Dean to do than he’d thought it’d be. Things had been good with Sam in South Dakota, but Dean could understand why his brother wouldn’t want to stay there.

The evil Sam had hurt those kids, so making them see his face every day, whether he was the evil Sam or not, wasn’t good for them or Sam. There were more adults here than kids . . . a lot more, but the kids here didn’t have the same fighting spirit that the kids in the South Dakota camp did. The kids here had been broken. They were scared of Sam, sure, but Bobby had made a point of telling everyone here that Sam wasn’t the Sam that’d run Vegas, and maybe if Sam stayed here, and they saw that was true, but also saw that this Sam would fight for them as hard as the other Sam had fought to destroy them, it’d help heal the kids here in the long run. That’d do as much to improve their lives as whatever Sam wanted to teach them in school. It actually made Dean really proud of Sam . . . still didn’t make it easy to leave him behind.

“Yeah, I was wondering when you were going to tell me.”

Sam looked at the truck behind Dean and said, “I had to be sure. I am. It feels like the right thing to do. You’ll still stop by to drop survivors off, right?”

Dean smiled briefly. “Yeah, I guess that’s what passes for hunting now.”

“What about a partner?”

He hadn’t really thought about that. “Not sure I –“

“Can’t go on missions without one. It’s the rule . . . unless you’re Rufus, but he hangs out at his cabin most the time and then goes on hunts nearby unless its something big they need everyone’s help to do.”

“Never really followed the rules Sam.” Before Sam could change his mind, Dean added, “But I’ll find someone. There’s Cas or about 3 other me’s to choose from . . . and Beth. Can have my pick, right?”
Sam relaxed and smiled. “Yeah . . . go with Cas or Beth. Think if you went with one of the other Deans, you’d be fighting over who’s in charge and who’s going to take a bullet for the other one, so nothing would ever get done.” Dean laughed. Probably. “You’ll call tonight to let us know where you’re staying, so we can make sure the area is clear, right?”

He didn’t think it’d take that long to get to the Iowa camp. “Think we’ll be able to make it to the Iowa camp tonight. The snow’s not that deep.”

“Okay, well, keep your radio on, so we can let you know if anything is coming your way.”

Yeah, Sam had been freaking out about the monster situation ever since Bobby showed the computer to them. The country was covered in them. And it didn’t include whatever Croats might be spreading out from the South. “Yeah, I don’t think they turn the radio off. Should probably get going –“

Sam stepped forward to give Dean a hug. “Thanks Dean.”

“For what?”

“Not giving up . . . If you had, we wouldn’t have any of this. A chance to do good again . . . Bobby . . . none of it.”

“Wasn’t me. It was –“

“If you hadn’t been there for them to find, none of this would’ve happened. I’ll see you in a few weeks.”

Dean patted him on the back and stepped away. “Yeah, all right Sam. Keep me updated with monster bulletins.” Sam smiled, while he backed away to go back to the bunker, and Dean turned in time to see the other Dean moving his bag, so he hopped up in the truck to pull him out. John was riding with Mary, so there was more space in Beth’s truck, but he wasn’t sitting in the fucking middle. He’d lucked out on the way here on getting the door seat, and he was keeping it.

10 miles down the road, Beth looked at him. “So, uh . . . were you hoping not to sit bitch?” He scowled in her direction and couldn’t keep from breaking it with a brief laugh. She looked so smug.

“Yeah, well, I’m driving to the next camp.”

“Are you?”

“Yeah, I’m calling it now.”

“You’re not driving my snow plow.”

“Thought you wanted me to have hope again.”

“Oh, there’s no hope of you driving this snow plow . . . I will sleep in here all night to make sure I’m in here first. You can fight over the other snow plow with Mary . . . Just so you know, she throws a hard right hook . . . speaking of which here.”

She cracked two ice packs he hadn’t even known she had before tossing one to solo-Dean and handing Dean the other. Both Deans put it to their left eyes almost in unison. Beth pulled out her iPod, and Dean waited for a couple of minutes before taking it to see what she was listening to today. Velvet Underground. *Pale Blue Eyes*. Not Bad. Pretty chilled out for the road. He nudged her and said, “What next?”
“Oh, are you going to be in charge of my –“ He went to cut off the song early and put on something different, so she quickly said, “Perfect Day.”

“Having a Lou Reed kind of day?”

Exhaling a laugh he didn’t think she meant even though she made it look legit, she said, “Well, I’m not going to go to the nearest poppy field and cook up some heroin.”

Yeah. Not real heroin, but her kind . . . doing something to get into some kind of trouble . . . she’d been building towards that for days. He figured she knew exactly what he’d meant too. Snatching her iPod back, she changed it to something else and tossed it back to him. The Pixies. Yeah, he didn’t buy that for a second. She wasn’t fine.

Dean flipped through her list and picked another song, Little Green Bag by George Baker. He laughed at the look she gave him. She wanted to respond, but she didn’t want to change the song, because she wanted to hear it now that it’d started. Finally, she forced herself to pick something else. Goddess on a Highway by Mercury Rev. He didn’t know the song, but the point was that she was fine.

His response was to put on I Wanna Be Sedated by The Ramones. The look of annoyance she gave him made up for the smug look she’d given to him earlier. She responded with No Sleep Till Brooklyn by the Beastie Boys. Fine. She could stay out in the truck all night to keep her driving spot, but she wasn’t going to distract him with that.

He put on All Day and All of the Night by the Kinks and she gave him a weird look. He gave her a half smile and shrugged. If she was upset about the other night, he’d rather be with her, but he hadn’t thought she needed that kind of trouble. He flicked down and put on Don’t Let Me Be Misunderstood by the Animals. He knew his place, but if that’s what she was upset about, then –

She put on Sinnerman by Nina Simone and smirked. Okay, so she wasn’t upset with him for that. Then her smirk fell, and she put on Ain’t Got No, I Got life, from Nina Simone, handed him the headphones and pushed play. He knew the song, but maybe there was something in the lyrics she wanted him to know? Usually, this was considered a happy song, but he didn’t think she meant for it to be.

I ain’t got no home, ain’t got no shoes
Ain’t got no money, aint got no class
Ain’t got no skirts, ain’t got no sweater
Aint got no perfume, ain’t got no bed
Ain’t got no mind

I ain’t got no mother, ain’t got no culture
Ain’t got no friends, ain’t got no schooling
Ain’t got no love, ain’t got no name
Ain’t got no ticket, ain’t got no token
Ain’t got no God.

And what have I got?
Why am I alive anyway?
Yeah, what have I got
nobody can take away?

Got my hair, got my head
Got my brains, got my ears
Got my eyes, got my nose
Got my mouth, I got my smile
I got my tongue, got my chin
Got my neck, got my boobs
Got my heart, got my soul
Got my back, I got my sex

I got my arms, got my hands
Got my fingers, got my legs
Got my feet, got my toes
Got my liver, got my blood

I’ve got life.
I’ve got my freedom
I’ve got life

I’ve got life
And I’m gonna keep it
I’ve got life
And nobody’s gonna take it away
I’ve got the life

When it was over, he motioned towards her to ask without asking out loud if he could keep it for a while, and she shrugged. She’d given him the clue to what was wrong. Now he had to figure it out. Felt like it was his job. He's the one who knew how she felt. She may look fine on the outside, but she wasn't, and she couldn't really hide it from him the way she did everyone else. Besides, Sam was okay somewhere else. Might as well look after someone who really needed it for a change. It's what she'd done for him, and maybe he wanted to return the favor.
“You’re not seriously staying in the truck all night.”

I looked over at the Dean sitting next to me. I was always going to stay out here all night. “Uh, yeah, I am. Probably best if they don’t even know I’m here. I’m just going to drop you off and –“

“Beth?!” I opened my door and stood on the step as I saw Carrie and Jasper come into view. “Bobby called and said you were coming. We’ve already got your place set up.”

Taking my keys, I hopped down to see her, and she gave me a hug, so she could whisper, “He told us about them. It’s weird, huh? Even for us.”

“Yeah, it is . . . Good for us though. They’re all heroes in their own universes.”

“Bet none of them think it though.”

I smiled and stepped back. “Nope . . . Uh, Carrie . . . this is Mary and John Winchester, and their kids, Dean and Sam.”

She looked from me to the family that’d gotten out of the truck behind mine and shook her head. “Weird even for us. Meg is gonna have a field day with this. Uh, you wanna run through the tests, and then follow me through the gate?”

“Yeah, they will. I was thinking I might just –“

“No, you’re not staying out here again. Fuck ‘em. Abbey’s got your house covered.”

“It’s not just me. It’s them, and if the people in the camp see me around you too much, it might sour their opinions of you guys.”

“Could always switch us out. I think we’re about done with this place. We’re all looking for a little more action. Make Pamela and Stephen take it for a while. They get all the fun stuff.”

Uh, they get the fun stuff for a reason. I didn’t want to lose her. I guess I would eventually, but I wasn’t ready to lose her yet. This living forever thing really sucked. It made me see everyone with little tombstones over their heads. I looked around at their defenses. “The snow’s melting.”

“Come on, Beth. You really expect us to stay here until we get a wall built for the Croats?”

“It was decided that would be best. Are you guys actually building a wall? I don’t see one.” She slumped a little, so I added, “I think you’ve been seeing plenty of action around here . . . Show me some real progress the next time I’m here, and we’ll talk . . . For now, I guess I’ll go in and get the ball rolling.”

She slumped a little more. “No, I don’t want . . . I mean that’s my job, right?”

“When’d it start?”

Ducking her head, Carrie said, “I don’t –“

“You do know what I’m talking about. Your eyes gave it away when I said what I did about not going in through the gates to keep the camp's opinion of you guys from souring. When’d it start bleeding over onto you three? There’s a reason this entire area is a monster-free zone for about 10
miles in any direction, right?”

“It’s not bad . . . it’s just . . . the early warning signs are there, like in Wisconsin and Kansas. We’re trying to keep our distance to keep it from getting out of hand.”

“So, when you say our house is set up you mean –“

“The house we're staying in is set up for you guys.”

“When did it start?”

“The last time you were here and left.”

Hadn’t gotten any better now that I was immortal. That’s a shame. I’d been hoping something good would come from this. “Okay, well this is what we’re going to do . . . nothing.”

She looked back up at me, so I said, “We’re camping out in that house, and nobody is going to be clearing any monsters . . . We’ll see what they think about having a wall when they’re reminded of what’s out there.”

“Beth, you can’t be serious. We can’t just –“

“I’m dead serious . . . Run the tests, and take the others to the house. Tell Meg and Abbey start fortifying the house. Then go next door and tell Shawn to do the same.” I let her do the tests on me and then tossed Despondent Dean the keys to our snow plow. “Park it up where Carrie tells you to go.”

“Why? What are you going to do?”

“What needs to be done.”

*Chuck, don’t think this means we’re okay, but I could use some flare when the time is right.*

Climbing to the top of a building pretty much dead center in the town, I searched my pockets. Apparently, Chuck thought a foghorn was enough flare. Raising it high above my head, I pushed the button and . . . well, it was more like a horn for the walls of Jericho that I’d wanted for the Kansas camp, because the building I was standing on shook a little, and the windows across the street blew in. I pushed the button a couple more times and people started coming out of their houses. Blasting it again to make sure they saw me, I waited until everyone was out and then saw a flicker of light flash across their faces and heard the rumble of thunder behind me. Guess that was my cue to go.

“Do I have your attention? I’m betting that every monster in a 20-mile radius has it too. Shame there’s no wall to protect you. You were given houses. You were given electricity. You were given food and clothes. All that was asked of you was that you work if you want something . . . You haven’t been working, and yet you expect our protection? Well no more. Until I see some serious progress around here, you can fend for yourselves . . . If I were you, I’d get started on the trenches. Those might slow down the things that are coming for you now. I’d use the diggers that are still in the same place they were a month ago, and if you’re not in a digger, I’d grab a shovel, flashlight, or a gun. You know where to find us when you’re ready.”

There was another flash of light and clap of thunder before the wind picked up to accentuate my point, I guess, and then I turned and started climbing back down the side of the building. Let’s see what they did with that. By the time I got down to their level, one of the men was shoved in front of the others and said, “I, uh . . . we’re ready. We’ll get started in the morning if –“
“You’ll get started now if you want to make it through the night. I need show, not tell.”

“You’re a bitch!”

Not sure who said that, but I didn’t really care as I turned to walk back to the hunter’s house. The people here may not respect me, but they would respect my team by the time this was over. I would not lose Carrie, Abbey and Meg because of this curse on my soul, and these people were going to rise to the occasion, defeat their darker natures that the curse on my soul brought out in people and become worthy of the title of survivor instead of what they were, whiney ass children.

“What did you do?” I glanced in Mary’s direction after closing the front door of the house behind me.

“What needed to be done.”

“What about my children? You’re bringing —“

“And I will protect them as will you, the Deans, Abbey, Meg, Carrie, and John . . . You have nothing to worry about. You need this as much as the people out there do . . . You underestimate me. Maybe it’s because I played my part as a game-loving nurse in the 1980s a little too well. Maybe it’s because you and your thug family members were able to rough me over two days after I had life-saving surgery . . . Whatever it is, make no mistake, we’re not in your world anymore. We’re in mine, and I am responsible for not just everyone in this house, but the lazy dickheads out there . . . That is the difference between what you do and what I do. I can’t just leave the people I save on a hunt. I have to be responsible for them for life.”

Having said everything I needed to say to her, I went to my weapons bag to grab a radio, so we could keep in contact with Kansas. We needed to know how much time we had and maybe what kind of monsters we were looking at if they weren’t all hybrids. Handing it off to Despondent Dean, so he could talk to his brother, I then grabbed a can of spray paint and bulked up the security on the house by adding wards they didn’t know.

When I was done with that, I went outside to put up the sigil that Men of Letters Dean had taught me on our house and the building across the street, so we could trap anything that came through our end of the street when the time was right. After that, I snuck around the town to see what they were doing and put up more traps. Some of the people in the camp were working. Others weren’t. They would. I had faith they would.
Auditions

Chapter Notes

This is from the POV of solo-Dean.

There she was, the woman he’d developed a bit of a TV crush on. Dean had seen flashes of her on the mission, but those were just a taste of how she really was when she had an almost empty universe to play around in. The woman who woke up an unsuspecting town with a foghorn from God and who stood on top of a building to address the crowds . . . the wind and the thunderstorm clouds appearing out of nowhere behind her . . . that was her, live and in the flesh. And the way she just spoke to Mary Winchester . . . That confidence and authority, the talk about responsibility and how what she did was different from hunting . . . All that was hot on its own, but the fact that it was Mary Winchester she said it to . . . Mary might not be his actual mother, but Beth putting her in her place like that still made him feel a little like she was the ‘bad girl,’ he was bringing home to meet Mom, and that made the appeal 10x stronger. He didn’t think he’d been this turned on by her since he saw her take down Crowley to Ballroom Blitz.

“Keep it in your pants, Winchester. We’ve got monsters to kill.”

Dean looked at Meg as she turned away from him to crouch in front of her weapons bag. Abbey and Carrie were doing the same to grab what they needed. She might be human, but she wasn’t a whole lot different from the Meg he used to know. She looked the same. She sounded the same. He wondered how she was as a hunter. Abbey and Carrie . . . he recognized them from the show. They were real just like the kids at the camp in South Dakota.

“We’ve got incoming. Sam says ETA is about an hour.”

Dean looked at the mopey Dean and asked, “How many?”

“10-15 to start, but the news is out on this place being here.”

“Know what they are?”

“I’ll find out.”

Dean watched the mopey Dean walk out of the room. Turning to look at the rest of the team, Dean’s attention went on John, because . . . well, he knew that look. His Dad was pissed. “You didn’t deny it.” Mary didn’t look like she knew what John was talking about, so John said, “Took a tumble down the stairs and broke her stitches open?” Mary opened her mouth to explain, but John put his hand up to silence her. “Save it. She told me . . . When she took me to the future, she told me that you and your uncle and cousin were the reason she looked the way she did when I saw her on that couch . . . I thought, no, my wife doesn’t have any family . . . she must be mistaken . . . couple of robbers must’ve called over, and you just happened to be there . . . made ‘em go, and she was out of it, so she thought you were behind it . . . It’s one lie after another with you. I don’t even know who you are.” Picking up the kid Dean and baby Sam from the couch, John turned to everyone else in the room and said, “I’m gonna find a closet to put them in upstairs. I take it you all have this covered?”
Meg looked over her shoulder and answered, “Yeah, we’ve got it, but Abbey will stand guard in front of the closet. We’ll need you on the roof.”

It made John pause. “Why?”

“Cause I remember how sneaky that mind of yours is, but you think fastest on your own and when you’re separated from your children. Need you on the roof. Abbey won’t let anything get through her . . . if anything even gets that far. Beth has this place warded up tight. Just won’t do anything for hybrids . . . that’s where the rest of us come in.”

Without looking at John to see if he’d moved, Carrie said, “You need weapons, or is there another reason, you’re not moving yet?”

John laughed at her audacity and said, “All right. I’ll put them upstairs and explain it to them. Then I’ll go out on the roof.” Shaking his head, John went over to grab his weapons and rifle bags, so he could bring those with him too. John had stocked up the same way they all had while they’d been in South Dakota. Even ran through the obstacle course the same way the rest of them did. His aim was perfect, even with the more modern rifles. He should be fine.

Looking at Mary, Carrie said, “You’re our wild card. None of us, including the two adult Deans, have any idea what you can do. Might want to use this time to show us.”

“I don’t need to prove –“

Standing to strap a machete around her thigh the way Beth had her angel blade strapped around hers, Carrie said, “You do. The only one here who doesn’t is Beth.”

“Then why is she doing this if –“

“Oh, no . . . sometimes she has to remind the masses of what she can do, especially if they’ve never seen her in action. The three of us . . . she never has to prove herself to us. She’s family. She would die for any one of us, the same as we’d die for her. If she falls, we pick her up, and she does the same for us.”

“She’s not your family. Your family –“

“Is dead? I know. I had to use my last 2 rounds to shoot my parents in the head when they were attacked by a swarm of migrating Croats. I was 17. See, I may not be a kid anymore, but I am one of her kids, one of the older ones who graduated from hunting academy, and Beth is as close to family as I have left. The same goes for all the other kids she’s saved. None of us will turn against her . . . Abs here is one of her kids too, even if she doesn’t look like it . . . What’d she do for you Abs . . . after the wendigo farm?”

Abbey looked up at Carrie and said, “She stayed true to her word when Cameron and I would not tell her what we had done. It showed us that she is a strong leader but fair. She may not have trusted us, but she still trained us, and she did not kick us out of her camp . . . She did not do it when she knew what we were either. She taught me how to read better than my Mom had a chance to do. She raises my niece for me, because I know she will do a better job of it than I can . . . Lily will grow up to be a great warrior, but she will also have compassion that I do not know how to give.”

“Meg?”

“Well, I’m not one of her kids, but she’s the closest thing to a nerdy little sister I’ve ever had. And she knows what I was, who I was before that, and what I did in between. She still accepts me
anyway. I'm her smoking and poker partner, and I love hunting with her. She knows how to keep
the intensity up there for what I need to control all the guilt I feel . . . wonder if she brought any
smokes. Think I’ll go find out . . . Point is, I’ll never turn on her, and she’s doing this to stop the
town from cutting us to shreds some day soon . . . And you do need to prove yourself . . . maybe
not to her, but you do to us, because right now, you don’t look a whole lot different than the rest of
the town.”

Meg left to go find Beth, and Dean bent down to go through his new weapons bag. Carrie came up
next to him to see what he had. Whispering she said, “Mary was a hunter, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Think that was enough for us to see her best?”

He smiled briefly. “Probably.”

“Good.”

“Wait, is that why you did that?”

Carrie shrugged. “Well, we meant every word we said, because we need her fighting with us, not
against us, but we also need Mary at her best. Same goes for you. This isn’t going to be anything
you’re used to doing.”

“I was in Purgatory. Think I can handle it.”

“Purgatory, huh?”

He smiled again. “Yeah.”

“Did you always know how to kill the monsters there?”

“Not always, but I found a way.”

“Good, but, uh, could you always see the monsters in Purgatory?” When he looked at her to see if
she was being serious, she smirked. “Like I said, we need you at your best . . . You brought night
vision goggles?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Good. Beth’s going to go cut the town’s power supply, so you’ll need them.”

“What?”

“Yeah, why do you think Beth said they’d need flashlights?”

“Is this like a punishment thing for not doing the work?”

“They’ll think it is, but it’s more because if we want a town left standing, we need to be able to see
the monsters, and sometimes the only way you can see them is through thermal imaging, but
sometimes, you can only see them with the night vision . . . You’ll have to flip between the two,
and lights don’t mix well with that.”

“How old are you again?”

“Just turned 20.”
She was so young and so old at the same time... just like all the kids in that South Dakota camp. She should be out there making fake IDs to try and get into clubs, not knowing the difference between thermal imaging and night vision. “You’re too young for this.”

“How old were you when you started hunting?”

“That’s not the point. You should be —“

“Going to college and worrying about sorority parties? That life is over, Dean.”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t mean —“

“If I was 20 and in the military, would you think the same thing?”

“You’re not in the military though. You’re —“

“Come on... you’ve seen this world. The face of the enemy might be a monster instead of a man or woman, but that doesn’t change that I’ve enlisted, and it’s a job I love.”

“You sound like Beth.”

She gave him a genuine smile and said, “Bobby used to say that all the time when I annoyed him. If it was meant as an insult, know that I take it as a compliment. It just makes me want to keep doing what I’m doing.” Dean sighed and shook his head, and Carrie added, “But she feels the same way you do. She’s only let me off the leash a little. Why do you think she put Abbey in charge of protecting me?”

“The training wheels haven’t come off yet?”

“Nope, and I might find it annoying, but I get it, because I’m the same way. I don’t want the kids from our camp out here hunting the way I am... I want to finish the job before they have to do it, or at least get as much of the job done as possible before they do... and I’m lucky. I have Meg and Abbey with me. We’re a good team.”

Yeah, he could see that. Not as good of a team as she would’ve been with Adam though. He’d been rooting for them on that TV show. Probably shouldn’t say that. She was real, so it’d be hard for her to hear, and it’d make him sound like a weirdo fanboy. He’d been called that at least once by the Dean from this universe, and it’d made him feel like those people who read the Supernatural books in his universe. Ducking his head, Dean said, “So, about these invisible monsters... I thought we were letting the town fend for itself.”

“We won’t do anything about the ones they can see, but the invisible ones... There’s not a chance, Beth will let those through.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Beth won’t let us lose a single person. And for this to work, the people in town need to see the threat.”

A couple of seconds later, the lights in the house went out, and it sounded like Carrie was smiling when she said, “Told you... Be ready for anything. Let’s see what you’re made of Dean.”
I waited on a roof on the northwest corner of the town with my thermal imaging camera. The hybrids were apparently coming from the north and the west. The rest of the monsters were coming from all directions. I assumed that meant that the hybrids had been part of Eve’s army, although I had no idea how many of Crowley’s monster factories had continued to churn them out even without him being at the helm anymore. If we were looking at something new, I wanted pictures. Intel like that was always good to have and keep.

The first monster came into view, and I snapped a picture. Taking a look, it was a . . . huh, hadn’t seen one of those in a while. “Are we gonna take this one out, or . . . “

I looked over at solo-Dean and said, “It’s a werecat, not to be confused with the Wampus Cat . . . two totally different monsters. Silver bullet will kill it. They can handle it.”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No.”

“How do you know –“ I showed him the picture I’d taken. “They don’t have to hide what they are here, so they can look like monsters?”

“Yeah, for the most part . . . unless they’re wearing suits, and then they still look like the monsters they are . . . just in suits.”

He shook his head and whispered, “You’re sure we’re doing the right thing?”

“Yeah. If they’ve been listening at all in their lore sessions, then they know how to kill these. It’s the numbers I’m counting on to make an impression, not monsters in general.”

“Knowing how to kill them isn’t the same as killing them.”

I looked back at the town. “You wanna know why I started this town in addition to not wanting to overcrowd Wisconsin?” He watched me for the answer, so I said, “They were all victims, but most of them weren't really innocent . . . Maybe a quarter of them were truly innocent, but the rest? The rest had all done something to make sure they stayed a float a little longer. I’m not saying that I don’t approve of doing whatever you have to do to survive, but it’s not like any of them went after their captors. They went after the other people being held with them . . . They did things like put nails in the other people’s shoes when there’s no such thing as medical care for infections or tetanus vaccines unless you know me, and they did it, so those people would be sick or injured on trading days . . . They did things like put poisonous berries or mushrooms into the food of the other prisoners, not enough to kill them, but enough to make their captors think the others were the weak ones that needed to be traded instead of them . . . By doing those things, they essentially sentenced those people to either death or becoming a monster . . . Now, I don’t know what the people who were saved from Eve’s corral are like. I haven’t had a chance to do my thing with them, but they’re all taking their cues from the original people I brought here. And if the original people here could do the things I know they did to other people, then they have it in them to kill monsters.”

"But they didn't have it in them to take on their captors, right?"

"Yeah, but they have it in them to be killers is the point."

“What if it backfires, and they think they can do this on their own without you?"
I pointed my camera in the direction the werecat had come from and said, “You tell me if you think they can handle numbers like this.” He glanced down at my camera and might’ve done a double take before moving it around to look to our north and south. “Do you see how big of a task keeping 10 miles cleared on all sides has been for my team? My team has been the wall for this town all this time, and because my team has done such a good job, the town thinks there’s no real threat. They need to be reminded of the threat, know there is a reason they have to build a wall before those Croats come back, and respect my team. Anything less will get my team killed.”

“Bobby didn’t say anything about there being this many.”

“I know. If they’re clumped together, they show up as a single dot, and hybrids are hard to pinpoint.”

“What about the invisible ones?”

“What invisible ones? Some of them are camouflaged, but you can see them if you’re up close.”

“Carrie said some of the monsters are invisible.”

I laughed. “I think Carrie was messing with you.”

“Well then why the hell did you cut the lights?”

“We can handle the numbers you see now, but if the lights were on, then there’d be like 10 times as many coming to investigate. These are only coming, because they heard the foghorn and got close enough to smell us, but the foghorn and light from a small town in all the darkness out there would’ve drawn more attention.”

“But the lights are on every night.”

“They’re not supposed to be. It’s supposed to be a blackout after sundown. Lights on in the house only with blackout curtains up. How do you think I knew they weren’t listening to my team? It wasn’t just the wall not being built. It wasn’t just what I saw on the monitor of the computer at the bunker. It wasn’t just Carrie telling me they didn’t want this post anymore. It was pulling up here and seeing the whole town lit up . . . except for in and around my team’s house and Shawn’s house next door. These lights are the reason my team has to go out there every night and face what you’re seeing to create that 10-mile safe zone . . . I’m guessing the moronic townspeople decided that with over 900 people, they didn’t have to listen to the 4 telling them what to do, whether those 4 had guns or not . . . because all 900 have their own guns.”

“You were never going to stay in the truck all night, were you?”

“No, I was. I wanted to see what a night in the life of my team was like without them knowing . . . I’m sure they would’ve snuck out the same way they always do, but not if I’d been staying in the house with them. I didn’t want my curse spilling over onto you guys if anyone in the town saw me with you . . . and maybe I was using not wanting Despondent Dean to drive when we leave as a cover, but I never planned on having us leave in the morning. I was going to do all of this tomorrow after I was sure. Might’ve lost my temper a little and kick started it a bit early. I don’t want to lose Carrie. That’s why I sent her team here. It’s supposed to give her just enough danger to keep her happy, but it’s not out there in the wild. If I can get this sorted out, then they can stay here, but if I brought Stephen and Pamela here in their place, then I don’t know where she’ll end up.”

Holding his breath a few brief seconds, he licked his bottom lip before ducking his head and
saying, “So, I’m guessing you have a plan?”

“A loose plan. They’re easier not to screw up. Nobody dies and nobody gets turned.”

He laughed. “That’s the plan?”

“No . . . This has to be my team’s win. They know what I want them to do. I told them before we left. I know they wanted Abbey to watch the kids, but the other Dean, Mary, John and Shawn can all keep the kids safe.”

“What are we doing?”

“Come on. Watch this.” I got up into a crouch and ran over to the other side of the roof, so we could see where the people in this town were working on the trench. Fewer now were working than had been earlier.

“Where’d they all go?”

“Honestly? I think they went to bed.”

“What about the people –“

“They’re working, aren’t they? I told them I needed show, not tell. Those 10 are showing me that they’re ready to work.”

I grabbed my sniper rifle with the night vision scope. It was loaded with a hollow-point round full of silver . . . silver worked on most monsters. A bullet to the heart worked on its own on a few monsters too. If this didn’t work, then I had other ways to do this. Taking aim at the nearest monster to one of the people working, I shot it in the heart before it could do anything. It crumpled to its knees and then fell on its face. The workers all looked around with their flashlights and realized for the first time that they weren’t alone out there.

Some of the people dropped their shovels, came back into the town and started running door-to-door to wake people up. Others stayed there and levelled their guns at the monsters before they too gave it up when they saw the numbers they were facing. “Did you want me to see them turn tail and run?”

“No, I want you to see how unprepared they are and why they need our help even though they are a bunch of asshats. I told them what would happen. And yet . . . why aren’t there people out here keeping a close eye on the camp perimeter? Why aren’t there more people out here with flashlights, so the people working can see what they’re doing? They know they have to do those things. It’s why Shawn is here. He’s been training at least some of them how to be guards.”

“Its not something everyone can do, Beth. You can’t –“

“I know that. But I also know that out of almost 1000 people, there should be at least 16, 4 to be stationed on each side of the camp, who have the skills to do it . . . and another 16 that can take the day shift, but I also know that they only do 8 hour shifts here, which means there should be another 16 on top of that. Now if you were told that you had an all hands on deck kind of situation, what would you do?”

“I’d double it up on each of the sides, so there’s less space between guards . . . put everyone who couldn’t fight into a couple of houses in the middle and have them protected by the other 16. Nobody would be sleeping.”
“Exactly. They’re not doing any of that right now because they’re leaderless. What determines who lives and who dies in these camps are the leaders, and they’re not listening to the people I left behind to be leaders . . . but watch and see where they run now . . . and watch what my team does.”

The people who’d started running door-to-door had gotten about half-way down the street. People were coming out of their houses looking like sleepy dumbasses again the way they had when I used the foghorn. The people who’d stayed behind to initially try and keep the monsters away, let the others keep knocking door-to-door and ran all the way back to where the hunters were staying. A call came through the radio from Meg 30 seconds later.

“They working?”

“Yeah.”

“Anymore?”

“5 more . . . should be there in 2 minutes. Give the test 5 minutes after they get there.”

Dean looked at me and asked what test I was talking about, so I said, “This camp has self-appointed leaders from the first group of survivors I brought here. What it needs is better leadership in the form of a council. The 10 who are being allowed into that house passed the first test, which was continuing to work. If they try to convince the hunters to go defend the camp instead of thinking it’s every man and woman for him or herself now that they’re safe . . . that’s the second test. If they go with them, then they can be on the council.”

“10 people out of 1000?”

“Mm . . . I’m thinking that it’ll be more like 5.”

“Which 5?”

“You would think it’d be the ones who stayed behind to put up some kind of a fight, but I’m willing to bet it’ll be the ones who thought of others first and are still knocking on doors trying to wake them up instead of just running for the safe house.”

Dean focused on them, while he asked, “Okay, so now what?”

I looked down at the street below us as it began to fill with monsters. We were looking at about 50, which was doable. “The other people in the camp only have enough time to batten down the hatches on their own houses. When the council makes the decision for the rest of them, we’ll do our part . . . The traps I put up around the town should be enough to catch quite a few of the monsters if it’s not just Meg, Abbey, and Carrie going to spring all the traps. Any monsters that are left over are yours and mine.”
Learning a New Set of Rules

Chapter Notes

This is from the point of view of the last Dean they picked up on the mission. Solo-Dean calls him Mopey Dean and Beth calls him Despondent Dean.

Meg opened the door, and one of the people outside said, “We need help.”

She lifted her radio to her mouth. “These the five?”

Beth answered back, “Yeah,” and Meg opened the door a little further before saying, “Come on in to the only safe house in the camp.”

Dean was a little unsure of what he was supposed to be doing, so he asked one of the guys in the living room, “Any idea how many are out there?”

“Hundreds.”

Hundreds? Bobby said there were supposed to be like 15 at most. Maybe they were scared and exaggerating? One of the newer guys said, “No, I’d say it was more like 15 or 20, but that was on the North . . . saw some coming from this side of town just before we got here, so double that? 30 or 40 . . . maybe?”

“Nah, I saw hundreds.” Yeah, Dean bet that guy did. None of them were worried about the others still out there?

“And everyone else in the town –“

Carrie cleared her throat and gave Dean a little look before shaking her head. They weren’t supposed to talk about that? Seemed like the elephant in the room though, or at least it felt that way to him.

“Fuck ‘em. We were workin’ . . . That’s why we got let in, right?” The guy who’d seen hundreds of monsters looked to Meg for the answer.

She gave the guy a sarcastic smile Dean knew well. “That’s right . . . You were the big brave men out there working.” There was a lot about her that reminded him of his Meg.

The guy who saw 30-40 monsters said, “Hey, uh . . . so what are you guys gonna do? I mean there’s not a whole lot of time. Like I said, they were closing in just before we got here.” John might be using a suppresser, but you could still hear the sound of his rifle from down here, so when they heard a shot a second later, and the guy pointed up. “See!”

Meg flicked a look in Carrie’s direction, and Carrie replied, “We’re not doing anything. We quit. It looks like everyone else is on their own.”

Dean watched the interaction. They were working something. They seemed just as sneaky as Beth. In fact, he bet she put them up to this. He just had no idea what it was, because he couldn’t feel what they were feeling. Another guy stepped forward and said, “40 or a 100 . . . that’s too many
monsters for the rest of them to handle on their own. You need to do something.”

Meg crossed her arms across her chest and leaned against the doorjamb into the living room. “Do we now?” Looking at Carrie, she said, “Thought that’s what we’ve been doing every night, isn’t it?”

Carrie mirrored her against the other doorjamb and replied, “It is . . . Our first night off in months and look at what happens.”

There was the sound of another shot from the roof, and a third guy stepped forward saying, “If you do this every night, then you know what to do. You have to do something. You’re about to lose . . . what is it? 1/10th of the population left in the country?”

The guy sitting next to the guy who’d seen 100s of monsters waved off that man’s concern. “So? They stay here, keep those monsters from getting us . . . That’s 1/10th of a 1/10th, and then they can just take us to one of the other camps.”

The guy he’d said that too shouted back, “Shut up, Hank. You’re a moron. If all they do is save us, it’s 1/100th of 1/10th, which makes it 1/1000th . . . That’s a hell of a lot smaller piece of the pie than 1/10th . . . Don’t pretend like you were working for any other reason than you might not get anymore booze.” Looking at Carrie, the guy said, “What do you need us to do? If you want us to stay here and look after –”

Carrie looked at Meg and said, “Nah, think we have it covered here . . . Beth did say she put something up around town that we could use if we felt like it, didn’t she?”

The guy who’d seen 30-40 monsters said, “Well, what was it? Some kind of weapons or –“

“A sigil . . . looks something like this.” She painted it on the beam behind her and said, “You cut your hand like this, and then slam it over it.” As soon as she did, a guy on the other side of the room got pinned to the wall against an identical sigil on that side of the room. Dean recognized that sigil. Maybe he learned it at some point, on some hunt, over the last few years, but his mind was so full of hunts and the Mark and Amara and lore and the end of the world, he had no idea how or where he’d learned it.

“Let me go!”

Meg and Carrie giggled, and Carrie said, “That was awesome,” before she used her knife to cut the sigil behind her, and the guy was able to step away from the wall.

The guy who’d seen 30-40 monsters asked if it’d do the same thing to the monsters. Carrie nodded, and the three men who’d been the most vocal advocates for doing something for the rest of the town shared a look before the 30-40 monsters guy said, “They’re all over town? So, all we have to do is hide, wait for the monsters to step in the way, do what you did . . . and it’ll work?”

“It sure will.”

“Well, if you need more hands, we could do that.”

Carrie and Meg stepped away from the wall, and Meg said, “Well, if you’re willing to put the work in, then I guess, we’ll go with you.”

They picked up another two men, and Meg looked back at them before opening the door. “Oh, so you want to go now too?”
One of the men shrugged and said, “Didn’t wake them all up to have them get eaten. 954 people isn’t something I want on my conscience. More people trapping these things means we can wrap this up sooner, right?”

“Yeah, I guess it does. What about you, Big and Tall? You don’t say a whole lot, do you?”

“N- n- no, but I- I- I know I can do w- w- w- what she did.”

Carrie nodded to the guy with a stutter saying, “All right . . . You’re with me. Abbey and Meg are splitting up with the other two teams. Keep your eyes open for more sigils, and do what we say.”

Looking back at Dean, she added, “And you might want to keep an eye on the main street,” before she followed the rest of the team out.

Dean surveyed the living room and didn’t really feel like hanging out here. He went to Shawn who was stationed at the foot of the stairs and said, “You have any idea what just happened?”

Shawn looked around the room. “I’m sure we’ll find out when this is over. Mary has the back. I have the front if you want to go up on the roof with John . . . see what Carrie was talking about.”

“You don’t want to see it?”

Shawn smiled. “I already know what they can do . . . been with them since day one. If you’re going to Wisconsin next, just keep in mind that when they started it, there was only one cabin, and that’s it . . . and maybe tell my family, I said ‘hi.’ They’re staying in Jess’s camp, the fishing one.”

Dean gave him a nod to let him know he would and headed up stairs before finding the window his Dad had used to climb out on the roof. Probably better if there were two people out here anyway. Mary could probably handle the back, but what about the sides? “Hey, you wanna take the right corner, and I’ll take the left.”

John picked up his stuff and moved without giving Dean any hassle about it. It wasn’t what he was really expecting, but then this John wasn’t like his Dad. This John was more like the way Dean’s Dad had been when he and Sam went back to stop Anna from killing their parents. Dean had to give him credit for how he was handling all this from finding out his wife wasn’t who he’d thought she was to hunting and joining the mission where every world looked like the last . . . except maybe it hadn’t, because most of the places Dean had been on the mission would’ve been decades in the future from the life John had known, and now he was here. This John was willing to do whatever he had to do for his family even though he really had no idea what was happening. He was learning, but he wasn’t hardened by loss. Dean hoped he stayed that way.

“Uh, what kind of rounds are you using?”

John looked at his ammo and said, “Ones with a silver tip.” Yeah, some of the rounds were normal rounds. Some of them were silver hollow points, and some were tipped in silver. Those would work. John must’ve heard something coming up his side of the house, because he rolled onto his back and fired a minute later. “Might’ve been right about splitting this up.”

Dean smiled. “Give it a few minutes. If that didn’t drop it permanently, let me know, and I’ll go down there and deal with it.”

“Uh, my wife . . . just cut its head off.” Dean laughed at the tone of John’s voice and then John said, “Now she’s setting it on fire . . . Is that normal?”

“Yeah . . . sometimes that’s not even enough. Different monsters take different things to kill them.”
Dean had a perfect shot on a monster two doors down and took it. It landed with a thud and didn’t get back up. He was thinking that maybe the guy who saw 30 or 40 monsters was right. Most of them were down at the other end of the street . . . He lined up a shot on one of the monsters at the back and then saw it look to its right before it and about 5 others went down a side street . . . either that was Meg and the others cutting down the numbers or someone needed to –

He watched the next batch of 4 monsters take off to the left. It had to be because of the hunting teams who’d left the house. He wondered how many monsters were trapped in between houses between here and the main group of monsters. It’d gone from about 40 to 30 in less than a minute, and then he used the scope to see why the monsters were all bunched up like that. Beth and the other Dean. Back to back . . . looked like the other Dean might be using his machete, while Beth used . . . her angel blade if Dean had to guess. Hacking up or down to take hands and arms of monsters starving enough to reach for them . . . around to take heads . . . They seemed to make a good team from what he could tell. He wondered if he looked like that much of a badass when he was fighting monsters. Kind of wanted to have his turn fighting with Beth to see how they did as a team.

Another 5 or so monsters went missing at the back and disappeared to the right between some houses a few down from where the last ones had disappeared at roughly the same time John took out a latecomer from this side of town. Could really use some of these people in the houses doing the same to keep it to just the monsters that were here now. There was nothing they could do about that at the moment. They were using suppressors so hopefully not many monster stragglers would show up to investigate what was happening.

Well, if the monsters were going to keep disappearing from the back, and he couldn’t be a part of the actual fight with them, then Dean decided to do something about the monsters closer to the other Dean and Beth. Lining up his shot on one on Beth’s side, he took it, a couple of seconds before Beth was going to kill it. She followed through on the swing and got what was left of the top of its head. Holding up her hand with 5 fingers in his direction, she then flipped her hand around to point the other way . . . only took a couple of seconds, because she had to take the head off of another one, and then she put up 5 fingers facing him, flipped her hand around again and put up 4 . . . she wanted to see who got to 5 first. He grinned. Challenge accepted.

Between the three of them, they brought down another 15 or so in the next few minutes, and that meant they were down to about 10 when Dean saw the other teams start going down the street to pound on doors. Carrie, Abbey, and Meg pulled people out of their houses when they opened the doors, and then the men with them pointed to the roofs, and went back into the houses with the people to make them get on the roofs. Looked like he wasn’t the only one who thought they should have more people out here guarding the town. Pretty soon just about every house had at least one person on it keeping an eye on their backs, and by then Beth and the other Dean had finished 9 of the 10 monsters. Dean decided to shoot the last one, and they both looked in his direction when it fell to the ground before the other Dean, bent down with his machete, and took its head anyway. Dean bet the other Dean thought that meant he was going to take credit for the kill.

At the moment, he kind of felt a little like this universe, on the way up from rock bottom. There were a different set of rules he had to learn, and he wasn’t quite sure how he fit in here yet, but for the most part, he kind of liked this place. Might be just what he’d needed.
Sam waited for his brother’s voice to come through the radio. It’d seemed like a pretty perilous situation last night, but then the dots disappeared one after the other pretty fast. That 10-mile buffer that’d been around the town was gone, but it didn’t look like there were any dots in the town anymore. He’d wanted to call them last night to find out if everyone was still okay, but Bobby had talked him out of it. That’s the way they did things here. They didn’t call people out on the road unless it was an emergency, because they didn’t want to take the hunters’ attention away from their surroundings. Anytime the hunters called here though, someone always answered.

That made sense. If there were any monsters still lingering around, then he wanted his brother’s focus to be on those, not the radio. He went back to trying to force himself to come up with the right classes for these kids. They did training everyday, military drills rather than hunter drills, so he guessed that they didn’t need gym class. If they could find one person in any of the camps who used to be able to play a musical instrument and who knew how to read music, then Sam was thinking of having that person come here to teach a music class. He wanted an art class too, not art history, but actual art . . . Sarah said she’d teach that if he wanted.

She wasn’t overly friendly with him, but knew he wasn’t the evil Sam. They were taking steps in the right direction for being friends. She’d agreed to cut his hair when he told her he wanted to look different than the evil Sam and while she’d done that, he’d told her that the Sarah Blake in his universe was dead, the why and the how. They’d talked about the art class and how things were here, what needed to be improved. He liked her husband, and apparently, Sarah was expecting. She’d asked Beth to get a pregnancy test when Beth was here, so Beth had. It was positive, and then Beth had said she didn’t have an ultrasound or know how to read one, but she could do better than that and called her Dad here. Her Dad took one look at Sarah and said she was 7 weeks along, snapped his fingers to make pregnancy books appear out of thin air in Sarah’s hands, and then left saying that when she wanted to know if it was a boy or girl, he’d be back.

Apparently, Beth was going to swing by every other month and maybe start doing a traveling clinic at all the camps . . . in between doing hunts between camps. Sam guessed that she’d told Bobby, she wanted to hold off on the witches in New Orleans in favor of strengthening the camps and getting prepared for the Croats. There was a lot she’d done in the few days she’d been here even though Sam had only seen her do some of it, like spending time with the kids, showing Sam where he might want to build the new school, and encouraging him to come up with what he wanted to teach.

Getting back to that, Sam thought about what else he wanted in his school. He knew that if this was going to be the ammunition-manufacturing hub, then he wanted to soften it with the arts. What else? Well, they’d have to do Math, English, History, and Science. Bobby was insisting on lore being a class too. With those 5 classes and the arts, they should have a full day. He could flesh out elective classes for them once he saw how things worked out after he got things up and running. They needed to build the school first, and he needed to get a look at the schoolbooks they had here and see about getting more for different ages. He wanted to find the right teachers too . . . none of the people who’d been their teachers or ‘commanders’ when the old regime was still here. They didn’t sound like the right people to have around kids at all, or they didn’t to Sam after Bobby had told him what’d happened here.

Maybe Jerry would be up for teaching the science classes or the Math and Science classes. Jerry seemed to know about stuff like that. Jerry could be the head of that department. Sam could take the English and History and be in charge of that department if Sarah took the Art. He’d just have to
find someone to teach music. What else could they do here? What about sports? Everything didn’t have to always be about military drills, did it? Sure that stuff was important, so the kids knew how to defend themselves, but what if they got something, like . . . softball or soccer or something like that started. Maybe they could get the kids in South Dakota and Wisconsin doing it too, and they could play against each other a few times a year? He’d look into it.

He felt his heart skip a beat when the Sat phone near him rang to life. Could be one of the hunters out of radio range. Could be Jody. Could be his brother needing help. Wasn’t any of those. It was a voice he didn’t ever really get to hear unless it was on some kind of recording device, but he knew it. It was his. “Sam here. Gadreel and I found 2 people we’ll be dropping off in Kansas. ETA 5 minutes after we run tests and give them an explanation of the camp.”

“I’ll let the guards on the gate know.”

“Other Sam?”

Sam rolled his eyes and said, “Yes, Sam?”

“What are you doing there?”

Sam thought that Sam knew they’d been doing a tour of the camps. “We’re doing a tour of the camps. The rest of them went onto Iowa. I’m staying here.”

“What about South Dakota?”

“Think I’m needed here more. Why aren’t you in South Dakota?”

The line went dead. Sam wondered if that meant that the evil Sam wasn’t going to stay in South Dakota. It didn’t really change Sam’s plans, because this camp needed help, but maybe he could make more trips up there than he’d been planning. If that was the case, then it made his entire day better.

Getting on the walkie-talkie, Sam said, “Bobby? The evil Sam is bringing survivors to the front gates in 5 minutes.”

“Sam? What’d I say about calling him the evil Sam, especially over the radios?”

Sam shrugged at his walkie-talkie and then said, “Would, ‘my evil twin’ sound better?”

He smiled as Bobby grumbled, “Ain’t a whole lot better, but it’s somethin’ I guess . . . Don’t mean he’s evil no more . . . talkin’ like that might get him shot, and if he is, I’m holdin’ you accountable.”

“All right . . . the other Sam is dropping off survivors in less than 5.”

He’d made his point. He wasn’t the evil Sam. He hadn’t told anyone what’d happened on the mission, and he wouldn’t. It’d probably come back to bite him in the ass. Maybe it’d make people think there should be open season on all Sam Winchesters . . . all Dean Winchesters too. That was a secret for the South Dakota camp to keep, but Sam still wanted people around here to know he wasn’t the other Sam. Maybe it’d make them stop giving him the same wary looks he’d gotten in South Dakota. It’d take time, but it’d happen, or he hoped it would. He just needed to get this school thing right.

He might’ve been so engrossed in his project that he jumped 10 minutes later when he heard someone behind him say, “Evil Sam, huh?”
Relaxing, but not really, Sam said, “Don’t do anything evil for the next 5 years, and I’ll think about downgrading it to Sam the Jerk.”

The other Sam sighed before taking a seat across from him. “I probably deserve that, but you don’t know me.”

“I don’t? I think I got a pretty good picture of what you were like on that show Gabriel gave us to watch on this universe.”

“You’re not any better –“

“Than you? I know that. It’s not a competition. I never listen to my brother when I think I’m right. I’ll stop at nothing to get the results I want if I think I’m right . . . I’ll torture or convince other people to sell their souls, so I can find him when he’s a demon . . . I’ll destroy the world for my brother too. I mean I did. Amara got out in our universe, and she destroyed it . . . because of me. But see the difference is that I never liked doing those things. They were a means to an end, and I paid for my sins. I died. You get chance after chance, and you don’t learn from your mistakes, and then you keep getting more chances.”

“You may have died, but so did I . . . If you did all those things, then you’re getting chance after chance too. You probably don’t learn from –“

“Why do you think I’m here? My brother and I are taking a step back from one another, because we know where our destructive co-dependency leads, and now I’m doing what I can to make this universe better, in my own way.”

The other Sam slumped a little and then said, “Yeah, that’s what I’m doing too with trying to find people with Gadreel, and, uh, that’s why I’m here. Bobby said something about maybe you needing help with starting up the school here. I started the one in South Dakota, so I know what it takes. I could help you make some lesson plans. Show me what you’ve got so far.”

If that was true, then maybe Sam could hear what he had to say . . . if that guy wasn’t just going to get him to drop his guard and taser him. Sliding his notes over to the evil Sam, Sam said, “Uh, yeah . . . need to build a school first.”

Looking through the notes, the evil Sam said, “First of all, you have to stop thinking of things as K-12th grade. There just aren’t enough teachers or people I’d trust to be teachers to do the job, especially not in this camp . . . Sarah and Jerry are good choices. Bobby could teach the lore class. I don’t know if they’ll be willing to come back here, but you could ask Deacon and Sue for help. She could take all the younger kids and teach all these subjects, so you four can concentrate on teaching the middle school aged and high school aged kids. Keep your rooms the same and rotate the kids out, so it doesn’t get too confusing. And you could have classes be a little longer and every other day instead of every day, so you can expand on your curriculum. I like the idea for music and art . . . think I like the idea for the sports teams too, but maybe to start off, it should be a weekend thing, so you’re not juggling too much at once, and they need to know how to defend themselves, so it can’t cut into their normal training.”

Sam sat forward with interest. That was some pretty solid advice. “What kinds of extra classes would you have?”

“Uh, well . . . if you want to stick with the arts theme, maybe you could do a play? You could do play practice after dinner when the kids have their down time, and you could travel from camp to camp with that too, so not just the athletic kids get to do it . . . Uh, a foreign language or two would be good. And you’ve got science here, but what kind of science? Chemistry, Biology and Physics
are what Beth teaches. Home economics and shop class are both practical things they could learn."

Was it weird that the person looking back at him, his evil twin, was motivating him to get even more excited about this than he’d already been? Probably. They talked about it for a couple of hours, and by the end, Sam still didn’t trust that guy, but like he’d said, if the guy didn’t do anything evil in the next 5 years, maybe he would. “Are you staying tonight or –“

The other Sam stood and shook his head. “No, I have my own penance to do. Might stop in and see how you’re doing the next time I’m this way though.”

Sam got to his feet to show him out. “Yeah, that’d be good. You need coordinates for something?”

The evil Sam glanced in the direction of the computer and shook his head. “No, that’s easier than what I’m looking for too.” After the evil Sam was gone, Sam went back to their notes and felt pretty good about it. Contacting Jody to talk to Deacon and Sue was the first thing on his agenda. Then he should probably go out and do an inventory on all the school books they had here before going out to find more of what he needed for all different ages. Building a school and having it up by the start of classes in a couple months time, and creating lesson plans were next up on his list of things to do. One thing at a time should be his focus right now, so it wasn’t too overwhelming.

He got the call he’d been waiting for all day at the end of the night. Dean was fine. They’d had some problems to sort out with the residents of the Iowa camp, but things were looking better. Sam needed to tell him if the path was clear between where the camp was and where the crew fixing power lines was, because they needed the crew back at the camp to fix the transformer Beth had shot down. After they did that and got the crew back to where it was now, they’d probably go on to Wisconsin.

The Iowa camp would need a little more focus than it'd had until now, because the hunters weren't going to create the 10-mile buffer again. Why? Because instead of having the hunters do it for them, the town was going to have the three hunters that were there train them how to look after themselves. When the hunters were confident they could, then they'd leave and go back to hunting. It wasn't like the town was going to be left high and dry though.

Apparently, half the town was working on building a wall and the other half was sorting through two trucks worth of seeds that Beth had gone back in time to get. She’d thought it was mid-April, but it was really mid-July, so she covered it by saying that she wanted year-round industrial-sized greenhouses operating, and in the spring they could start on planting crops in fields too. That camp was also going to be starting up a canning and maybe freezing plant, so people who weren’t farming and who weren’t guards would have something to do when the walls were done. They would trade their surplus with the other camps, or that was the plan.

Now the other camps needed something to trade with them. Sam guessed that the animal farm in Kansas would need to keep focusing on building up its animal numbers for now, so the ammo manufacturing should get started pretty soon. There was a lot to do. He’d focus on the school, but if Bobby needed help with the rest, he’d do that too.
New Ways of Finding People

Chapter Notes

This is from the solo-Dean's POV.

They dropped the electric crew back where they’d found them halfway between Iowa and Wisconsin. Another 6 months or so, and the Wisconsin camp should be good for electricity too. Dean wondered if Wisconsin would be like Iowa when they got electricity. He wasn’t really sure what to expect from the Wisconsin camp. All the other camps had been drastically different from one another.

Iowa had looked all right, but the people in it were kind of annoying, and all the women kept hitting on him, which normally wouldn’t be a problem, but he wasn’t interested, and they were persistent. Some side effect of Beth’s curse, maybe? They were leaving Iowa in a better way than they’d found it though.

Beth had figured they’d had too much time on their hands, and that was part of what was causing the problem along with them following the original settlers, who hadn’t been the best leaders. Somehow 5 of the men who’d run into the house on the night of the monster attack had gotten their shit together by the end of the night and now had no problem making the rest of the town do what they should’ve been doing all along.

One of the guys was quiet, but he had good ideas. The other 4 had been in Oregon. One of them had a short fuse, but knew the difference between right and wrong. The other 3 were more reserved and balanced the other 2 out. Beth had told them they were the new council in front of the whole town and why, and some of the people complained, a few called her names, and she might’ve . . . accidentally banished those people to Ohio. Where in Ohio, nobody knew, or she probably would be out there going to find them. She hadn’t done it on purpose. You could tell by the look on her face right after they disappeared. God was still listening whether she and God were on good terms or not. Made the point with the rest of the people in the camp to treat her with a little more respect though.

When they pulled up to the first ‘outpost’ in Wisconsin, the obvious thing to notice was the wall. It was huge. A woman named Karen came to the gate to greet them, and Beth went to meet her, the way she always did, and then they ran through tests again, the way they always did, and were allowed through the gates. This place was full of cabins that looked like they’d been built by hand and unlike the cabins in South Dakota, the cabins here looked like they’d been split into sections, so families could live side-by-side instead of sharing the same house.

Karen showed the place off, like she was proud of it and then showed them where all the blankets and quilts they’d been making were stored. There were a lot, and no two looked the same, so everyone got one that was individual to them. To show his interest in what she was talking about, Dean pointed to one he liked and said if she let him have it, he’d go out and find her a turkey or something, because he guessed they didn’t do cash here, and she laughed. “Here. Just take it.”

She picked it up and handed it to him, and he started to say, “No, I couldn’t. It had to have taken someone a long time to make this. I don’t want ¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬¬‐
“You don’t need to trade with us. We’ll take care of you, so you can keep doing what you’re doing.”

He didn’t know what to say. “Not really used to getting paid for the job.”

“Well, none of us would be here if it weren’t for people like you, and just by doing what you do, you’re keeping us all alive, so it’s the least we can do . . . Besides it’s not like you didn’t give up everything to move to our little planet and help us . . . Come on, I’ll show you guys our new clothing range. We’re pretty excited about it.”

Beth must’ve filled her in on everything about the mission. Maybe she’d embellished his role in it? Following Karen into the next room, Dean’s attention went on that. The room was about twice the size of the last one, and it was full, top to bottom with handmade clothes. The people here had made all of these . . . after the world fell apart. There were sweaters, so thick you wouldn’t need a coat in the winter, flannels, long sleeve shirts that were all . . . well, they were all in neutral colors, olive greens or blues, so you could blend into the environment up here, he guessed. All of it was really high quality. You wouldn’t even know it hadn’t been made before the outbreak.

Karen saw him checking a shirt out to see how it’d been made and threw her eyes to Heaven before taking it off the rack and putting it on top of his blanket. He didn’t know what say again, and she smiled. “Don’t worry. It’s not just you. Our Dean doesn’t know what to do when we give him things either . . . doesn’t stop us from doing it, and I’m guessing you guys don’t have much now that you’re here and starting over again.” Then she went down the line and picked clothes out for him and the other Dean . . . even some homemade jeans in their size . . . and woolen socks. Didn't seem like the socks would be itchy. Their arms were overflowing with clothes by the time she was done. It was all stuff they’d wear . . . just in different colors, so they wouldn’t end up looking the same.

“You guys staying for dinner, or are you going to go over to Jess’s next?”

“Uh, I . . . well, we can stay here and then go there tomorrow . . . if that’s –“

Karen cut Beth off with a smile and said, “Finally taking a break, huh?”

Beth smiled. “Yeah, I thought maybe we could stay a day at each place . . . I need some time to clear my head, and up here is the best place to do it.”

Karen put an arm around Beth’s shoulders to escort her out of the storage cabin and towards a big giant mess hall, and the mopey Dean whispered, “Is this place for real?” Dean laughed, and the mopey Dean said, “No, I’m serious. Like . . . Amara didn’t really win, and I’m not really living some kind of dream life in my head, right?”

“Nah, and you’re not dead either. This is just . . . I don’t know . . . maybe people at their best?”

The next day was even better at the fishing outpost. It was really tranquil compared to everything they’d seen over the miles they’d driven. The day after that, they were on the farm, and the farmer there was really excited to show them around. The baking outpost was relatively new, but Dean remembered seeing Beth start the wall on it and the werewolves finish it on that TV show. The bread there was fresh out of the oven and with butter from the farm . . . awesome. It was definitely the small things in this life that made a huge impact and made you appreciate them more . . . They got biscuits and gravy in the morning and cinnamon rolls . . . He was incredibly happy the whole time they’d been there.

The farm and game outposts had the best food overall . . . the fish one wasn’t bad either. He wasn’t
really a fan of fish, but they’d made homemade soft fish tacos, and they’d been pretty good. Maybe when they got back to the place in South Dakota, he’d focus more on the kitchen there . . . It’s not that the food there was bad. It wasn’t. It was actually pretty good, but the home cooking he’d gotten in Wisconsin . . . there was nothing better than home cooking . . . He wanted the kids in South Dakota to get more of that. He didn’t know what he’d start with first. Maybe something simple like the biscuits and gravy. Just had to find the right ingredients and make enough for 1000 people. He’d figure it out. And he had a responsibility to train the little kids and help them with their homework when he was in South Dakota . . . going out to hunt . . . he still wanted to do that too. Maybe he’d do the every other month thing too.

When they left Wisconsin, loaded down with a lot more than they’d come there with, Dean thought he was going to miss this place. He also missed driving. Should’ve annoyed Beth the way the mopey Dean had about it, because now the mopey Dean got to drive all the way back to South Dakota. John and Mary were staying here on the farm, which Dean hadn’t really expected. Apparently, the kid Sam and Dean liked the animals, and the farm needed more guards and people to help with some of the new operations the farmer wanted to start soon.

There was a school here, it was pretty basic, but Beth said she’d be back in a month to meet up with the teachers, so they could go over lesson plans and coordinate with the camp in Kansas to make sure everyone was on the same page. The kids here would be getting a lot more training on things like the farming and leatherwork and sewing than the other kids in other camps would, but it’s not like the kids in the other places weren’t learning things the kids here weren’t. Maybe the kid Dean and Sam would have a chance here. They had two parents, which was a good start, and they were going to be staying in one place, which was another good start. He was kind of interested to see how their lives turned out.

“So, we’re going to clear Madison on the way back?”

Beth looked over at him and said, “Part of it. We have two snow plows to fill, so we might as well. Once we clear Madison, then we can mark Wisconsin off and start finishing Minnesota.”

Yeah, and it gave her a chance to show he and the mopey Dean what looking for survivors was really like too. He honestly wasn’t quite sure what to expect. It was different than getting coordinates from Bobby on hunts in the area. Turns out, it was mostly parking up at the North end of the city, getting out, and searching house to house.

It became pretty apparent early on that this was . . . well, it wasn’t easy. You were on edge the whole time, listening for any small sound, and you cleared the house first, but there weren’t any people there. They were just gone. You might grab food if it wasn’t too out of date or books, but that’s about it . . . until he came across his first house with someone in it. “Beth!” She came up the stairs behind him and looked in the bedrooms. Family of 4 . . . all dead, and maybe the cold was keeping them preserved, but it made him wonder what the rest of the houses in the country were going to be like when the houses thawed. “What are we –“

“Salt a burn.”

“You guys have been doing that the whole time?”

“Yeah . . . well, if we’re not under attack and have to go. We have to take them outside and do it. The smoke from a house fire might draw too much unwanted attention. I’ll got get the trolley.”

He’d noticed it in the back of the snow plow, but he hadn’t thought anything of it. Mostly, he’d thought it was for getting heavier supplies. “That’s what you use it for?”
“Uh, yeah . . . dead weight is too heavy to move on your own, so strapping them onto the trolley is the easiest way to get them out.”

Yeah, the TV show didn’t show any of that. “How many times have you done this?”

“Lots. I just generally don’t like to think about it. Rather focus on the positive.”

Yeah. He got that. By the time they were finished with that, the mopey Dean had finished the rest of the street on this side and came to see what they were doing. “You didn’t find anyone?”

The mopey Dean shook his head. “So, we just go onto the other side of the street . . . keep going?”

Beth turned away from the fire and said, “Yeah.”

“You really think there’s anyone here?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. Have to check. Out of a population of over half a million if you include the surrounding metropolitan area, I’d say we might get lucky. We found a couple hundred in and around Milwaukee, and it had a population of about 2 million, so . . . maybe we’ll find 50? That’s if they haven’t moved on somewhere else already. We cleared out Milwaukee a couple of years ago . . . got busy with other things in the meantime. Those 50 could’ve died or been picked up by human traffickers or monsters. I don’t know.”

So, finding people was definitely an area where they needed help. “What about all the places you’ve already cleared?”

Beth sighed. “People could’ve moved into them . . . Can’t keep going back over ground we’ve already covered . . . at least not until we get the other 48 continental states cleared, and then we have to do Canada, Alaska . . . see if there’s anything left of Mexico . . . for now we’ll start with Madison and mark off Wisconsin.”

Dean shared a look with the mopey Dean. They’d never get all that done. They’d been lucky to get large numbers of people in Vegas or the monster camps, but finding people out here alone or in small groups . . . there couldn’t be many left. “Okay, so realistically, how many do you think we’ll find here?”

Looking down the street Beth admitted, “5? Our luck in the cities after all this time won’t be all that good. You’d have better luck in houses in the middle of nowhere.” Then she turned back to look at them and said, “But we can’t leave those 5 here . . . And we need to search every shop and store along the way to grab what we can out of those.”

Okay. If that’s what she wanted. Somehow hope sprung eternal with her even if he thought this was probably a lost cause. They cleared the other side of the road, and he didn’t know which was more depressing, finding dead people the way he had on the other side of the street or finding nothing. Watching Beth mark off the street on her map of Madison when they got back to the truck, Dean pulled out the other maps she had in her clothes duffle bag. Looking at the one for Wisconsin and seeing all the red . . . they had put a lot of work in on this. Seemed a little wrong to see all the other roads marked in red except for the ones around Madison.

If he could help her mark it off, he would . . . or that’s what he was thinking until they pulled up to the next street, and Beth opened her door to hop out. One second she was there, and the next, she was falling to the ground, so he got out to make sure she was all right. She was down for the count. Checking for a pulse, he found one just as the mopey Dean got there to find out what’d happened. “Uh, not sure –“
Pulling her hair back, Dean saw the dart in her neck a second before the other Dean collapsed on the ground next to him. Must be coming from this side of the truck. He wouldn’t be any good them if he went down too, so he started to go around the front of the truck hoping to use it for cover until . . . shit. He felt a bee sting in his left shoulder . . . Made it around the truck and had enough time to pull the tranquilizer dart out, but that’s right around when the world started to swirl, and he saw the ground speeding up towards him . . . and then it all went dark.
Captive

I felt sick. My eyes were closed. That was never a good sign. Did I really want to see what had caused it? Not really, but I supposed I should. No, I had to . . . what about the two Deans I had with me. Body awareness returned, and . . . I think I was sitting. My eyelids felt like they weighed a ton, but I forced them open anyway. Damn. Never liked those Saw movies . . . never wanted to star in one . . . sure as shit never wanted to be in a real life version of one, and yet . . . this grubby . . . disgusting, industrial room backlit from the lingering sunlight coming in through the windows looked just like one.

I felt something tickle the fingers on my left hand and looked down to see that it was blood dripping down my arm and off my fingers into a bucket on the floor. What a waste of blood. I clenched my hand into a fist. More blood poured out, but at least the hole in my forearm hadn’t done damage to my tendons. Looking to my right arm . . . It was in a similar state. The blood in both buckets . . . well, if I could die, I’d be dead. I guess this answered the question of whether or not I’d be trapped in this body if the body wasn’t functional. I mean I had wondered if I got brain damage or something if I’d just end up in a coma forever, but apparently, I’d stay awake and coherent no matter what happened. I felt cold. It hurt, but I was awake and alive. My eyelids got heavy again. Maybe I wouldn’t be okay. Maybe I’d just stay asleep forever, like one of those awful Disney characters.

I don’t know how long it was later, but I felt someone patting the side of my face and heard my name. When I opened my eyes that time, I saw Dean. “Hey. Where’d you come from?”

He looked back over his shoulder towards the door and said, “I could see you in here. Picked the lock. Thought you heard me.”

“When?”

“When you opened your eyes just now.”

Feels like hours ago.”

“Come on, I’m gonna get you out of here, and then –“

“Where are we?”

Cutting the zip ties around my arms and wrapping my cuts with pieces of his shirt that he tore off, Dean answered, “Uh, I don’t know. Wisconsin or Minnesota . . . couple hours drive from where we were.”

“You’re okay? Nobody did anything like this to –“

“I took a dive.”

“What?”

“Someone tranqed you. I saw movement to our left. Don’t know how many there were, but I knew we were outnumbered. Figured there were enough they wouldn’t know who’d taken the shot on me. I took a dive before they could. No other way out, and at least they brought me where they were taking you two.”

He went to pick me up, but I stopped him. “Need a shifter test and a Leviathan one.”
“How about I don’t eat you? That work for the Leviathan one.”

“Yeah . . . not the shifter one.”

“I don’t have . . . they took all our stuff.”

“Likely story . . . God, I wish I had my weapons.”

They showed up on the floor next to my feet, and I gave him a goofy smirk, or I guess it was goofy. He laughed for some reason before unzipping it and finding my silver tipped ceremonial axe. Placing it against his forearm, he looked up at me when it didn’t burn. “That all right?”

“Yeah . . . spray bottle in the –“

He rolled his eyes and used it to spray his forearm. It had Borax in it. That didn’t do anything out of the ordinary either. Going to pick me up again, he asked, “You think you can ask God to fix you. You’re not looking too good.”

I rested my head against his shoulder, while he picked up my weapons bag. “This Chuck won’t heal me if I ask or at least not enough to make me functional. He’ll just do something about the holes in my arm, not the blood loss . . . I don’t think. The locked up Chuck does . . . or maybe –“

“Can I ask him for you?”

“You can ask him for things if we’re having sex . . . or –“

He laughed. “As hot as you are as a pasty white zombie looking chick, I don’t think –“

“Or I could hand it over as a POA. But you don’t have to worry about me . . . I’m fine. I should be able to walk out of here on my own though . . . Don’t want you getting caught because of me. Chuck, I could use some of that watermelon drink my Dad made us on the training mission.”

A bottle of it showed up in my hands, and I muttered, “I don’t want anything from him, but I keep asking for things . . . even when I’m not asking for things on purpose. I don’t think I want this now.”

“That stuff will make you better?”

“Should.”

“Then who cares who gave it to you. Drink it.” Unscrewing the cap, I took a sip, and it tasted the same. “Need more than that?” I nodded, so he told me to keep drinking it.

By the time he had me halfway down the hall, I’d finished it. I still didn’t feel miles better, but it’s the only bottle I’d been given. I should be able to walk though. He needed both his hands free.

“You can put me down.”

He did, and I stayed steady on my feet, so he let me go. I rummaged around my weapons bag for . . . there she was . . . my angel blade. I strapped her to my thigh and then pulled one of my handguns out of my bag. “Uh, you still don’t look all that great.”

“Look.” I unwrapped my arms to show him that the holes were gone. “I’ll be fine . . . just a little slower than usual . . . not enough blood oxygenating my muscles for me to be faster . . . We need to find solo-Dean. Take whatever you need from my bag. I’ll, uh . . . I’ll go this way. You go –“

He laughed. “Not a chance of that happening, Beth.” Putting his hand on my shoulder, he turned
me and kept me close in front of him as he got us going again. Not really sure why he felt the need to keep his hand there though.

“You planning on using me as a hostage?”

“No.”

“Human shield?”

“Handcuff you to me if I didn’t think I’d need both hands free in here. I’m keeping you in front of me and in arms reach. It’s the only way I know you won’t go running off . . . probably die on your own in some –“

“Nah, I won’t die. I’m –“

“You’re not fine. Thought that stuff was supposed to fix you.”

“It did. I’m not bleeding anymore, and I’m walking, aren’t I? But I only asked for some, and Chuck gave me one. If I had more, I’d –“

“Well, then ask for more.”

“No.”

“You look like crap.”

“Thought you said I looked hot as a pasty-white zombie chick.”

“I lied . . . Besides how are you supposed to have my back if –“

“Thought you wanted to keep me in front of you? How can I have your –“

He laughed. “Stop it. You’re not funny.”

“You’re a walking contradiction, Dean.” He sighed, and I turned to look back at him. “I’ll be fine. I’ll prove it.” I unsheathed my angel blade, pivoted around the corner, and swung my blade around to take the head of whatever had been standing there waiting for us.

Stepping around me to see the body fall, Dean shook his head. “Show off. How’d you know –“

“Well, I’m not an actual zombie. I heard it.” Looking down at the body, I added, ”And I think I know what we’re doing here . . . or not what we’re doing here, but why we’re here . . . maybe not why, but who brought us here. I’ll stay with you, but we need to hurry.”

We turned down yet another grimy hall and another, and I found myself wondering why this place looked like this. I mean sure, after an Apocalypse, this is how movies and video games always make buildings look, but I hadn’t come across any like this . . . on the other hand, I hadn’t really been in any abandoned hospitals in a while . . . Maybe with time, they all looked like this now, and I was just used to hospitals in other universes that were still operational? I did spend 13 years somewhere else before the mission too and hadn’t exactly had a chance to go looking for people in the 2 months we were here before the mission . . . Did get to go on that hunt in the sanatorium though, and that’d looked like this, but then it’d been abandoned for decades. It was weird. Was it just my perception of things that’d changed and places here really looked like this and always had or was there just something about this hospital that made it seem like this?

A few hallways later, and the light from outside was gone. We were walking in the dark. We
couldn’t use flashlights, but we could use some of my gear. I fished my night vision goggles out of my bag for him and grabbed my camera. I could use that to see just fine. Probably better to put around corners than my head anyway.

Another right and then a left, and I think we had our hall. Should be 33, not 20 . . . 21 including the one I’d killed. Dean hadn’t had to kill any, because he didn't have any weapons. With them thinking he was knocked out, they’d made the mistake of thinking they could leave him alone for a second, and he’d used it to his advantage. That's why he was free . . . I doubted there were more around here looking for him. They had all their resources surrounding the target, the one they thought was my Dean . . . a shifter wouldn’t be knocked out as long, right? And to them, one of the Deans had to be a shifter or something like one, so the one who woke up first must not be human. I was going to kill them all. I had the chance. Was extermination right? Well, if they were vindictive killers with the ability to track us all down for life . . . why the hell not?
Beth turned to look back at Dean and pointed to her head. He had no idea what that meant. It felt like she had a plan though. Rolling her eyes, she touched his forehead and then her own. Her finger was cold, like the rest of her. She should be dead, right? He saw the blood in those buckets. If that was all from –

She tapped his forehead to get his attention, and then used her other hand to touch her forehead. Oh. She wanted him to know what she was thinking. That was really... well, he didn’t do that anymore. He just felt what she felt. He kind of wanted to keep it that way, so he could cut down on all the noise in his head. He put his hand over her heart to let her know he’d rather know what the plan was that way, and it felt like he’d be able to push her over with little effort. If there was something around that corner that she wanted to fight, then she shouldn’t be doing it.

Putting her hand over his, she lifted it to her forehead, and he almost laughed. It looked kind of stupid with him standing here in the middle of the hall with his hand on her forehead. All right, he’d do it this once, but this was the last time. Got to know her better knowing how she felt anyway.

"What are we looking at here, Beth?"

"20 vamps that I can see. Might be more around that I can’t."

"Why is that a problem?"

"Well, I might be a little slower than –"

"I knew you were lying about being fine. Let me deal with –"

"No. I already told you I might be a little slower... That’s not the problem. They’re all ex-military. And I’m pretty sure they’re the last of their kind on this side of the world for a reason. They didn’t fall for any of the things we did with the rest of the Alpha Vampire’s Army, because they know me. We used to be on the same side. They know what to expect out of me."

"Okay, so we take you out of the equation." Didn’t want her fighting them anyway. Before she could protest, he added, "Relax. Did I say you wouldn’t be doing anything?" She shook her head, and he smiled. "Got anything in this bag I can use other than the machete?"

She pulled him further down the hall and quietly rifled through the bag. "Uh, tranq gun with dead man's blood... Think that’s where they got the idea to tranq us... Flash grenades. A left over vampire stink bomb. There’s –"

He grinned, and she covered his mouth with her hand before it could turn into a laugh. "Your hands are fucking freezing."
"I know. Uh, there’s –" She dug through the bag a little more and smiled when she found something small hidden at the bottom. "Didn’t have to use this, but I had it as a back up just in case the ultrasonic dog collar didn’t work. It’s an ultra sonic dog whistle."

There was a lot to work with here. "Okay, here’s what we’ll do . . ."

---------------

Dean kept her with him as long as possible, back through the halls to the other side of the building and up a couple of floors, until they found a window they could use. He had to give her a hand up, so she could reach the ledge above them, and then followed her up. Rather be below her. It'd give her a softer landing if she fell on him, but she didn't fall. She clawed and scraped her way up to the roof. He'd make sure she had an easy ride out of here.

Once they were both up there, they had to clear the roof . . . just had to kill a couple of guards. That brought her total up to 23. They were still missing 10. As soon as the guards were gone, Dean checked them for weapons and gear. Looked more commando than vamp. Might as well take what he could get, while he could. They took all his stuff anyway.

Dean cut the rope in her bag in half and watched Beth tie her rope around one of the air vents and fixed the knot for her before making sure the end she tied around her waist was –

“I’ve got it.” Yeah, she probably did, but probably wasn’t definitely, and he didn’t want her jumping off the roof with nothing to catch her. He got his rope ready and they went to the opposite side of the building from Beth. She waited for his count down, and then they both jumped. Should bring them both to exactly the windows they needed . . . Taking the M16 he’d lifted off the guards on the roof, Dean shot a hail of bullets through the window, making sure to aim down, so he didn’t hit Beth, dropped the gun and reached for a flash grenade before flying into the window and throwing the grenade into the middle of the hallway. . . The hallway was already starting to fill with smoke from the vampire stink bomb that Beth had thrown, and then she threw her own flash grenade as Dean cut himself loose from the rope. She was supposed to take out any vamps on her side of the hall with the tranq dart and then go, so to hide her leaving in all the commotion, Dean blew the dog whistle to keep their attention on him.

The vamps on this side of the hall hadn’t been as blinded by the flash grenade, and the smoke hadn't reached them yet, but the dog whistle did the trick. Dean grinned when they dropped to their knees to cover their ears. Made this easier. Lifting his machete high above his head, Dean brought it down through the neck of one before turning to deflect a punch from the other one that’d gotten to its feet.

She wasn’t kidding about these being trained soldiers. That would’ve given him an opening on most monsters, but this one knew how to fight. It matched him almost move for move until he played dirty by blowing the whistle again. That gave him the in he needed, and he lopped off its head before turning towards the rest of the hall. Couldn’t see anything in here now. Looked like more of a smoke bomb than anything else. He guessed he’d be doing this blind. Well if he was, then they were too. He still had a few more flash grenades, so he pulled the pin on one and threw it into the middle of the hall. "Beth! Eyes! Now!" Might’ve been a little late on that warning. She shouldn't be there. She should already be gone, but who knew what she'd really do?

The next two vamps were about as difficult as the 2nd one had been, except they took him on together, and he did all right for the most part, but right around the time when the tide started turning against him, he blew the whistle again . . . He loved that whistle. He should’ve used it in his old life. Would’ve saved him and Sam more than a few concussions. 5 down . . . he wasn’t sure how many were left on their feet or where those missing vamps were, but the closer he got to
ground zero for the stink bomb, the less of a fight they put up . . . if they were even there. It looked like they might have to track down a few that’d gotten away . . . or maybe not. Dean saw one crawling away down the hall and went after it.

One second, the blade of his machete was slicing through its neck, and the next something big was grabbing him from behind and picking him up off his feet. Before it could sink its fangs into his neck, Dean bent his arm at the elbow and used his machete to cut the vamp’s arm off. The vamp dropped him, and Dean spun around behind it, planted his foot, swung the blade, and . . . now they were 2 more down. Walking back towards the smoke, he thought this was definitely his kind of fight. Hadn’t felt this alive in forever.

It was awfully quiet. He pulled Beth’s night vision goggles down over his eyes and flipped them to thermal imaging . . . 8 down on his end or in the hall behind him. 6 knocked out on Beth’s. 6 just standing there in the dark, in the smoke . . . waiting for him. Except they couldn’t see, and they couldn’t smell. If he blew the whistle, they wouldn’t be able to hear either. They were the ones being hunted. They just didn’t know it yet.

Dean pulled the pin on another flash grenade and then walked into the middle of the hall. Throwing it towards the three on the other side of the group, he ducked when the vamp he was standing next to swung its arm back, like it’d just figured out he was there. Before it had a chance to put up more than a fight than that, Dean used its momentum against it to push its face against the wall and used both hands on either end of the machete to cut through its spine and out the front, a much harder way to behead things, and then ducked as the body fell and another vamp came up behind him. It missed . . . wonder what it’d do without its feet. Slicing through both, Dean waited until its body hit to crawl over it to take the head, and it’s a good thing he was down when he did, because that’s when the others decided to start spraying bullets towards this end of the hall.

Monsters with machine guns . . . wasn’t quite used to that. The bullets cut through the smoke and went every which way. Somehow they missed him, probably because he dove to the ground, and the vamps were aiming a little higher than that, or they were for now. Belly crawling to the next closest set of feet, Dean waited until that one reloaded before taking its feet too and then rolled away from it as the other’s changed their aim to where he’d just been. Shot the vamp instead, but that wouldn’t kill it. Dean blew the whistle again, and there was a pause in the firing, just long enough to give him time to finish the bullet-riddled vamp off before they resumed firing, which covered the sound of him crawling behind the final 3 vamps. They still thought he was in front of him . . . There was one facing him and back to back with the others. It didn’t know where he was though. Couldn’t hear his heartbeat over the sounds of the other’s firing.

Dean tossed his final flash grenade at the vamp with its back to the others. The grenade bounced off its chest, made the vamp look down, and Dean used the distraction to kill it before covering his ears and turning away from it in a dive. Might've been a little too close to that one. Two more vamps . . . but he bet they couldn't hear for shit. He tested it with the dog whistle. Yeah no that flash grenade had gone off right behind them. They still couldn't hear even though they'd moved back to back to be ready for him. Finishing them off after that was a piece of cake.

Looking down at the whistle in his hand when it was over, he wondered what other monsters this would work on. He didn’t know. He was looking forward to finding out though. Maybe he could help Beth come up with more ideas for weapons like this and the smoke bombs . . . make them have more of an impact on larger numbers. Speaking of Beth . . . should probably get going on killing these last 6 that she’d knocked out. She wouldn’t wait around for him to go into the room where they were keeping solo-Dean . . . only reason it was probably taking her this long is because she’d had to climb up the rope to get back to the roof, and she wasn’t really at her best.
Life Altering Decisions

I was waiting just outside the window. I could see Tom in the other room. I couldn’t see solo-Dean. He had to be in there though. Tom wouldn’t have left him with anyone else if this was his end game. It had to be. He had to know he wasn’t walking out of this. If I couldn’t kill him, like say for example, because I was strapped to a chair and slowly bleeding out, then I could always ask God to do it. The best way to prevent that was to actually try to kill me as fast as possible, but Tom had let me live. I didn’t know what his end game was, but I did know he didn’t think he had anything to lose, and that made him dangerous.

What also made Tom dangerous was how his aggression levels kept increasing every time the other Dean threw a flash grenade out in the hall. He was pacing and working himself up, getting ready for someone to come through that door, and he wouldn’t play fair when that person did. I half . . . more than half-expected him to shoot whoever it was in the head before they had a chance to pick the lock or kick the door in . . . I couldn’t let that happen. I had to time this just right.

The noise stopped for about 10 minutes after the last flash grenade went off. No gunfire. No noise at all, and it felt like the suspense was building . . . until I heard the first door get kicked in . . . that had to be the other Dean. Hopefully, he’d taken my advice about there maybe being booby traps set up inside the doors, because I heard an actual grenade go off as the windows in that room were blown out from flying debris. I held my breath. I think Tom might’ve been doing the same thing, because he froze and listened for any sound that might tell him if we were dead. About 2 minutes later, another door got kicked in . . . shotgun blast. Tom went back to pacing, and I went back to breathing, but my breathing was tentative at best.

What if that one had gotten him? What if the reason I couldn’t see solo-Dean was because he was in one of those rooms tied up to one of the booby traps . . . No. It couldn’t be that. If Tom thought he was killing my Dean, then he’d want to see it.

This was the 4th door down from the right. One more room . . . maybe the other Dean was clearing them before going onto the next room. Hopefully, that’s what it was and not him getting more and more injured as he went along. The next door was kicked in and it was another grenade. Maybe I should try to warn him about Tom? No. I didn’t want to give away my position and any sudden movement, like me swinging to the room next door to warn Dean through the window might do that.

Getting my feet up on the ledge of the window, so I could prepare myself to jump back and get enough momentum to do this, I took a deep breath to calm myself and checked my gun to make sure the safety was off. Checked that the mag was full. We were good to go. The muscles in my legs tensed as I saw Tom go from pacing to heading for the door. Instead of jumping back, the way I'd planned, I waited and was a little perplexed by Tom's reaction. He took a few steps back and smiled, and then I saw why. The other Dean must've been using the broken shard of the mirror from my compact to check what kinds of mini-disasters awaited him on the other side of the door. That’s what was taking him so long between rooms and what was keeping him alive. Clever man.

And yeah, that’s what I thought. Now that Tom had a rough idea of where he was, I saw him draw his weapon. Didn’t have to wait to know where he was going to aim it, so I pushed off the ledge with everything I had and shot about 5 rounds through the window to distract him . . . Hopefully, the other Dean followed my cue. Must have, because by the time my feet flew through what was left of the window, he was already in the room and had used my distraction to get close enough to Tom to punch him. Tom picked him up to body slam him, but the other Dean used hitting the
ground as a way to knock Tom’s legs out from under him. While they fought it out, I cut myself loose from the rope and looked for solo-Dean. Didn’t have to go far.

He’d just been out of my line of sight on this side of the room. They’d done the same thing to him that they’d done to me, so I went to cut him loose. His eyes popped open. “No, leave me . . . Agh.”

His eyes closed. He shrank back in pain, and I heard the sounds of the fight stop. Looking over my shoulder . . . apparently the other Dean had fought dirty with the dog whistle to win, because Tom was dead. You don’t always get answers to the questions for why things happen in life, and I guess I’d never get any answers out of Tom about how he’d started down this path. Was it a thought that’d been in the back of his head that’d grown and grown until he had to indulge it, and then that made everything he did after that easier? How had his descent started? Maybe James and Rick and Juan and Franklin and the others would finally have their justice with him now that he was in Purgatory with them. Doubt he’d tell James and Rick that I was taking care of their kids. Why would he do that for someone else? He’d probably just tell them that he’d killed them or something. Dick.

Looking back at solo-Dean, I went to untie him again. “Beth, stop . . . It’s over. I –“

“It’s not over, Dean.”

“No, they –“

“I know. They turned you.”

“Wanted to turn me, so when you died, I’d die, and we’d be separated . . . thought I was your guy.”

That wasn’t possible anymore, because I couldn’t die, but to want to do that to someone else was awful. Felt even better about Tom being dead. “That’s okay. I have the cure in my truck, and if they destroyed it, then I know an occult shop in Cleveland or Madison or Chicago . . . lots of places that might be near here –“

“Can’t cure me, Beth. It’s over.”

“If you haven’t fed –“

“Woke me up with a syringe of your blood in my mouth. It’s over. Just kill me, and –“

“I’m not killing you.”

“I don’t want to be –“

“Who you are, but . . . enhanced?”

The other Dean laughed. “Enhanced? Beth, he’s a monster. We can’t leave him –“

“I’m not killing him.”

“He doesn’t want to –“

“I work with monsters all time . . . when they’re good. He’ll be good.”

“Beth, you can’t know –“

“I can. He’s you. He’ll be good. I know he will.”
Solo-Dean looked from me up to the other one in a look, I’m guessing meant ‘kill me when she’s not looking,’ and I’m guessing the other Dean probably gave him a nod to let him know he would. “If you knock me out and kill him. I’m not sure what I’ll do, but you won’t like it.”

Solo-Dean looked at me and took a deep breath. “Look, I appreciate –“

“No, you don’t, or you wouldn’t be serious about this. What about Rogue?”

“She has her Dad.”

“What about the responsibility you have to the kids at my camp?”

Solo-Dean looked up at the other Dean, and the other Dean said, “You train the little kids, right? I could do that.”

Solo-Dean nodded. “Yeah, and alternate, so there’s always someone there . . . was thinking –“

I quickly cut him off. “Stop doing your last will and testament . . . such a freaking drama queen.”

“Beth, there’s no way out. I’m starving. It’s taking everything I have not to attack you two right now. That’s why they’ve been bleeding me . . . figured you might get out, and if you did, then when you got here, I’d be hungry enough to . . . You and your hope can’t fix this or –“

I got an idea. “I can’t die.” He stopped talking and watched me, so I said, “I can’t die. Look at me . . . He keeps saying that I look like a pasty-white zombie chick. I literally have almost no blood in my body right now or I didn’t until I drank some magic elixir that Chuck gave me . . . probably still not a whole lot there.” Looking up at the other Dean I said, “Tell him . . . Tell him how much blood I lost before you found me.”

The other Dean ducked his head before looking at the other Dean and shrugging. “There were a couple of buckets. I couldn’t say for sure –“

“Tell him how cold I am . . . I’m like walking corpse.” Looking back at solo-Dean, I added, “It’s what Amara did to me. She made me freaking immortal, so that whichever Chuck is locked away will stay that way forever. It’s why I was pissed at Chuck when we landed here. He won’t take it back. It means I’ll watch my daughter get old and die . . . all the kids at the camp . . . everyone I know . . . except for maybe my Dad and maybe Cas unless Cas decides to stay human, and then I’ll have to watch him get old and die too.”

Solo-Dean sat forward a little and said, “Beth, I can’t . . . It’s not like it was before I got the cure the last time. I can’t control –“

“You don’t have to control the hunger . . . I’ll top you up, so you don’t have to go anywhere else . . . got a few buckets in a room around here somewhere if it hasn’t all congealed, and then after that . . . I don’t know . . . if you’re still hungry, you might have to wait until I’ve got a little –“

Solo-Dean looked up at the other Dean with a laugh he didn’t mean. “You mind explaining to her how crazy –“

“I don’t know . . . might be hard at first, but Lenore did it with animals . . . Benny lived off of blood from the blood bank . . . It’s just that Beth will be your blood bank. You’ve seen what Beth has to live with . . . the way those people in Iowa were . . . that guy you were telling me about stabbing her in Wisconsin . . . If Chuck’s seriously not going to take it back, then she’s gonna have to go through that on her own after we’re all gone. She won’t die, but it could get pretty fucking ugly, especially the longer she has her Mark . . . You want her to live through that on her own?”
I looked up at the other Dean. "Did you just guilt trip you into living?"

He must have gone back to just knowing what I was feeling, because he didn’t say anything, and the solo-Dean said, "Yeah, I think he did . . . and yeah, I still know what you’re thinking, but the first time I go after one of those kids —"

I quickly said, "The first time you do that, I’ll kill you myself."
Dean glanced towards the door when it opened and did a double take when he saw Beth and two Deans . . . one wearing shades and the other not. Must still be trying to look different. Beth looked a lot different. Getting to his feet to get a better look at her, he asked, “What happened?”

“Tom.” She pointed at the Dean with sunglasses and added, “We got him back and then drove all night to get here. I must be better than I feel. You look okay.” She didn’t. He’d seen her look like this . . . every time she was about to die. In fact, she didn’t look a whole hell of a lot different than she had when she did die, bags under eyes, really pale. He couldn’t do anything to bring her back the way he had that time. Couldn’t heal her anymore either. He hadn’t even known anything had happened . . . had no idea she was on her way back. Normally, he’d feel . . . maybe like he should yell at the two behind her for not having her back. He didn’t. Instead, he pulled her to him in a tight embrace.

“Do you have your first aid kit, or do you want to go to the clinic or . . . I could get your Dad. What do you need me to do?”

“I’m okay, Dean. I –“

Looking at the other two, his anger started to shine through a little more. “Where the hell were you two? Thought you were supposed to –“

“Dean, it’s not their fault. It was an ambush. Tone it down a little . . . We, uh, we need to talk.”

She stepped back to look at the other two Deans, and the one with sunglasses sighed before pulling up a hoodie as they turned to walk back out the front. Without taking his eyes off Beth, Dean said, “Jody, we need the room. Can you take Rogue and Lily out to Jenna? See if she can watch them for a while.”

He wasn’t ready for it . . . for this talk. A month, and he still wasn’t ready. He knew he missed her. He knew his side of it, basically, what he had to work on and build up and get right . . . but he didn’t know her side of it. If she’d want any of that . . . maybe she wanted to tell him she’d chosen one of the two she’d been with all month. He noticed nobody else who’d gone out with them was here. Maybe he could lead with that . . . ease into it. “John and Mary? The kids?”

She let him take her hand and lead her over to the couch. “They’re okay. They wanted to stay at the Wisconsin camp. The kids liked the farm animals, so that’s where they’re staying.”

Sitting next to her he asked, “The other Sam?”

“He decided to stay in Kansas with Bobby.”

Looking towards the front door, Dean said, “His brother all right with that?”

Yeah, he knew this was just as awkward as the talks they’d had before she left. He was trying. “They kind of made the decision to take a step back from one another before they even joined the team. After what happened with Amara, they thought it was for the best.”

He could understand that. Ducking his head, Dean said, “What’d you want to talk about, Beth?”

“Uh, well, for one, solo-Dean is kind of going by vampire Dean now . . . probably not a good idea to –“
“Have him here? No, it’s not, Beth. At least not until he’s cured.” He slumped a little when he looked up at her. “Can’t cure him?”

“Tom shoved a syringe of my blood down his throat to wake him up . . . after he turned him and tranqued him with dead man’s blood.”

Fuck. “Why —”

“Tom thought he was you. He left me bleeding out slowly in another room. The idea being that when I died, it’d drag you down with me too, and then you’d end up in Purgatory and I wouldn’t. We’d be separated forever.”

That was a dick move. If it’d been 6 months ago, that would’ve been the perfect way to end both of them if you were a sick, evil bastard. “He’s dead?”

“Yeah, they all are. Solo-Dean is the last vampire on two continents.”

“Until he makes a nest.”

“Come on, Dean. You wouldn’t do that. He won’t either.”

“I don’t like it Beth. It’s not safe. If he can’t control it, —“

“I’ll put him down myself. I think he’ll be okay . . . It’s just probably not a good idea to yell at him right now or have him training until he’s got a little more control over his urges. He hasn’t done anything wrong yet. I won’t kill him until he does.”

“What’s he gonna eat, Beth? You know what a starving vampire looks like . . . how desperate they get. They’ll —“

“It won’t be a problem.” She bowed her head and said, “I’ll feed him . . . keep a stock on tap. Not sure how often he’ll need to eat, but —“

“You’re kidding right? You did the same thing with Crowley, and it took less than 2 weeks to wipe you out. And what you gave Crowley is a hell of a lot less than what a vampire is gonna need.”

She reached her hand for his, and she never did that. “You saw it when I came in a few minutes ago. I should be dead. I’m not.” Focusing on his hand in hers, she added, “I can’t die . . . ever. It’s what Amara did to me . . . She made me immortal, so it would lock her brother in the cage forever.”

Running his thumb over the top of her hand, he couldn’t look at her when she glanced in his direction to gauge his response. “So, I guess . . . you’re choosing him, right? He’ll be around forever unless someone cuts his head off, and —“

“Choosing him? That’s not why . . . It’s just . . . You and I had this whole plan for our afterlife, and —“

“I’m not connected to you anymore . . . not even the soul mate thing . . . Don’t know what you’re thinking. I didn’t know anything happened to you last night. I would’ve had no idea where you were this whole time if I wasn’t getting updates from Jody throughout the day. The plan was already . . . it can’t . . . I mean . . . I think we need to start over . . . maybe build it back up to what it was if that’s even possible. I don’t know what’s normal and not normal. I just know it’s different now. I know I want to try, and I know I missed you . . . I don’t want to lose you, but if you want to be with —“
“Start over how? Do you not remember -”

“No, I do. I remember our lives together. I don’t know . . . like maybe we should date or I don’t really know how to —“

“You want to date me?”

He looked up at her, and she smiled. “Well, yeah, I mean . . . not sure where I’ll take you or what we’ll do, but I was thinking that maybe we should see if there’s anything there, like normal people do. Pretty sure normal people don’t sleep in the same bed every night or any of that other stuff we did that seemed normal for us at the start.” Why was she giving him that look? “What?”

“Nothing. It’s just our connection is what kept us apart so long, right?” Maybe. “And after our training mission I wasn’t sure if us being soul mates was something that forced you be with me, so maybe if things work out without the roadblocks, we’ll both know.”

“What if it doesn’t?”

“Well, I look dead, and you’re asking me on a date . . . Are you doing it for Rogue or you?”

Well, Rogue wasn’t here, and to be honest, he hadn’t thought of Rogue when he said it. “That was all me.”

She smiled again and said, “I’d say that’s a good first step, and you seemed worried about me when you saw me, so unless that was out of habit —“

He shook his head. “It wasn’t. Haven’t seen you look like this since you died . . . I don’t like it.” Might’ve been why he’d yelled at the other two. It was like yelling at him. He should’ve been there. “Not that I don’t think you’re still the hot chick next door . . . just —“

“Deader.”

“Stop saying you look dead. You just look . . . I don’t know . . . like you're sick or hurt, and —“ He stopped himself from saying he wanted to take care of her. He did. Kind of sounded like a weirdo if they were trying to date. “What if it feels different?”

“Different how?”

“I don’t know. I won’t know until I know.”

“You don’t know now?”

“No . . . just know she took something from me. I can feel it. Right now, I don’t know if what I felt was because of the connection or the connection happened because of how I felt or if it was both.”

“I think you’re worrying about nothing.”

“I don’t. What if it’s the only thing that —“ He hung his head. He couldn’t say that either. Made him sound needy.

“What if that’s the only thing that made me want to be with you?” Might not be able to say it, but he nodded anyway, ‘cause that’s what he’d been thinking. “I guess we’ll find out.”

Yeah, he guessed they would. "We, uh, we should get your Dad in here to heal you."

"Okay . . . so when is our date?"
"What?"

"The last time you asked me on a date, I told you to wait until you were sure. You didn't ask again, and I don't remember you asking me before that. Our nights out weren't dates, or if they were, they were off the books. I think the way it's supposed to work is you ask. I say yes, and then you tell me when."

He smiled briefly. "You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?"

"Nope . . . have to nail you down before you change your mind."
“I can’t stay here.”

My eyelids flittered open. Letting my eyes adjust to the dark, I missed when I used to get a decent night’s sleep. If it wasn’t nightmares, it was something else, like waking up from being drugged or knocked out, which just makes you feel ill, or it was things like demons and vampires rudely interrupting my slumber. Looking over towards the window, I sat up with a sigh when I saw a form standing there. Guess I had heard that right.

“Okay.”

Walking over to the foot of my bed, Dean said, “Okay, just like that? No arguments.”

“You know your limits. If it’s bad enough that you’re telling me you need to go, then I believe you. When —”

“I don’t know if I’ll ever have it under control enough to live here like I was.”

“I’m sorry . . . I —”

“Should’ve killed me when you had the chance?”

“No. I should’ve killed Tom the way he wanted . . . instead of –“

“If you start thinking that way, is it going to put dark marks on your soul?”

“I don’t know . . . Maybe . . . If it makes me change the way I do things . . . I feel locked into it now, like it’s a curse or punishment that I created for myself . . . It’s like being on a tight rope. Too strict one way, and I’ll fall. Too much leniency or doing nothing, and I’ll fall . . . And after what happened in Iowa . . . whatever happens to those people that ended up in Ohio . . . that’s on me. Should’ve watched my mouth. I didn’t think . . . That always was my problem . . . thought I had things figured out, and I don’t . . . I hate losing, but I think that’s all I ever really do . . . against angels, against God, against people, against Crowley . . . I keep hoping for the best, expecting the bad, and getting the worst . . . I’m sorry you got wrapped up in that.”

“I could stay here.”

“Thought you just said you couldn’t.”

“No, I mean in here. You’re calm . . . not giving me demands or yelling that I’m in your room. You’re not looking at me like I’m a monster that’s about to go off . . . Right now, I feel all right.”

I smiled briefly. “You want to be roommates?”

He gave me a sarcastic response. “Yeah, I’ll get the bed during the day. You can have it at night.”

“Trade off on washing the sheets every other week or something like that?”

He laughed. “Yeah, why not?”

“And, you’ll what? Take the night watch.”

“Do you need someone to take the night watch?”
“Well, yeah . . . Cas did it and then Gadreel used to do it. Chewy’s a little young for it. My Dad takes off to the past to relive the joys of being the Trickster at night. The wards we have up won’t keep everything out.”

Watching me to see if I was being serious, Dean said, “You’ll be my roommate and give me the job . . . just like that?”

“Yeah.”

“I worry about you.”

“I know. You wouldn’t be alive right now if you didn’t.”

“No, I mean you just said hoping for the best is what keeps biting you in the ass, and here you are –“

“I don’t have to hope for the best with you. I know I’ll get it.”

“Yeah? What if I said I was hungry, and –“

I stood up to go to my first aid kit and grabbed what I needed before coming back to the bed. I got the tourniquet tied around my left arm before he put his hand over my right hand to stop me from putting in the IV. “What the hell is wrong with you? If it weren’t for your Dad, you’d still be in a world of hurt that you did a crap job at hiding, at least from me, and here you are trying to give me –“

“I don’t know what a vampire needs. If you want more now, I have it, so -“

“I’m not a pet, Beth. You can’t –“

“No, you’re my friend, and I’ll give you whatever you need.”

“You don’t have to give me anything to be your friend. I don’t want –“

“If you don’t want it now, you will. And I don’t mind. My blood hates me. It’s always finding ways to escape. Might as well escape somewhere useful . . . and it’s probably not a good idea for you to start liking the feeling of sinking your fangs into me, so a sterile approach is probably best.”

He brought his hand up to cover his eyes and laughed, like he wasn’t sure if he was annoyed or mad . . . maybe a little dumbfounded? “What?”

“Is this the Heaven Beth?”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“More independent, less social, reads a lot, has a lot of nightmares . . . doesn’t take care of herself . . . needs to be protected, but doesn’t think she does, because she never had anyone do it or know why anyone would?“

“Uhhh . . . That’s just me, except I don’t need to be protected . . . Not really sure -” The next thing I knew I was tackled onto my back with Dean at my throat. I calmed myself and tried to bring my heart rate right down.

I felt his lips at the front of my throat as he said, “If I bit you here, it’d stop you from being able to scream for help.” He moved a little to the right of my neck. “Here and I could have you drained in a couple of minutes.” Moving over to the other side, he added, “Same goes for here.”
“Okay, so rip out my throat, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

I heard him retract his fangs and then say, “That’s not what I was going for.”

“Can’t help it. I’m not scared of you.”

“Then why’s your pulse increasing?”

“You’re kind of turning me on.”

“Stop it.”

“Can’t. Get off of me, and –“

“Think I’m stuck. Not sure either one of us should move right now.”

“Don’t want to do the things you just said but finding it a little hard not to?”

“I didn’t think this through.”

“You wanna do me a favor?”

“Think I’m already doing it.”

“Well, if you don’t want my left arm to fall off, could you take the tourniquet off?” He slid his right hand down my left arm and did it without moving away from my neck. Thought that distraction might’ve worked. It appears that it did not.

“Where’s your guy, Beth?”

“Why? You want me to call him?”

“He should be here . . . Why isn’t he?”

*Are we having a normal conversation right now?*

“Trying . . . Thought you fixed things when we got back. Why is he still out there?”

“We’re dating. People who date don’t live together.”

He laughed and then pushed himself away from me. “You’re kidding, right?”

“No.”

“Dating, like –“

“Like he asked me out on a date, so he can see if there’s anything there . . . dating.”

“Why would –“

“Amara severed our connection. We’re not even soul mates anymore. He doesn’t know if it changes things for him.”

“Yeah, but you made us race back here last night instead of going back to finish checking out Madison, because you thought he might be dying. You didn’t go near either one of us the whole month . . . and you could have . . . Things haven’t changed for you, except now you can’t die, and he can, and that sucks, but why would this change anything for him?”
“I don’t know . . . Who says it does? I’m kind of excited about it to be honest.”

“Why?”

“Because if it works out, then it’ll be real.”

“And what you had before wasn’t?”

“It was. It is. I didn’t notice a change, because you’re right. Nothing has changed for me, but . . . now I’ll know it’s real instead of wondering in the back of my mind if I’m imprisoning him . . . What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

“What if it doesn’t work out? What if he’s . . . I don’t know . . . I know you say all of us have spoiled our brothers, but you’re no better when it comes to him . . . What if it doesn’t work out, because it’s not exactly the same, and he wants it the same?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ll know then too.”

“He’s gonna fuck up my chances, right?”

I laughed. “What?”

“You won’t think. . . . You know what? Think I’ll take you up on the roommate offer and the night shift. I want to get this under control, just don’t think I should be around the kids until I do.”

“Okay. When do you want to —“

Getting up to go to my door, Dean answered, “I’ll start tonight, and uh, there’s a kid on the roof of one of the cabins. Is that —“

“Ezra? He’s up there every night. It’s what he needs . . . for a lot of reasons.”

“That the kid who doesn’t talk?”

“He’s getting better, but yeah.”

“How much of a radius do you want to start?”

“10 miles?”

“I’ll make it 20. See you in the morning, Beth.”
Reading the Signs

Cas looked over at the Mark of Cain Dean and the other Dean, the non-vampire Dean. He still wasn’t entirely sure, why out of the three of them, it was assumed that he wouldn’t be driving. The other Dean just got back from being out a few days ago, and he came back driving a snow plow. Cas preferred driving these to driving cars, not that he’d had much of a chance to drive any cars on their mission, but with snow plows, you could push cars off the road. It was something he enjoyed doing.

He supposed he should get used to the idea that they wouldn’t have to drive these much longer. The only reason they were using it now was because they were still far enough North that there were at least 2 ½ feet of snow on the ground, which was too high for the Impala, not that Cas’s Dean would let these two drive it. He guessed it was mid-August, so it would be winter again soon enough, and he could drive again . . . but then they couldn’t really just drive cars around on supply runs could they? They needed trucks. Maybe he could take a grain truck or one of the trucks on a construction site while they were out this time and use that for any future supply runs that didn’t happen when there was snow.

Beth and the others had ended up in Chicago. They’d been able to bring back some supplies, but those were only what they’d gotten in Wisconsin. What did they need to get now? Mostly, more houses cleared in Madison to make sure there weren’t any survivors there and then they were planning to stock up on things in stores and megastores. Most things had probably been looted, but that didn’t mean they wouldn’t find anything or possibly anyone in them. They were also looking for things to feed Chewy. The ogre seemed to enjoy the deer heads Beth gave him. The rest of the venison that she’d brought back had been used for dinner a couple of days in a row. They couldn’t really store meat anymore until they got some freezers, but powering those wouldn’t be easy because they only had so many generators. They’d figure something out. They always did. Anyway, if they came across any deer, which had exploded in numbers in the time since the outbreak, they were supposed to bring those back for now . . . exclusively for Chewy. They didn’t want him to start getting hungry and unhappy enough to start trying to eat the children.

Speaking of eating the children, Cas noticed where the footprints in the snow ended . . . approximately 20 miles away from the camp. The vampire Dean was keeping his patrol at night. He guessed he shouldn’t be surprised. The vampire was Dean after all. Apparently, vampire Dean already killed a substantial number of monsters that couldn’t get past the wards and some hybrids the further out he went. The camp generally did its own patrols during the day to keep the surrounding area safe, but with Max, Ivan, and Yuri away, it had made things a little more difficult. Having more Deans to fill those roles seemed to be helping, and now there were more people to go out and do a supply run, while Beth and Cas’s Dean stayed behind at the camp.

What was his place in all of this? He didn’t think anyone else knew any better than he did. Right now his place seemed to be teaching History and now doing a supply run. This didn’t feel like him though. He felt more like he should be out there . . . maybe doing what the vampire Dean was doing, except instead of keeping a 20 mile radius around the camp free of monsters, they should be growing it until it covered the whole country. They had to start somewhere. Why not start there?

And the other hunters, like Pamela and Stephen and Gwen and the others . . . they were closing down the final monster trading posts that were set up like the one in Rhode Island. There’d been
one in California and another one in Oklahoma. If they spread out the monster free zones around those places too and kept going, then even if they didn’t find survivors to bring to the camps, people would be saved, because there would be fewer monsters. Not everyone had to live in one of the camps if the rest of the country was safe.

He’d talk to Beth and Dean about it when he got back. He knew they were worried about the Croats. Those were a concern too. It’s just that Cas had really liked the ideas that Purgatory Sam and Dean’d had about making this universe a monster-free universe. He also wanted to start helping the other Sams and Deans with hunting spirits, so they could have an after life.

Whichever one died first would probably end up in Heaven. One was a vampire now. If that one died, he’d go to Purgatory. What about the other two? Cas didn’t think the Sams would be a problem. He thought when his Sam died, he’d probably go to Hell, and the other would go to Heaven, but who knew? Chuck seemed to like Cas’s Sam, so they should probably get the other Sam some spirits to trade with Death too.

All of it made Cas wonder. If you had a Sam or Dean in Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory, then you’d really have the Winchesters almost ruling this universe . . . He wondered what that would be like in 1000 years time. Would the universe be at peace or would they always find something to fight even if it was one another? He didn’t know. He’d probably find out . . . if he took his grace back. He wanted to find out if it was not killing monsters with his family that made him feel not quite himself first. It could just as easily be that his family was a little lost too, and without them, he wasn’t sure who he was as a human.

When they pulled up in Madison where Beth and the other two teams had been ambushed, the MoC Dean laughed. “That’s all you got done? One street?”

The other Dean rolled his eyes. “Yeah . . . they followed us from the Wisconsin camp . . . knew to stay far enough away from the camp that Bobby wouldn’t think it was a problem, and it’s not he has a tracker on us and knew where we were to let us know there were vamps following us.”

The MoC Dean shook his head. “Why wait for Beth to show up there? I mean they had to know where she lives. Why wouldn’t they just go there?”

Cas smiled briefly before getting out of the cab. “Better to ambush 3 hunters than wait for them to leave a camp with 1000 hunters in training. They may be children, but Tom must have considered them a serious threat.”

“They’re just kids.”

Cas glanced in the MoC Dean’s direction. “Most adults are afraid of them . . . even when Sam and Dean came back as younger versions of themselves and had no memory of this place, they were wary of them until they got to know them. I’m surprise you don’t feel the same way.”

“Guess I just don’t see them as a threat.”

The other Dean laughed. “You don’t train with them. They’re a threat . . . even the 7 and 8 year olds are a threat. They’re smart. They know how to use weapons. They just wouldn’t hold up all that well if they had to fight a monster off. I’d think they were Children of the Corn if all I did was train them.”

----------------------

They spent the next three weeks searching every street in the city. They killed at least 3 to 4
monsters a day and only found 3 people, these 3 people, people that didn’t want to come with them. That was fine. Cas didn’t like the look of them. The two Deans didn’t want to give up on their first survivors, but Cas had grown weary of the back and forth and finally said, “We will not beg you to come with us. If you want to stay, we’ll leave you to continue scavenging for scraps until the monsters out there eat you or turn you.” One of the Deans turned back to look at him in mild disgust, and Cas shrugged. “Let’s go. They have until we make it back to the truck to decide.”

Cas started walking, and the other Dean turned to follow him, while grabbing the MoC Dean’s arm to get him to come too. When they were far enough away, the MoC Dean vented his frustration. “What the hell are you doing, Cas? We can’t leave them.”

“Those people were not being resistant because they are scared of us. They are hardened. That in and of itself is not a damning quality, but I have learned to read the signs of Beth’s curse, and the effects of that are what I saw there more than anything. They would sooner kill us and rob us of our supplies or destroy our camps than try to assimilate peacefully.”

“Beth wouldn’t leave them.”

“You don’t know what Beth would do. It depends on what is on their souls. I can’t read their minds anymore, and she’s not here. Her curse is. It gives us an idea of what we can expect out of people. . . It shows us on the outside what she sees on the inside. Those people are not people we want in our camps. We have to be careful they do not follow us. We’re leaving the city now.”

“We’re not done yet.”

“Close enough.”

The other Dean started walking backwards to keep an eye on their backs at Cas’s words, and said, “Uh, guys . . . they’re gone.”

Cas nodded. “Like I said. They’re going to try and ambush us on the way back to the truck.” Pulling his handgun that he’d grown quite fond of, Cas added, “Aim for the knees or arms. It’s not our place to do more than that.”
Dean’s feet pounded the backstreets and alleys in time to his accelerated heartbeat. The other two were still with him. Hadn’t been an ambush as much as a meeting they’d been forced to have when they got to the truck. It’s not like they could’ve ditched the truck. It’d been suggested, but there were spotters on the rooftops, probably armed, and unknown numbers in the side streets that had made it silently clear that they were there to direct them where to go.

When they’d gotten to the truck, the Kris Kristofferson look-alike leading this group said that since they’d gotten the contents of the truck from Madison, it was staying there. Fine. Let them have it. Could’ve had warm showers and warm food, clean clothes and soft beds, but no, let’s stay here and live in derelict buildings. That wasn’t the problem as much as the tax they were supposed to apparently pay for being here.

Never mind that they’d spent the last 3 weeks clearing this city of monsters . . . apparently, that wasn’t good enough. No, this group wanted one of them . . . as a fucking tax. Well, none of them were staying here with these dickheads, and who knew what the fuck they’d do to the other two if one of them even did agree to stay . . . The newest Dean of the group had created a diversion, and Dean had used it to grab Cas and go. They’d met up with the other Dean as soon as possible by going where Dean would go if he’d been in the other Dean’s shoes, and now they were on the run.

They didn’t know the streets as well as these people. They didn’t even really know how many people they were dealing with here . . . maybe 20-25 . . . they needed to find somewhere to hole up for the night, maybe the next couple of days until the interest in them had subsided, and they could get out of this hell hole. Hadn’t really thought much of Madison before this, but now . . . 2 bad things happening here, 2 supply runs in a row . . . seemed like a place that was cursed.

The other Dean found an alley that ran between two alleys, and they hid in the shadows, while the people chasing them went past. There were people on the rooftops too, but they were far enough away not to be a concern right now, or he hoped they weren’t. Dean and the other two went back the way they’d come and down a different alley to the left and then found a door halfway down. It was locked, but that didn’t really mean it was an obstacle for them. If anything, it said that the building was probably all right. If it’d been unlocked, they could’ve had problems.

As soon as they were safe inside and a couple of flights up, Cas said, “I want to call Beth and my Dean to confer.”

“Radio’s in the truck, and the truck’s gone, Cas.”

Cas sighed. “Gabriel, we need Beth and Dean . . . Can you bring them to us. I’ll let you know where we are. And put the council on standby.”

The other Dean shook his head before kicking a door in, waited until they’d cleared the apartment, and then said, “We don’t need them to get out of this, Cas. We’re not a couple of kids who—“
Cas turned away from the window and said, “I know. This goes beyond us.”

“What does, Cas?”

They turned to see Beth and her Dean standing on the other side of the room. Both of them were armed with what Dean assumed was probably every weapon in their arsenal. Sitting on a musty couch, Cas answered, “There are 20-25 here. They have taken our truck, but that wasn’t enough. They wanted one of us as a tax. . . . The only thing that was containing them to his corner of the city were the monsters, but —“

Beth’s Dean went to the window to keep watch and said, “Now they can go where they want, and this place is too close to the Wisconsin camp for us to let them spread out?”

Cas nodded. “That’s what I was thinking.”

Beth went to the front door of the apartment to stand watch and said, “And keep building up their numbers by ‘taxing’ other groups of people . . . you told them about our camps?”

Dean sat next to Cas. “We did, but we didn’t tell them where the camps were.”

The other Dean shook his head. “Not exactly, but we —“

Cas spoke up. “Gave them the pitch. Farming or ammunition manufacture . . . and we might’ve said Iowa had a few places open. Kansas had more. And —“

The other Dean slumped and finished what Cas was going to say. “Wisconsin wasn’t far, but probably wouldn’t be the right fit.”

Beth and her Dean shared a look before her Dean gave her a nod, and Beth said, “I’m going to go get a closer look, and they are not keeping our truck. I don’t care if they took the supplies you guys found already, but that truck is ours,” before she slipped out the door.

Dean looked back at her Dean. “These guys know what they’re doing. She shouldn’t —“

Her Dean smiled. “She does too . . . They’ll never see her coming.”

“Wait, is she going to —“

“There’s no way they would’ve let the other two of you go if they got one of you to agree to stay . . . Why take the chance that those two would come back for the one left behind? This isn’t the first time they’ve done this. If she finds bodies or hard evidence, she’ll deal with it herself . . . if she doesn’t, she’ll probably have her Dad send them to the nearest Leviathan . . . if I had to guess.”

“And you’re okay with that?”

“I trust her judgment. Hasn’t gotten it wrong yet . . . maybe lets people off with more of a chance than they deserve sometimes.”

He was talking about Sam, right? That’s something Dean and Beth’s Dean hadn’t talked about now that they were human and Mark free. In fact, this might be the first time they’d talked in person. He didn’t know what he thought about the ‘Evil’ Sam. He remembered what the Evil Sam had done as well as the Evil Sam’s brother did. Remembered how that Sam had looked, sounded, and all of that . . . but his own Sam . . . he was struggling to find his way without him. Being around Ben helped, but it wasn’t the same. In a lot of ways, he felt like he’d taken a massive step back and was where he’d been when Sam was in the cage.
It wasn’t even him who’d signed up for this. Well, it had been. It’s just that he’d been a demon, but that’s not who he was. He wasn’t a guy who belonged here either. He lived his life in shades of grey, but not as grey as this universe made you become.

At the very least, he wanted to let Sam know he wasn’t a demon . . . if Sam had even figured out that Dean had ever been a demon. Dean thought that Sam probably had and hadn’t been too far away from finding him when Beth showed up. Sam and he would be all right if they saw each other again now. Dean had seen it in the way the newest Dean on the team and his brother were. Even something like what’d happened with Gadreel and Kevin and the Mark couldn’t stay between them forever. If he couldn’t see Sam again, then he at least wanted to find a way to let him know he was all right and tell him the Mark was gone. Looking at the door, Beth had gone through, Dean thought maybe he knew a way to do that, and now that she wasn’t in a universe where Chuck wouldn’t answer, maybe he could . . . as soon as she came back . . . whenever that was.

It wasn’t until late the next morning, and she didn’t come back alone. There were 7 people with her. To get everyone in the room to lower their guns, because she wasn’t there under duress, Beth said, “They check out . . . The rest did not.”

The newest Dean asked about the truck, and Beth glanced at one of the men with her, wanting him to tell them. “It’s parked outside. We loaded it up . . . Look, I just got recruited into this a few months back . . . They killed my wife and daughter after I agreed to stay . . . thought we were in the home stretch, you know? Made it this long, but . . . anyway, I just wanted you to know you don’t have to worry about me. If I could’ve found a way out that didn’t involve them bringing me back and cutting off limbs, I would’ve done it.”

Beth explained. “I had my Dad heal them when he came to help me with the rest . . . similar stories for all of them. I found them in a prison block of sorts . . . They’re going to Wisconsin.” She glanced at her Dean to make sure that was okay, and he nodded. It looked like now that their job was done, she and her Dean were ready to go, so Dean pulled her aside.

“I was wondering . . . you think maybe you could ask Chuck to get a message to my brother? Let him know I’m all right and that the Mark is gone . . . explain –“

“What about her?”

Dean paused. “I don’t want him to come here if –“

“You could go there . . . come back when you want.”

“But I thought –“

“Well, the mission is over. You don’t have the Mark anymore, so it won’t be a problem in your universe if you’re there. If you want to go home, I’ll do what I can to make it happen . . . if it’s what you really want.” What about her? He hadn’t really spent any time with her since they’d gotten here. He hadn’t really known what to say or how to act around her, but he didn’t want to leave her here. She deserved better than this universe and this job . . . being the one to deal with people like the ones they’d run into here? That was too much to ask of her. It wasn’t who she was. It’s who she’d made herself become and now the others expected her to do it, just like she’d made herself become a hunter when she really felt like a spy at heart, but they all expected her to be a hunter. When he didn’t say anything, she said, “Think about it and let me know. You’ve got to take them to the Wisconsin camp . . . maybe see Mary and John while you’re there. And then you’ve got the drive home. And like I said, maybe you can come back.”
I let my last physics class of the day go. They had lunch. I had to go through something that’d occurred to me in the middle of the last lesson. It was the last one before their finals for the summer semester. They were essentially getting 3 semesters a year, the fall semester and the spring semester, like they were used to having, but because it was the best way for us to keep them busy and give them face time with us, they were also getting a summer semester. I’m not entirely sure why it hadn’t occurred to me until then, but it basically meant that by the time we were letting them ‘graduate,’ as ‘seniors,’ they had an extra two years of school done.

The older kids would essentially be halfway to getting college educations . . . I mean to keep them interested, I had to teach them newer and more advanced things every year. I don’t know why I hadn’t thought about it until now. Probably just hadn’t had time . . . I wasn’t quite sure what it all meant, but it seemed important, like it was something I should bring to their attention, because it isn’t something they’d ever thought they’d really have again. But on the other hand I had to find the right way to frame it, because I obviously wasn’t going to let them graduate 2 years early and start going out there to hunt at 15 or 16.

If I did it the right way, maybe I could convince the older ones to stick around another 2 years, so they could ‘get their Bachelor’s degrees?’ Maybe for the final two years they could focus more on one subject, like Biology or Chemistry or History or English or whatever, and that would be their major? If they were half way there, maybe they’d be more inclined to do it? What about Kevin? He’d been teaching them Math and taking over on the science classes when I wasn’t here, which meant he was having to do the same thing I was . . . get into the harder more advanced Math and Science, so he could teach them. Maybe I could . . . I don’t know . . . find a way to honor that . . . give him some kind of a sneaky ‘teaching exam’ and tell him when he passed that he now had a ‘Bachelor of Science degree’ and then tell him to write up a thesis on whatever he wanted over the next year or two, when he had time and give him a ‘Master’s Degree?’

I wondered if he would. It’s something that would’ve made his Mom proud, so maybe? But from what I’d heard him say about his Mom, she’d be just as proud of him throwing a wrench in Sam’s plans in Vegas, buying us enough time to shut Vegas down, and being the best prophet he could be to help us after that. Maybe I should talk to her about it the next time I saw Pamela. I’d unintentionally set myself up to alternate every other month being out on the road in a way that made me skip seeing the hunters for our bi-monthly poker tournaments. I had other people I wanted to talk to in Heaven, and I wanted to see if the Dead Hunter’s Society could verify that some of the heavily dotted regions on Bobby’s screen were the remnants of Crowley’s monster-making operation. Maybe I could have Pamela and Stephen meet up with me in Kansas before they headed up here for the poker tournament? I could talk to the Sam down there about the school thing while I was there too and see what he thought. I’d talk to my Sam, but I hadn’t seen him in a few months.

Right now I had to go to the clinic for lunch office hours. I’d go back out there during dinner too. I was trying to get some kind of normal office hours going. There’d been a cold going around the
camp the week after I got back, and the teens had been worried about it, so they’d brought the smaller kids to me to have me check them out, or they did until I told them it was a virus, and plenty of rest, lots of fluids, and some over the counter fever and cough medicine to help manage the symptoms were all I could prescribe. Then they told the others, and they took care of things themselves.

Some of the kids had gotten a little worse with chest infections, but I’d caught the symptoms of those in my classes with some of the coughs I heard, so I had them meet me during lunch . . . of course they brought their teens with them, and I explained the situation, told them that I could do something about the coughs, and that because I wanted the kids to get the right treatment, I’d meet with them at breakfast and dinner to make sure they got their medicine . . . not that I didn’t trust them to give the kids their medicine when they needed it, but adults were crap at that kind of thing, and despite how adult-like these kids were, they were still kids. I didn’t want any of them to get pneumonia.

Lunch and just before the kids went to bed were my free hours for anything they or the adults around here might need. Obviously, I wanted to take care of any injuries when they happened. We were relatively injury free except for the odd sprained ankle during training . . . not that they told me about those. That’s why I went to see the kids at night, because they didn’t always tell me when it happened. They’d tell the teens, and then the teens would make the kids tell me. Of course the teens never did it for themselves, so I had to pay attention to things, like limps and winces in class to know if there was something wrong with any of them. Overall, I think I was a lot busier this time at the camp. Maybe I was finally doing things right around here? Now I had to get ready to go do it in the other camps.

“Hey, do you have time to talk?”

I looked to my left and saw MoC Dean jogging to catch up with me. “Yeah, sure . . . When did you guys get back?”

“Couple of hours ago.”

Opening the clinic door, I let him in ahead of me, and said, “So, you –“

“Made a decision? Yeah. I want to go back, but I want you to come with me.”

Uhhh. “I can’t leave –“

“I want you to bring Rogue too.”

If he wanted to go back, I thought that was good for him. I knew if he went back, he’d have Sam, and that’s something that’d been weighing him down, but Rogue and I going with him? “Why?”

“Because I meant what I said before . . . and I’m in a position to do it now, but I don’t belong here, neither do you . . . or Rogue. We can give her a better life where I’m from than she’ll have here.”

We? “What about her Dad? He’s –“

“He’ll want what’s best for her.”

“And being with her Dad is what’s best for her.”

“Is it? Because she can really be whatever she wants to be where I’m from, but here . . . her options are kind of limited.”
My shoulders dropped before I sat on my desk. “So, you’d just give up hunting if –“

“Maybe not give it up, but I have a home at the bunker, and you could help us start up a real Men of Letters again . . . do both . . . that and hunting. When she gets older, she could go to a school there.

“What about the kids here? What about the other hunters? I can’t just –“

Dean put his hands to either side of me on the desk. “Yeah, I thought you’d say that . . . I wanna try something.”

“Okay, but –“

I flinched a little when his lips landed over mine. It was unexpected. My Dean hadn’t even done this yet. He wasn’t ready to know if it felt different yet. It did, because this Dean wasn’t my soul mate anymore either, but it didn’t stop this Dean from pulling me closer and wrapping his arms around me when his tongue found mine. Just like it always had with this Dean, it turned into one hell of a kiss, and when he pulled back, his eyes searched mine for something, and then he smiled. “Best friends don’t kiss like that.”

No, I guess they didn’t. “But –“

“He said you’re just dating.”

“You already talked to him about –“

“No. The other Dean told me . . . If it’s just dating, then it’s not-exclusive.”

I know, but that didn’t mean kissing other men was right. “But –“

“It’s not wrong . . . You’re putting yourself on hold for him, and he’s not a sure thing.”

“But –“

“We’d be great together, Beth.”

“I didn’t think –“

“I’d want you without all the extras? Why? I told you I meant what I said, and I like this better. Means I can concentrate on you instead of what you make me feel.”

Oh. “Well, what about –“

“Taking my time and getting it right?”

I don’t know if that’s where I’d been going with it. He was more than a little distracting. I nodded anyway. “I still want to do that, but it’s an every day kind of thing. And the contract . . . it is you, but it’s not a supernatural thing . . . It’s a . . . I don’t know . . . a you’re worth it, and I don’t want to screw it up, so I won’t contract.”

“But you haven’t even talked to me since –“

“I know. Had a lot of things to figure out. Think I needed to go on that supply run, so I could, and I know that maybe the reason your life is screwed up now is because of what I did when I was a demon, but I’ll spend every day making it up to you.”
“So, you feel indebted to –“

“No. I miss the way things were when were in 1983, but I don’t miss the things with John and Mary. I miss the way they were with you.” Oh. What do you say to that?

“I can’t die.”

“I heard. The way I see it, that’s a good thing.”

“But you’ll –“

“Die. I know. Also know that I’m okay with that as long as I know you’ll be okay, and you won’t be if I leave you here.”

“But everyone I know is here.”

“My Cas is there. I know it’s not the same, but he’s an angel, and if I say you’re important to me, he’ll get to know you . . . feel the same way about you that your Cas does, and you won’t feel guilty if your Cas goes angel again if it isn’t what he really wants.”

“But what about my Dad and the vampire –“

“Ask to bring them too.”

“There’s no way Chuck –“

“How do you know? I mean the vamp me is here, isn’t he? Chuck let that happen.”

Yeah, but Chuck likes for you to make and stick with the hard decisions. I decided to go back to the whole me not dying thing. “If I stay the same age, you –“

“Won’t get a whole lot older. I know the score with hunting, but let’s say I do . . . Old men end up with hot young wives all the time. Don’t have the kind of money for you to be a gold digger, but that’s what people will think. Kind of like the idea of that.”

I laughed. “No, you don’t. It –“

“Won’t happen, but if I live long enough for it to be a problem, I kind of do . . . What old man wouldn’t?”

“What about the –“

“Kids here? They won’t be kids forever.”

I know. “Dean, I can’t –“

“Well, then what if you ask to come back whenever you want, or you can come to me when you’re ready or I can come back whenever I want, like you said?”

“If Chuck would even –“

“Won’t know unless we ask him.”
Bunnicula

Chapter Notes

This is from vampire Dean's POV.

Dean waited for the other him to come back. “What’d she say?”

The MoC Dean rolled his eyes. “What do you think she said?”

“I’m going with she turned you down, but you can come back when you want if Chuck lets you do it.”

“Yeah.”

“You played your part though, right?”

“What part? I meant everything I said. If I didn’t think it’d rip her family in half, I’d push harder for her to come with me, and I do plan on coming back to check up on things. If Chuck won’t let me, I’ll start looking for a spell to do it as soon as I get back. And I’m telling you now, if I don’t like what I see when I come back, I’m bringing her and Rogue with me.”

“So, you not being soul mates anymore didn’t –“

“No. Feels more natural. Less like a magnet, and more relaxed. If it'd been like this whole time, I don't think I would've fought being with her as much as I did.”

“And you think she buys that?”

“There’s nothing for her to buy. What the hell difference does it make to you anyway?”

He was playing the long game and needed one of the two Deans who wasn’t her soul mate to let her know he was still interested. Her Dean was too much of a wild card for it to be him. “You agreed to it. Thought it was best for her if –“

“she doesn’t think there’s something wrong with her if he screws this up. I know. What's your interest in –“

“I need for them to work out more than I need them to not work out.” She wasn’t single . . . not to her. Didn’t matter what her Dean said, she didn’t see it that way.

“Why? You think you have a shot? Maybe before, but now –“

“I know what I am, and I’m willing to bet it won’t matter. Did you give Benny this much shit for getting out because of a woman?”

MoC Dean held his breath for a couple of seconds, like he wasn’t sure he should say what he was thinking, but decided fuck it anyway. “I almost killed her. You think you’re any differe –“

“I can’t kill her.”
“Doesn’t mean you can’t hurt her, and that’s just as bad.”

“I won’t.”

“I didn’t think –“

“Something else was controlling you. I’m controlling me. I know I won’t hurt her. This is totally different.”

Laughing, the MoC Dean went over to flip the lid up on Dean’s cooler to expose the bags of blood Beth had left there and said, “Man, you play for Team Monster now. You could probably go home too . . . if you wanted. Pretty sure a vamp can’t take the Mark of Cain.”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“Why wouldn’t you? Least you’d get a few years of hunting with Sam, and what the hell has he been doing in your universe since you left? You left him with Abaddon and Metatron . . . Aren’t you even –“

“I’m not going back.” He’d made peace with it when he was looking after Rogue. After her Dad came back, he might have stumbled a bit, but then he went out on the road and started to come around to where he fit into things here. Now . . . now he wouldn’t go back if he could. He had to think about the same things Beth did.

He might have Sam for a few years, but then what? He’d keep on going, and maybe he’d turn into the kind of monster he’d fought his entire life. He didn’t want that. The other Dean had been right. Here, being a monster didn’t mean you were one. Here, he’d have Beth, and she wasn’t going anywhere. Her Dad probably wasn’t going anywhere. Cas might not be going anywhere. He wouldn’t have Sam, but if he went back, he’d only have him for a while. This universe was his home now.

“And what happens when all your plans don’t work out.”

“What?”

“When he dies, she’s going to be –“

“I know, but she won’t grieve forever . . . I’ve got time on my side, but not if she thinks I’m forced to be with her.”

The other Dean slumped. “Might be a lot of problems there, but it could be a once in a lifetime kind of thing they’ve got.”

“Not if you’ve got forever. You should know. You were going to live forever once, right?”

“Never gave it much thought, but I know Cain gave up killing for –“

“150 years. I heard. That’s not forever.”

“What if her guy figures out a way to live forever too . . . lot of ways he could.”

“Well, then forever is a long time for him not to screw up.”

“Why are you –“

“What else have I got? Look at me. I’m stuck in here during the day, and I kill around the camp at
night . . . that’s it.”

“So, you’re bored and playing matchmaker to -“

“No. Just investing in the future.” It isn’t anything he’d let himself think he might be able to have with her after the first night he met her . . . It may not be for a while, but it gave him a reason to work harder to fight his urges. He needed that.

“And in the meantime?”

“I’m not going to kill him to get him out of the way if that’s where you’re thinking.” He’d help her pick up the pieces when she needed it, but he wouldn’t hurt her that way either. He was her friend first. He didn’t want to talk about it anymore. “So when are you leaving?”

“After school is out, she wants to meet with Chuck face-to-face to ask about me being able to come back. I’m supposed to go with her, and he’ll probably send me then.”

“You talk to Ben?” The MoC Dean looked off to the side and shook he head, so Dean said, “You need to talk to him. He’s gotten used to having you around, and what about those fishing trips you were supposed to take the kids on?”

“Think you can control being a blood-thirsty monster and do it . . . They’ll probably listen to you.”

Yeah, they were just as likely to chop off his head, which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. He didn’t know how he’d be at controlling it around that many people for an entire weekend. He’d only been a vampire for a little over a month. It was easier now than it had been when he first got back, and Beth leaving him a stock of blood helped take the edge off even if he hated needing it. “Maybe. When was the first one supposed to be?”

“Didn’t give an exact date. Just said I would let them know when I got back.”

That was as good as a promise here, and those meant something to those kids. “Yeah, I’ll do it.” Should probably get used to being around them more now in small doses. He grabbed his hoodie, and his sunglasses. “Come on. We need to go pull Ben out of class. Think he’s in Kevin’s class right now.”

“You know that’s creepy, right?”

Dean sighed. “Shut up. You’re not the one who has to listen to Kevin teach algebra, Beth teach Biology, Gabriel teach History or Chuck read Bunnicula to the little kids in his class.”

The MoC Dean laughed. “Bunnicula? Is that –“

“The one about the vampire rabbit . . . yeah. He’s been reading them the whole series all month.”

“You think he’s trying to tell you something.”

“Well, he’s not reading it to me.”
Yeah, Dean didn’t figure it’d be all that easy. Chuck was basically saying that he wouldn’t bring Dean back to this universe, but he wouldn’t stop him from coming back if Dean found his own way to do it. He was also reminding him that there were thousands of universes he could end up in before he ever found this one again. Beth hadn’t really said anything since they’d been in here. She was mostly ignoring Chuck and letting Dean do all the talking. Looking at her, he asked, “What do you think?” and she smiled.

“I think we should find out what your brother’s been up to while we’ve been gone, what kind of damage control you have to do when you go back, what point in time he’ll send you back to, and what your plan is on what to do about Cain, because he’s been going on that global killing spree of his family tree since he gave you the Mark.”

“You don’t think Sam has wrecked the joint trying to find –“

“I don’t know, Dean. I’m not saying he brought on an Apocalypse or anything, but I’m guessing that he’s continued going further and further down the rabbit hole trying to find you.”

Yeah, he figured that too. It’s one of the reasons he wanted to go back. Looking to Chuck for the answer, Dean said, “Does any of that matter if you send me back to when I left?”

Chuck sat back against his desk and said, “I’m not sending you back to when you left. Time moves on without –“

“You brought them back to when they left.”

“I told them I would. You didn’t ask for that when you left. Actions . . . consequences . . . You know the drill.”

Okay, so if Chuck wasn’t sending him back to when he left, then how long had Dean been gone. He’d been with Beth in the 1980s for like 2 ½ months, plus the week it took to recover from the ogre hunt. Before that . . . he’d been with them as the demon for like a week and a half. They were in the newest Dean’s universe for about a week and a half. That was 3 ½ months. Then they’d been in the next universe for . . . a week? And they’d been in the last universe for at least another week, or he thought they had been, so that was 4 months. He’d been here for 9 weeks, so he’d been gone for a little over 6 months. “Is Sam –“

“Still looking for you? Yeah, he is.”

“And he –“

“Crowley is Dead. Sam is working with Rowena and her associates to find you now. He knows you’re not in his universe anymore thanks to more than one witch and a few psychics.”

Oh. “By working with, you mean –“

“Forcing.”

Beth asked, “And Cole, is he –“

“Looking for Dean? No. A gerbil? Yes.” What? Chuck looked at Dean and said, “Your brother has a pretty tight leash on the witches he has working for him.”
Yeah, cause that sounds like a good idea. Let’s just keep a bunch of witches locked up and force
them to do our dirty work. Nothing bad can come from that. They won’t get loose or anything and
want revenge. “And Cole is the guy who would’ve used Sam to try and find me?”

Chuck crossed his arms over his chest and answered, “Yeah . . . husband, father . . . general
nuisance to Sam.”

“But it’s reversible, right? Him being a . . . I’m sorry. Who’s idea was it to turn him into a gerbil?”

“Your brother gave the witches creative license to deal with it as they saw fit . . . He has a virtual
zoo of animals locked away in the bunker at this point. And yes it’s reversible . . . if one of the
witches in the Grand Coven feels like returning them to normal.”

“The Grand Coven?”

“Yeah.”

“They’re a thing again now, because –“

“It’s what happens when you bring a bunch of witches together to face a common enemy. It’s one
of their many human qualities.”

“Their common enemy being –“

“Sam . . . they don’t tolerate Rowena though. She’s the teacher’s pet, because he killed Crowley to
get her on his side and then put her in charge.”

Dean ran his hand down his face and laughed briefly in response before asking, “And Cain?”

“He’s still out there. Most of Sam’s interest is in recruiting witches to find a way here. The ones
who don’t get turned into animals he has to find somewhere to keep.”

“So, Cain is still out there –“

“Yeah, he’s still out there killing his descendants.”

So, Dean had more than a few things to put right when he went back. Looking at Beth, he said,
“What do you think now?”

“I, uh . . . I guess prioritize? Cain is killing people. The witches aren’t?”

Yeah. “You think the devil’s trap bullets will work on him?”

“They should. A normal devil’s trap does, but something tells me it won’t be that easy. Maybe do
the illusion spell of his next victim to trap him, use the cuffs, and then take him somewhere you
can summon Colette’s spirit, so he can talk to her in person. She might be able to convince him to
stop, and I know Sam kept Rachel’s soul with him in Vegas. If Colette would be up for visiting
like that, so Cain can see her whenever he wants, maybe it’d make him happy enough to stop
indefinitely?”

Yeah . . . yeah, that might work. Then they’d deal with the people the witches had turned into
animals, unless they were witches, and then they’d deal with the witches? Then what? Back to
hunting, he guessed? “Okay, so how do we do this –“

Chuck answered, “Just say the word, Dean.”
“Okay, I’ll –“

The next thing he knew he was standing in the bunker looking at Sam. It wasn’t the Sam from Beth’s universe, and it wasn’t the other Sam. It was his brother, but . . . that’s it? He’d wanted to talk to Beth again . . . one-on-one. Couldn’t give him 5 minutes to do that? Lucky he got to say goodbye to Ben and the other kids in his cabin earlier, but he’d been saving Beth for last. He’d talked to her earlier, but it hadn’t been a goodbye . . . and he hadn’t really wanted to say goodbye, but maybe he’d see her again . . . at least tell her thanks.

It was because of her the Mark was gone and she gave him a plan on what to do about Cain without it . . . And she gave him a taste of what a normal life with a woman could be like if she was a hunter. He didn’t think it’d work unless it was her though. He wondered if there was a version of her in this universe. He’d look, but he wasn’t holding out much hope on that. She wasn’t supposed to be in very many. Kind of wanted to go back now.

He knew there’d always be issues with the other Deans, but now that he was home, he felt like he’d turned his back on something he really wanted and maybe could’ve had if he’d worked at it harder . . . Hadn’t even really tried until today, and he’d only let himself do it to let her know there wasn’t anything wrong with her, because there wasn’t, and he liked her the way she was . . . Doing that might’ve brought up all the possibilities that he hadn’t let himself think about in a while.

Sure he’d had to turn his back on a normal life . . . well, pretty much his entire life, but this was different. It’d been his shot, his one chance at happiness, not that being with Sam didn’t make him happy, but Sam . . . Sam was fine. He’d thrown holy water in Dean's face already, gave him a hug, so he could do a sneaky shifter test, he had to know he didn’t really need to give him and was asking if Dean was all right now that that was out of the way.

Patting Sam on the back to return the hug, Dean said, “Yeah, Sam . . . I’m good, but we need to do something about Cain.“

Sam stepped back to look at him with a laugh. “What? You’re not even back two minutes, and you want to go on a hunt?”

He didn’t want to do it. He had to do it. Needed to start tying up loose ends here, so the next time he left, he wouldn’t have to worry about this place anymore . . . and maybe he could prepare Sam for what it was going to be like there. “Yeah, he’s killing people again.”

“You’re sure you’re all right? Is the Mark –“

“It’s gone, Sam . . . I, uh . . . it’s a long story. Been a long day. Think I’m gonna hit the shower, and when I’m done, you can explain this witch thing to me. We’re letting the people they’ve turned into animals go.”

“Yeah, about that, Dean. I –“

Stepping forward to give Sam a more heart felt hug, Dean said, “Was looking for me. I know . . . Been kind of a wild ride, Sammy. I’ll fill you in . . . and then I want to know how far you’ve gotten on this universe hopping thing . . . just need to clear my head . . . and take a shower. Don’t really get them on the road unless you’re at one of the camps. The ones in Wisconsin weren’t bad. Didn’t get a chance to take one when I got back.”

That camp had been special. He could see why John and Mary would want to stay there. He’d talked to them about coming back. They’d both thought it was a good idea. Seemed like it at the time. Now it just felt like he’d left a whole lot of unfinished business there with Ben and the other
kids at the South Dakota camp, with Beth and John and Mary and their kids.

Letting Sam go, Dean turned to go back to his room, and Sam started to say, “Dean, I haven’t really gotten very far on –“

“We’ll talk when I get out.” Sam had to have something. Even if Dean couldn’t go back yet, there had to be something to let him know they were all right. Should be a few years ahead of them in time now. Could always use the time spell to go back a couple of years. Should’ve just asked to set up a meeting with Sam and brought him there. Well, at least now they could do something about Cain, but after that, he wanted to go back with Sam. That’s where they were needed most. “Maybe start looking into what you can find on illusion spells, and see if we have what we need to summon a spirit.”
Beth finished filling the camp in on the MoC Dean leaving. Dean watched Ben . . . Ben seemed all right. Most of the kids did . . . well, some of them were complaining about not getting to go on a fishing trip, but vampire Dean said he was going to do that instead, and . . . now most of them were being pretty vocal about how they weren't going . . . until Beth raised her hand, and they all shut up. Must be something she did in her classes. He didn’t think he’d ever seen her do that . . . hadn’t had to do it until now. Usually, they stayed quiet until these assemblies were over.

“She said the same thing to me. Does that mean –”

“Means exactly what she said. I mean she wouldn’t torture you or kill you or anything, but make you regret it? Yeah.”

“So, like . . . “

“I don’t know, like . . . put itching powder in your clothes for life or something.”

“Seems like torture if –“

“I don’t know. This is her thing.”

“So, that’s what you would do.”

"To you? Yeah."

Dean grinned, and the other Dean rolled his eyes before saying, “She won’t send the kids to –“

“To the nearest Leviathan? No. She’ll –“

“What the hell? I know she wouldn’t do that. I was thinking one of the other camps.”

“She wouldn’t do that either if it meant splitting up their families. She’ll probably pull their hunting credentials for life if they go around killing monsters that don’t deserve it though.”

“Is that really what she’d do, or is it what you would do again?”

“I don’t know. Maybe both . . . I wasn't sure about having him here either, but he hasn't done anything except kill a fuck load of monsters around here . . . He's more like you and me than he isn't. I mean if I’d gone out with you guys instead of him, that would be me . . . could’ve been me a
lot over the years . . . not really sure they’re getting the message of this place if they’re thinking
decapitate first and ask questions later with him.”

“You were the same . . . I’m guessing until –“

“The werewolves.”

“They really meant that much to you?”

“Maybe not at first, but yeah . . . you mean to tell me that with all this talk I’ve heard from you
three about Benny that you’re not the same.”

The other Dean shrugged. “Never said I wasn’t. But these kids have seen a lot –“

“I know how much they’ve seen. And I know they’re supposed to know right from wrong. They
should know that you don’t hesitate if it’s you or someone else and a monster, demon, or angel, but
in a situation like this it’s hands off on monsters like that.”

He finished by pointing his thumb in the direction of vampire Dean, and Ty said, “Don’t worry,
Dean. We won’t kill you in your sleep.”

Why was he not surprised they were all listening in on a private conversation. Taking a step
forward, Dean said, “I’m not worried about me . . . It’s not like he hasn’t done this his whole life,
the same as me. He cleared more universes than the rest of us too, and the thanks he gets is you
guys lining up to take him out . . . It’s not like I haven’t heard it all over the camp all month.
You’re all supposed to know killing him is wrong. Doesn’t look like you do.”

Ty shook his head. “So, just because he looks like you, we’re supposed to –“

“Doesn’t just look like me . . . he is me!” Maybe he’d made a mistake not doing this sooner. He
knew the other Deans had done the obstacle course, but he hadn’t done it with them. Maybe he
should have. “You all right to go back out in the sun?”

Vampire Dean pulled his hoodie up and sighed. “Already hit my limit on the sun today . . . got a
raging headache . . . was thinking of going to bed. What’d you have in mind?”

“Obstacle course . . . the other Dean too.”

“We already did it.”

“Not with me. They need to see it.”

“See what?”

“That we do everything the same . . . and while we’re doing the course, you say something from
when you were a kid, I’ll say what happened next, and the other Dean will follow it up.”

Stuffing his hands into the pockets of his hoodie, Vampire Dean pulled out a bottle of sunscreen,
and Dean laughed. “Shut up. It’s this or wearing gloves . . . not giving you the advantage on that
too . . . already have one ‘cause it’s still bright out . . . How far back are we going?”

“Anything before we were 15 will be the same. That’s when my path went a different way.“

“So, like the first time Dad took me shooting?”

The other Dean followed them down the stairs and through the throng of kids saying, “I broke the
first bottle on the first shot.”

Dean nodded. “Yeah, and then he wanted to know if it was beginner’s luck.”

Vampire Dean grinned and said, “But I hit every bottle after that one after the other.”

Dean smiled when he thought about it. “Yeah, hey, you know that memory was in my Heaven.”

The other Dean was quick to say, “I got Sam and me on the Fourth of July when –“

“Yeah, no I got that too after Walt and Roy killed me and Sam. I mean the next time I went up there . . . after the aswang.”

Vampire Dean shook his head with a laugh. “Aswang. Think that might be my favorite monster name.”

Dean quickly disagreed. “Nah, wendigo-wang is better.”

“Why not wen-wang?”

Dean smiled briefly at the other Dean’s attempt, and the vampire Dean said, “Or wango? Nah, I’m thinking wen-wang isn’t bad . . . wendigo-wang.” He laughed and added, “It’s no weredemon, but I like it. Think you should flip a coin.”

“Not flipping a coin for it. You two can flip a coin over naming the next hybrid we find.”

“Eve’s will probably still be Jefferson Starships, right?”

“What?”

The other Dean and vampire Dean shared a look and shrugged before saying, “Shifter, wraith, and vampire . . . They’re horrible and hard to kill.”

Oh. That was good. He liked that. “Is that the only hybrid she made?”

“In my universe.”

“Mine too . . . but she had longer here to come up with something better. I think some of the ones I saw in Iowa were a little different.”

“Well then take those, and leave my wendigo-wangs alone.”

They got through the course without really having to concentrate on anything they were doing. Their shooting techniques were exactly the same. Their knife throws were exactly the same. They disassembled and reassembled their guns exactly the same. Everything was exactly the same until they got to Beth’s wall, and then vampire Dean had the edge. They were walking back to the house and talking about the shtriga when they were kids when one of the teens said, “What about sparring?”

Had kind of forgotten they were supposed to be proving a point. Dean asked the vampire him if he thought he could control it. Didn’t want to have to kill the guy if he vamped out in the middle of sparring. It was his job to look out for these two. They were his responsibility now that they were in his universe. The guy who was a vampire wouldn’t be a vampire now if Dean had been doing his job, and he wouldn’t fail him like that again. “I, uh . . . think I can control it if you don’t let yourselves get hit?” So block and don’t draw blood. “But I’m not sure about this superhuman strength. I don’t want to . . . might be best if I save it for the monsters tonight.”
The guy had made a massive step today in just leaving Beth’s room and being around the kids. Shouldn’t push it. Without making a big deal about it, Dean said, “Yeah, all right. It’ll work better with two instead of three anyway. How else are they going to see a guy fighting himself in the mirror.”
Is this it? Is this why my life had become, an endless loop of being at the camp and going through routines for a month, only to be broken up by a scheduled loop of the camps in my months off? I know I agreed to do this tour two months ago, the last time I was out here, but I needed more than this, and I didn’t know how to get out of these loops, because these were things that needed to be done. I mean I couldn’t just tell the camps I was going to see now that I wouldn’t be back in two months time. I needed to check in to make sure they had what they needed and to make sure what’d happened in Kansas with Tom never happened again.

I walked out to our new Army truck. We didn’t need the snow plows, but we needed something big that we could use to carry supplies and that couldn’t easily be stopped by Croats. I was expecting more of them on this trip. Opening the door to throw my bags into the cab, I was a little surprised to see Dean sitting there. “Weren’t planning on leaving without saying goodbye, were you?”

“Uh, no . . . hadn’t really gotten that far yet.”

“But you’re going out?”

I stepped back still a little confused. “That was the plan.”

“Didn’t tell me your plan.”

Oh. “The kids’ exams are done, so . . . “

“And you left a supply of blood for the vamp. I know . . . What’s the rule, Beth?”

“Uhh . . . which one? There are a lot.”

“There are a lot for them. What’s the only one for you?”

“Don’t get caught?” His stern exterior cracked, and he tried not to smile. He wasn’t nearly as annoyed as he was pretending to be . . . just giving me a hard time.

“That’s your Dad’s rule. What’s mine?” I shrugged, and he started to say, “Come on, Beth. What have I been saying since –“

“Nobody goes out alone.”

He did a double take mid-rant and said, “That’s right. Nobody goes out alone, so where’s your partner?”

“Uhh . . . God is my co-pilot?”

That time he couldn’t stop himself from laughing. “I’m gonna get you a bumper sticker that says that.”

“Don’t. He and I still aren’t good.”

“I know . . . So, where’s your partner?”

“I don’t –“

“You do have one.”
“I was going to say, I don’t know. Some people say he’s been on vacation. Some say he’s had a mental break down.”

“Who says I –“

I smiled. “I do. Been keeping it to myself though.” I couldn’t imagine having to go from being fine one second to being a demon the next with no warning; forgetting who you are as a demon, because as a demon, you don’t care enough to remember who you are; disappearing when the demon is cured; coming back as a demon, and then having it all taken away by Amara . . . not to mention having not just one but two all-consuming relationships taken from you, the one with Sam and the one with me . . . He’d needed some time. He still needed some time.

He ducked his head and said, “You know the dating thing . . . It doesn’t change –“

Us being partners? “I do now.”

He nodded before saying, “You still coming, or . . .“

“Yeah, but only if you drive.”

He got a little smile that seemed uncertain. “You don’t want –“

“It’s been longer since you have, and I’m torn between going on a rampage and doing nothing for a while to quiet my mind . . . It’s a toss up. Sure you still want to come?”

Starting the truck, he said, “Bag’s packed. Already said goodbye to Rogue. Can’t change it now.”

Rogue. I turned to run back towards the house. “I needed to –“

“I know. You’ve got 10.” I was back in 15, but he was still there.

Things between the South Dakota camp and Colorado were comfortable, easy . . . well, they were between us. Dean seeing how Eve’s army had spread that night when we stopped and the Croats the next morning when we got to Colorado made him a little less than easy. Not just about our camp, but the others. It was good to see him get involved more. He’d been slowly doing it more around the camp the last month or so, but now he was getting more involved outside the camp too.

I also enjoyed seeing his reaction to the Colorado camp. Sitting forward when we first saw the walls over the tops of the trees, he slowed down a little. “These weren’t already –“

“No. The last time I was here, all they had was a chain-link fence . . . but then they also have over 2500 people to help with this.”

When we got closer, you could see the trenches. It looked just like our wall in Wisconsin, except it was bigger both in length and height. The top sparkled in the sun, like it was encrusted in diamonds . . . or margarita salt. “What’s at the top?”

“Uh, I’m not sure. If I had to guess, broken glass to shred hands and feet of monsters that try to climb over?”

The front gate was massive and solid . . . looked like it was made of steal, but there was another one behind it that seemed to be made of wood. When we got inside, there were people broken off into groups. Some were learning hand-to-hand combat techniques from Max. Others were learning even more basic moves from Ivan, and Yuri was having his group clean weapons. “Were they doing this when you were here the last time?”
“Uh, yeah, but it looks more impressive with these walls.”

“Where are the scientists?”

“Uh, well, there’s one, and . . . she’s over there in Ivan’s group. They train in the morning. In the afternoon, they go over lore, and then in the evening they split off into three groups. One group goes with her to learn what needs to be done to run the facilities and another group goes with Max to learn guard duty related things. The third group goes with Ivan and Yuri to do patrols.”

“I wanna see it.”

“What?”

He smiled before looking down at me. “The place where they’re going to make medicine.” I opened my mouth to ask why, and he said, “It’s something you’ve been talking about us needing forever . . . since Wisconsin. I wanna see what it looks like.”

We got the Doctor out of her training class, and she gave us a tour. The facilities were ready for operation, which meant we had to wear microbiological containment suits and went through decontamination protocols. We spent a lot of our day in there. She showed us where they were going to be making the antibiotics . . . as soon as we got them all the supplies they needed. Then she showed us where they’d try making insulin in the bioreactor and where everything was going to be packaged. It’d be done by hand, which meant more room for human error, so the quality control section was going to be important. I guess a lot people were going to be involved in that.

When we got done with that part of the tour, we ditched the suits, and she showed us the labs where they were ready to try cloning the insulin gene into the right E.coli strain. Just needed the right strain. Since I doubted that any of the stocks in old pharmaceutical facilities were any good, I might’ve gotten a little help from Chuck to save them time. Looking at the labels of the tubes suddenly in my hands, I said, “Uh . . . Insulin DNA and . . . a blue-white screening kit . . . x-gal included.”

The doctor took them, examined them, and then looked up at me. “You’re sure this fragment is correct.”

“Might want to sequence it to be sure, but I’m fairly certain.”

She went back to looking at the two packages, while she left to store them in the appropriate freezers, and Dean said, “That a big deal?”

“Saves them years of trial and error and getting it wrong.”

“And they’ll be able to make insulin with that?”

“There's still a bit of work left to do before it gets to that stage, but soon, yeah.”

“What about aspirin and stuff like that?”

Uh. “You could ask her. See if she has anything in the works for it. I think she’s used to Microbiology, and the other drugs are more Chemistry-based, but we’ve all had to branch outside our areas of expertise.”

“You think any of our kids will be able to work here . . . you know, after you convince them to finish the final two years and get their college degrees.”
“Well, I think the only other person here who is used to doing this is her right-hand man, Daniel, and he has his Masters . . . everyone else working in here only ever had undergrad level biology or took it in high school and liked it, so yeah.”

“Think we should bring them back here again, so they can see their options now that it looks like this. Might get more takers.”

I smiled. “Yeah, maybe.”

“Hey, what are you doing tonight?”

“I don’t know. Going over a list of things they need us to get while we’re here.”

“After that.”

“I don’t know. What’d you have in mind?”

“Be ready at 8, and you’ll find out.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Third date. The first two had been pretty sweet, the highlights of my month at the camp. The first one he got the use of the kitchens for the night and made us dinner and the next one he’d taken me into town, not the place we went on our field trip, but another place, and we’d had a few drinks and played pool. It was going pretty well, or I’d thought it was. It’d been a lot like our nights out used to be . . . until Dad came to pick us up to go help out in Madison. I wonder what Dean had planned this time.
Returning Briefly from the Wild

Sam had been at this for a couple of months now. He’d switched his efforts early on from monsters to Croats. They were only here because of him, so it was his responsibility to get rid of them. It didn’t feel like he was making much of a dent, and he really didn’t like what he was seeing in some parts of the south.

It wasn’t just that the Croats were heading north now that the snow had melted. It was their behavior. He’d had a lot of time to observe them through the scope of his sniper rifle from various perches. What had seemed like aimless paths they were walking, weren’t really all that random. They were wandering over the same patches of land on a loop, and nothing detracted them from their paths, not other Croats dropping in front or behind them, not Gadreel making an appearance . . . not even Sam letting them see him after a while.

At first he’d thought that maybe it was a mutation. Viruses did that, didn’t they? He remembered back when there used to be news that viruses were always mutating in one way or another. If there’d been a mutation, then it might work in his favor. He could kill more of them faster using a gun if he didn’t have to worry about drawing more of them onto him . . . but if there’d been a mutation, that also meant that maybe he wasn’t immune to them anymore and maybe other monsters out there weren’t either. It didn’t really stop his mission, but it did mean he had to be more careful if he wanted to finish it.

If it wasn’t a mutation, then he’d thought that maybe they’d been short-circuited after migrating to different areas and now found themselves in loops, but that didn’t explain the ones who were going north. Not all of them were, not even most of them were, but large enough numbers were doing it that they would be a problem for the camps . . . so he decided to see what happened when he got in the way of a few migrating Croats . . . They glanced in his direction, maybe quickened their steps towards him, and then they just walked around him.

Now, he was pretty sure that someone or something was controlling them. What if the Croats going north were being sent as scouts and the main army was being kept down here in a holding pattern to be released at the right time?

Who might be controlling them? The witches could apparently do it, but he wasn’t anywhere near Louisiana. Demons could. Could angels? Maybe. Michael was able to control them using the weather. And the why . . . well, either the Croats were being sent to search for something or someone, or there were several someone’s out there controlling the Croats, and they were preparing to go to war against each other or against a common enemy . . . he had no idea. It was a mystery he wanted solved.

He also wanted to know how Michael knew the snow would work in getting the Croats to migrate and what happened if the Croats got caught in the snow. It might be useful to know as a defense. Maybe some experimentation was in order . . . something else that was in order was finding out what wards Gabriel had used to hide the Kansas camp for so long. They needed to put those back up and put them up at all the camps. If the Croats were being sent in search of someone, then the chances were that someone was in one of the camps, and they couldn’t afford to lose any of the camps. The easiest way to keep that from happening was to make the camps invisible to the Croats.

So, Gabriel . . . he needed to talk to him, and he needed to talk to Beth and Dean about the experiments and defense . . . maybe to Cas to find out if Cas knew how Michael knew about the cold . . . He also needed to tell them what he’d found, so they could be prepared. All of that is why
Sam went back to the South Dakota camp for the first time since he’d left. He didn’t want to cause any trouble. He didn’t want any kudos or praise. He just wanted to go there, figure this out faster than he could on his own, and go back out into the wild.

The reception wasn’t any different than he expected. He and Gadreel landed outside the wards of the camp. There was one point where you could enter if you were an angel or demon. It was supposed to work that way for monsters too, but hybrids were able to make it through, not that he saw any right now. Sam suspected that Croats would also be able to make it through the wards too, because they were technically a kind of demon/human hybrid. That’s why he wanted to make this place invisible. If they weren’t going to build walls here, they needed to do at least that much.

Sam and Gadreel made it all the way into the camp before anyone approached them even though he knew they’d had eyes on them the entire time. Jody was the first to greet him. “Sam, you know the drill . . . gotta do the tests.”

He was a little surprised the kids weren’t doing it, but then the kids didn’t particularly want anything to do with him anymore. Maybe they were more than all right with letting the adults take this one. He went through the tests and passed all of them, but the tension in the air didn’t necessarily recede even though Jody tried. “You here for dinner? Think we have some left over if –“

“Uh, no . . . thanks. I need to see Dean and Beth . . . Gabriel and Cas too.”

“What’d you need, Sam?”

Looking up to a roof on his left, Sam saw the Dean that’d asked that. It was hard to tell from this distance if that was his brother or not, but he was going with not, because his brother wouldn’t even say that much to him. He was essentially dead to his Dean now. “I need to talk to them about the Croats.” Looking from that Dean, who still had a rifle trained on him, to the silent Dean on a rooftop to his right, Sam added, “I’m not here to cause trouble.”

Sam couldn’t see Cas, but he heard his voice from somewhere to the right yell, “Then why did you pick today to come back here?”

“Because I need their help –“

The Dean on the roof to Sam’s right said, “He means why’d you pick the first time in 2 ½ months that they’re both out of the camp to come back?”

Bad luck? He could see why they’d be on edge if they thought he was here to maybe finish killing off the other Deans or take over the camp now that his brother and Beth were gone, but neither of those were on his agenda at all. “I didn’t know they weren’t here. Can’t really wait. Can you call them back?”

Jody relaxed a little and stepped forward before saying that they’d left yesterday and just got to the Colorado camp this morning. She wanted to know if it was an emergency. An actual emergency as in right this second kind of emergency? No. Was it something that could wait until they got back? Not if they’d just left on a tour of the camps.

“I think it is, or I wouldn’t be here.”

Looking over her shoulder, Jody used her radio to say, “Better call your brother, Cas . . . Ask him if he can bring them back.”

“Why isn’t Gabriel –“
Sam jumped a little when he heard Dean’s voice to his immediate right. “Beth’s been trying to give him more time off . . . not sure what he’s doing with it, but she figures he’s been going non-stop with you guys for a while now and needs it.”

Sam looked to his right. That Dean was still on the roof over there. Glancing to his left . . . the first Dean he’d seen wasn’t in his spot on the adjacent roof. Where’d he go? This one had to be the fourth Dean . . . hadn’t been caught by surprise like that in a while. He didn’t remember this place being this creepy. “Is everything here okay . . . where are the kids?”

“It’s after 9 o’clock. They’re in their cabins. You wanted us to wake the smaller ones up, so they could give you a ticker tape parade, or –“

“No . . . I wanna see –“

“I want a lot of things. Doesn’t mean I’m gonna get them. You can see the kids in the morning.”

Sam looked over his shoulder at Gadreel to see if the kids were really okay, and Gadreel said, “The vampire is right. They are in their cabins . . . or most of them are. A few have snuck out to see what’s happening.”

Jody sighed and left muttering that she'd round them up, but she hadn’t flinched at Gadreel saying the Dean next to them was a vampire. Sam looked at the Dean beside him again. What the hell was going on around here? Where was his brother? Was there an attack he didn’t know about? Is that what had really happened to his Dean and Beth? “Where’s my brother? Where’s Beth? I want to see –“

“What’d you need, Sam?”

Beth? Sam looked behind him and saw Beth in a ski jacket next to an annoyed Dean standing in front of Gabriel. “I, uh . . . Is everything here okay? Gadreel said he’s a vampire, and . . . if I’m honest, this place is giving me weird vibes.“

Beth shrugged. “It is dark . . . everything is creepier in the dark.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s –“

“Sam, you’ve been out in the wild for a while now. Coming back to civilization is going to be a difficult adjustment.”

“This isn’t the camp, I created. It’s –“

“It is, Sam. You’re just seeing it from an outsider’s perspective.”

“No, I saw it that way when I came back not remembering this place.”

“And were too driven by being annoyed with how I did things to notice that it creeped your brother out?” Maybe. Beth noticed his hesitation to her last suggestion and looked around at the camp, noted the posts people had taken up around the place, and then added, “And I’m guessing that you picking this time of day to show up without calling ahead is giving them weird vibes, so they’re on edge, and it’s putting you on edge.”

Right. He hadn’t even thought about calling. He rarely used his sat phone these days. The battery on it might even be dead. It’s not like he ever stayed anywhere he could charge it, and it’s not like he spent his time doing anything other than hunting Croats with Gadreel. “Yeah, I didn’t plan it that way. I just . . . I wanted to talk to you guys. I’ve been watching the Croats, and I think we’ve
got a problem . . . more than just them coming back up here.”

Without hesitation, Beth said, “Okay. Is this a council kind of discussion or . . . “

“Maybe, but I wanted to talk to you three and Cas first before we roll out a plan.”

“Hunter’s shack work for you?”

*The* hunter’s shack? Adam had told Sam all about it when they were in Kansas, but he hadn’t gone into it. He didn’t think anyone had. Then it’d just shown up here out of the blue at Christmas. That’s where Dean had spent most of his time over the holiday, and Dean and he hadn’t been in a good place then, so he hadn’t thought he should go in there . . . It was almost like a clubhouse he hadn’t been invited to be a part of until now. It was ridiculous how happy that made part of him and how much dread that happiness filled in him too.

He tried his hardest to tamp down both feelings and tried to focus on doing whatever he could to honor their sacred space. Now that Beth had reminded him how long he’d been in the wild, Sam thought he probably looked a little like a wild mountain man. He’d said it was an emergency, and he didn’t want to have dragged them here only to make them wait. He looked down at his clothes to see if maybe he could have the meeting looking like this. He was a mess and covered in blood from the Croats he’d killed. Probably smelled pretty ripe too. “You mind if I take a shower first?”

“Sure go ahead, Paul Bunyan. We’ll meet you in 20.”
Friends

Chapter Notes

This is from the POV of the 'Mopey' Dean. The others are mostly calling him 'other'
Dean now that there are only 3 and 1 of them is a vampire.

Beth waited until Sam had gone inside to shout, “You guy’s couldn’t have gone a little easier on
him?”

Dean slid down the roof he was on, landed on his feet and said, “I don’t know. What’s he doing
here?”

Walking up behind him, Cas added, “And why did he wait until you two were gone to come
back?”

Beth looked between them and then snorted. “What, you guys think he’s afraid of Dean or me?
That was never the problem. And he’s here, because this is his camp.”

That didn’t mean he could just come waltzing in here whenever he wanted. Dean may not have
seen that whole show they were supposed to watch about this universe, but he’d seen enough to
know why these kids were . . . not really scared, but weren’t going to give Sam the same kind of
chance they’d given him before the mission. “Just trying to make sure it doesn’t end up like the
last camp he set up.”

After a quick glance towards the house, Beth said, “I can appreciate that, but have any of you
actually taken the time to get to know him?”

Cas muttered, “I already know him, and I know that he is unpredictable,” and the vampire said,
“He’s sure as hell not someone we can trust.”

“Okay, but I mean –“

“Beth, you put him down for a reason. He's not my brother . . . sure as hell ain’t your Dean’s
brother either. He stopped being that a long time ago . . . And it happened before they even met
you.”

Her Dean looked as confused as Beth did by what the vampire had said, but Dean knew where the
vampire was coming from, so he added, "I know my brother has his own thoughts on it, same as
your Sam does . . . They’re both wrong.”

They still didn’t get it, so the vampire said, “Dude, where was your brother the night before you
went to Hell?”

Her Dean finally said, “Nah, that’s water under the –“

Dean laughed before saying, “Look, I know things were far from perfect. Every time she was on
screen, I had to stop myself from shooting her stupid face, but –“

“Hey. That’s my stupid face.”
Dean glanced at Beth. “No, it’s not . . . I mean it is, but . . . it’s different and the same. Now you look the way you’re supposed to look.”

“How do you know –“

“It was in that show . . . when Cas was talking about when he met you, there was a flashback to what really happened, and it was you . . . mostly.” She’d looked exactly the way she looked now until it’d flickered to what Cas had seen when he saw her. When that happened, she’d been really faint . . . fainter than a spirit, and there was a lot of her missing, like just big massive chunks of her were gone, but the parts you could see . . . well, she was scarred and healing from something that’d happened to her recently, but underneath of that, you could see that it was still Beth . . . the way she looked now, but broken.

“What do you mean, mostly?”

The vampire stepped in to keep Dean from digging himself deeper. “Nothing. The point is that there are just some things you don’t share. And Sam knows that. Sam’s always talking about when he lost his brother . . . never talks about when his brother lost him, and that was it.”

It was obvious they weren’t getting it, so Dean said, “We’re not saying it’s something we wouldn’t have gotten over either. It’s just that him doing that said something about what he thought about being brothers, and it was before Ruby, before Beth, before Lilith or the Croat outbreak.”

Rachel hadn’t just done the job she’d been created to do with Sam. She’d done a number on this Dean too. It’s why Beth was always paying for her sins, like her Dean was always waiting for her to leave or admit that she’d never meant any of the things she’d said to him over the years, because buried in there somewhere, her Dean probably thought she really thought the same things about him that Rachel had. And it was probably why her Dean was so fast to think she was hopping from bed to bed. Dean hadn’t seen it in that show they'd watched, but when John asked why Adam wasn’t doing the mission too, the vampire Dean had told them what’d happened to Adam, and if Rachel’s voice was exactly like Beth’s the way it’d been in the Luxor, Dean would say that when Beth’s Dean decided to leave Beth ‘for her own good’ that somewhere deep down, her Dean couldn’t face being around Beth after what’d happened.

He definitely wouldn’t say any of that, because he was sure it’d cause problems with one or both of them, but it’s what he thought, and even if he tried to fix it by saying something like Rachel wasn’t Beth anymore than a Leviathan or shifter is the person they shift into, it wouldn't work. It’d have more of a negative impact on her, and maybe it might give her Dean an excuse to be even more of an idiot than he already was, not that her Dean had gotten most of it wrong. He hadn’t. There were times when he’d made dumb choices, but he always found a way to course correct. That’s all that seemed to matter to her, and it’s not like she hadn’t made dumb choices either.

He was drawn from his thoughts when the vampire said, “Anyway, you can’t hope for the best with him. You have to expect the worst, because there’s nothing there to keep the worst from coming out. My brother and I always knew that we were what kept each other human. Without that . . . well, look at me.”

Beth laughed, and turned towards the hunter’s shack saying, “Come on, roomie. Let’s go talk about how much of a monster you are now.”

As the vampire and Beth walked ahead with Gabriel and Cas not far behind them, Beth’s Dean walked up beside him at the back and said, “You and me need to talk.”

“What don’t you get? We just spelled it out for –“
“I’m not talking about that . . . How many women in these camps have seen me naked?”

Uhh. “Not sure what you do in your spare time, but –“

“I’m not talking about me . . . Spent all day thinking I was going to have a problem with Max that I thought I nipped in the bud years ago . . . until she finds out I’m not you.”

Oh. “What, am I supposed to be a monk?”

“No . . . Yes . . . I don’t know. Just don’t leave a trail of pissed off women we have to see all the time in your wake.”

Uh huh. “Doesn’t sound like she had any complaints if –“

“That’s not the point. I –“

“I was the last guy alive in my universe. Now I’m not . . . At least I held off on it until –“

“Until what? Until the mission was over, so you could sex it up in my sandbox.“

“Until there were other women around.”

“Other women? You were in like three universes full of women . . . oh, I get it. You mean Beth, right? Like she’d –“

“I don’t know. She has a type. I’m it, right?”

“Shut up . . . I’m trying to help you out, and you’re being a dick.”

“Help me out, or help you out?”

“Help both of us out . . . women here . . . it’s like they stake their claim to you, because there aren’t a whole lot of people left. And what if you knocked her up?”

“I used –“

“They don’t work 100% of the time, and I have no idea who is on birth control. Beth is the only one who knows, and she’s not handing that kind of information out to anyone.”

“Are you seriously giving me the ‘wait until marriage’ speech?”

“What? No. Just . . . you’ll see what I mean. The next time you go to Colorado, she’s gonna be expecting more than you thought you were offering until you tell her you weren’t, and if you decide to dodge it and not go back there, then she lives here, so she’ll be coming back when they’re done setting that camp up. How many more am I going to have problems with?”

“Was she really giving you –“

“Not after I told her I wasn’t you . . . but now I know that Beth knows that Max knows what I’m like in the sack.”

“How does Beth know –“

“Cause I asked her what the hell was wrong with Max, and she told me.”

Oh, well if that’s all it was. “Maxine’s the only one, and if it helps, I doubt we’re the same in the
“I don’t want to know about whatever kinks you’ve picked up along the way. I just don’t want women in every camp to be giving me ‘the look’ like they know what I’ve got on sale. It’s gonna mess up my chances with Beth.”

Dean laughed. “Chances? Oh I forgot. You’re taking this whole dating thing seriously.”

“I would if we actually got a chance to go on one . . . supposed to be on one right now.”

Oh, that’s why he was pissed off. “So, what’d you have planned?”

Her Dean glanced at him and said, “Nothing. Doesn’t matter now. Sam’s gonna steal my thunder.”

That made no sense. “We didn’t mean that he and Beth –“

“There is no Sam and Beth unless it’s one of them killing the other. I just . . . she’s climbing the walls doing all this with the camp and only getting let out of her cage to go to other camps . . . was going to take her sledding down one of the mountain tops that still has snow, but –“

“In the dark? You trying to kill her?”

“No. She and her Dad used to do it, and I thought if you mix that in with killing whatever monsters were in the area, it might be enough for her. Now Sam’s got this Croat thing. It’s what she’s gonna want to do, and it’s gonna be better for what she needs.”

“So do it with her.”

“Yeah, but then it’s not a date. It’s the job.”

Dean laughed. “Man, I thought I was crazy, but I’m downright sane compared to you.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t be that sane. You chose to come here.”

Nah, that wasn’t insane. It might’ve been the best decision he ever made. He and Sam were good. They were actually doing something good for a change, which was awesome compared to the last year or so they'd had. What was insane was that he was friends with two guys who were him when most mornings he still couldn’t stand to look at himself in the mirror after all the things he'd done wrong in his own universe.
Sam walked through the door and the easy banter inside the hunter’s shack evaporated. Beth told him to sit next to her. It reminded him of other times she or Dean had done the same thing when they first got to Kansas, but now his brother wasn’t offering. That was fine. If his brother really had been Demon Dean, then there was no way back from that.

Everyone was watching him. Now he felt put on the spot. Beth gave him a nudge with her elbow and said, “What’d you want to talk to my Dad about?”

Right. Gabriel. The archangel wasn’t saying a whole lot. That was kinda odd for him. “That’s because my daughter has kicked me out of the camp, and now I’m reduced to being her taxi driver when you people want her for something."

“What are you talking about? I haven’t kicked you out of the camp. I figured that you went on the mission and before that you volunteered to spend 12 years with us on the training mission, and then before that you were with us all the way back to when I saw you in the warehouse, and that’s when people weren’t banishing you. I thought you might need a break from –“

“Oh, well, if you’re going back that far . . . might as well count the 35 years I spent raising you before that too.”

“I told you to go on vacation while I was out this month and that you had nights off now if you wanted. I’m sorry. I thought you spent thousands of years on vacation, and you might be missing it, but –“

“That’s right. You were wrong. You didn’t even ask me. Instead you put me out to pasture.”

Beth laughed in frustrated disbelief. “I think it’s safe to say that you’re never going to be put out to pasture, Dad . . . You’re stuck with me for –“ One of the Dean’s who wasn’t Sam’s brother kicked Beth’s leg and shook his head, and Beth exhaled a brief sigh before looking at her Dad and saying, “What I’m hearing is that you’re bored and don’t know how to have fun without us now. What about Kali? I bet she’s –“

“Stop trying to pawn me off on –“

“If I were trying to pawn you off on anyone, I’d ask you to go to Heaven and sort out the angels.”

“You think I’m bored now –“

“So you are bored . . . You don’t know what to do with yourself any better than –“

“No, and I won’t until you all get your groove back.”

Sam looked around the room. It didn’t look like anyone knew what to say, how to act, or where to look . . . well, there was a Dean who wasn’t all that concerned about the father/daughter argument, so Sam assumed that was his brother. Clearing his throat, Sam said, “I might be able to help with that.” Sam saw the guy he thought was his brother roll his eyes and slump back in his chair, but carried on anyway. “I think the Croats are being controlled by someone. The ones heading north are . . . I don’t know, scouts maybe, and the rest of them are in a holding pattern . . . probably not far from where they’ve been this whole time.”

There was a notable change in the room as everyone sat forward, and their wheels started turning.
Looking up at Sam, Beth said, “What about the ones in Kansas? They were running after the trucks the last time we drove through there. Scouts would be more discreet, and they definitely weren’t in a holding pattern.”

“If I stand in their way, they just go around me. They don’t attack. Maybe the ones that are heading north are looking for someone or something, so they were trying to get a look in the trucks?”

One of the Deans said, “But you’re immune, right? Could they just be going around you because they don’t think it’s worth their time?”

Sam hadn’t thought of that. “It didn’t seem to matter to them that I was immune in the past. They always tried to attack me. I’ve been bitten a lot.”

The other Dean that wasn’t his brother said, “Okay, so let’s say they are being controlled by someone . . . Is it like that everywhere you saw them or just in one place?”

“Uh, I know the Leviathan cleared out Florida, Georgia, Alabama, the Carolinas, and Tennessee, so I’ve been focusing on Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma . . . parts of Texas.”

Cas said, “And you don’t think it has anything to do with New Orleans?”

Sam shrugged. “I mean that seems a little far for their reach, doesn’t it?”

Beth bit the inside of her cheek in thought before saying, “I don’t know. When Bobby and Rufus got to Louisiana, they said there wasn’t a Croat in sight throughout the entire state. The witches had enough power to do that, and that was 2 or 3 years ago. Who knows what they’ve been working on in the meantime. Could be a demon, or it could be demons and the witches. I don’t see it being anything other than one of those two things.”

Sam’s brother finally said, “Maybe they’re starting to split apart now that they can. I doubt you could get a city full of witches all trying to be top witch to get along in one place forever . . . Any idea if there’s more than one group? Maybe they’re sending the scouts to clear the way and find somewhere new for them to go?”

Maybe. Sam hadn’t thought of that either. “I still get the feeling they’re looking for something or someone.”

“So, you think they’re being controlled by one person?”

“I don’t know. I also don’t know why Michael thought the mini-ice age would make them migrate. I was kind of hoping Cas might know, since he was with Michael when they started migrating.”

Everyone looked at Cas. “If Michael was responsible, he didn’t inform me of his plans. He was primarily silent and angry in those days.”

Looking over at Gabriel, Sam said, “Could he even do something like that?”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Took you all this time to ask me that? Yeah, Michael could do it. Why do you think two archangels fighting could destroy half the planet?”

“And we’re sure it wasn’t . . . “

Sam looked down at Beth, and when she noticed the pause, she looked confused. “Why the hell would it be me?”
“I don’t know. Maybe you were like . . . ‘I miss the snow . . . God, I wish it would snow for years,’ and –“

Beth laughed. Good. That’s what he’d been going for there. “It wasn’t me. I had no way of knowing something like that would work.”

“And Chuck couldn’t have –“

“Chuck wound us all up and let us go. The paths we all took were our own.”

Okay, so it was looking like Michael was still their prime suspect. “So, how’d he know that freezing them out would work?”

Sam’s brother shrugged and said, “Freezing something usually slows it down. Maybe he had no idea they’d know to start migrating until they did? Guessing we could use something like CO2 fire extinguishers or liquid nitrogen to protect the camps.”

One of the Deans snorted before responding. “Okay, professor. Where are you gonna find enough of either of those things now or enough for millions of Croats?”

“We’ll go out and look for fire extinguishers, and we can make our own liquid nitrogen.” When the two Deans who weren’t Sam’s brother looked at Beth, she added with a smile, “And you two can be in charge of building what we need to make it.”

“We don’t know how –“

“I’ve got some books around here for the kids in my physics class. You’ll figure it out. Have plenty of time to do it, while Dean and I go check out the Croats. I want to see what they’re doing and how far the radius extends beyond New Orleans. If it stops after a while, then it’s probably the witches. If it doesn’t, it’s something powerful enough to control all of them or something powerful enough to control a lot of demons that can all control a lot of Croats each.”

Sam’s brother said, “So an angel or maybe the new person in charge of Hell . . . how would that many demons get out with the Gates closed?”

“I’m thinking it’s more likely that it’s something that was already out though . . . maybe the remnants of the army from the abyss. If they’re in contact with the leader in Hell . . . maybe they are looking for something, like one of the doors or something else to open the gates again.”

“Well, then they’re in for a surprise.” Everyone looked at Gabriel, and Gabriel said, “Those gates are staying closed as long as the person who closed them is alive.”

Beth relaxed, while she thought through that one before she flicked a look in Sam’s brother’s direction, and Sam said, “Did Gabriel close them, or –“

His brother quickly replied, “Yeah, he did . . . Beth was there for the training.”

“I thought she closed the last one.”

“One, Sam . . . Had to let her try it some time.”

Well, that was good. Gabriel was now the most powerful thing in the universe next to God and Amara, not that Amara was a problem here. Sitting forward, Sam said, “Well, while we’re figuring this out, I was thinking we could maybe use whatever sigils Gabriel used to make Kansas invisible on all the camps to keep them hidden.”
Looking at her Dad, Beth said, “Would you mind? Then maybe you could stay here and help Cas take care of Rogue?”

Crossing his arms and looking at Cas, Gabriel said, “Why doesn’t he just go with you? That’s what he wants. Take the other two with you too. I can handle the camp.”

“What about the –“

Gabriel waved his hand and said, “You mean the liquid nitrogen generators that are already in the back of the truck outside? Take them with you when you go back to Colorado.”

“How many?”

“6”

“Two small ones for each of the trucks, and four larger ones for the four camps?”

“You got it.”

This was good. Sam felt like there was a plan in place, a loose plan until they figured out who was controlling the Croats, but a plan, which is more than they’d had before this. He still wasn’t going with them, but maybe he’d stop by Kansas a little more to charge his satellite phone, so he could keep in touch more and let them know if he saw any changes, and while he was there, he might as well help the Sam down there with setting up the school the way he’d said he would.
Gabriel had just left to go put wards on the camps, and Dean hadn’t necessarily thought the meeting was quite over, but Sam got up and said he was going to get back out there, so Dean followed him out the door. “Wait, so you come here, give us this intel, and now you’re just gonna head back out again?” Sam shrugged in response, and Dean followed it up with, “Not that I’m not grateful you brought this to our attention, Sam, but what the hell made it an emergency that couldn’t wait until tomorrow morning?”

“No time like the present, right? I don’t know. I just . . . It’s something that’s been bothering me for weeks now. I tested them walking around me yesterday and today in a couple of the states I mentioned along with the ones heading north. They do it day or night. And I didn’t say it was something you had to come back for tonight. Jody asked if it was an emergency because you just got to the Colorado camp today, and it wasn’t a real emergency, like one this second, but it’s not one that could’ve waited until you guys got back.”

Sam turned to start walking again, and following him, Dean said, “Hold up, Rain Man . . . Where are you going now?”

“I’m going to the house to get another satellite phone that’s charged, so I can keep you updated with any changes I find while you’re all finishing your rounds of the camps.”

“How’d you know we’re going to –“

“You’re going to drop off the liquid nitrogen generators, right?”

Dean stopped and ducked his head before mutterings, “Yeah, right . . . What are you doing, Sam?”

Stopping to turn back and look at him, Sam said, “I just told you.”

“Yeah, I get that. What I’m having a hard time understanding is what the hell you’re doing when you leave here? You what? Go down south and play with Croats all day?”

“No. At first I thought maybe I could find a cure. That’s why I was interested in the cold thing. I thought maybe . . . anyway, I know they’re too far gone for that. They’re falling apart, and now I’m just trying to clear as many as I can.”

Right. “Could always try to save their souls instead of worrying about their bodies.”

“I’m not a scientist.”

“So, you want Beth to –“

“There’s no time for that. It’d take years . . . longer than we have now that they’re coming back.”

“You can’t cure a virus. Our immune systems have to learn how to fight them off, and a lot of viruses we get never really go away. They just lay dormant until our immune system weakens, and then they emerge again . . . Exorcising Croats doesn’t work. Holy water has no effect . . . at least not externally. I have no idea what injecting it into them would do. Probably be excruciating . . . maybe it might lessen the pain if you filtered their blood through manganese dioxide to remove the sulphur . . . It’s attached to the virus, right? I mean, that’s what you saw the first time you came across the virus. I don’t think the sulphur is the problem. It’s just a by-product the virus leaves behind the same way demons leave traces of sulphur behind wherever they go, but if it’s attached
to the virus, it might help scrub the virus from the blood.”

Sam and Dean both looked behind them at Beth, and she shrugged. “What? I’ve had a lot of time to think about it. That’s the best I can come up with . . . saline holy water flushing through the system, while simultaneously filtering the virus out until the soul has enough time to fight back . . . like our immune systems have to do with normal infections . . . each Croat would take days . . . maybe even weeks . . . if it even works, if their bodies weren’t already shot by this point, the treatment would probably kill them anyway . . . But if you’re talking about just saving souls, you wouldn’t have to worry about it. If saline holy water doesn’t work, maybe purified blood would, the way it does on normal demons, but you’d never find enough to be able to do that now. And being around that many contaminated body fluids, you’re talking about a high risk of exposure for anyone involved, especially, since Croats don’t exactly sit around and behave themselves.”

“So, you’re saying, I’m the only one who could do it safely?”

Dean looked behind him at Sam, and Beth said, “You are immune. I’d expect a lot of failed attempts . . . unless you can find Croatoan himself and get him to tell you how to make the virus disappear.”

“He’s dead. He died at the Devil’s trap in Wyoming, but from what I understand, after a week or two, the virus is imbedded enough that it won’t just disappear the way it did the first time we saw it. I’ll give it a try and see what happens. I’ll keep you updated?”

Beth nodded, and Sam turned to head back into the house. As soon as he was far enough away, Dean asked, “You think that’ll work?”

“I don’t know. Doubtful, but if anyone can do it, then it has to be him.”

“’Cause he’s the one who broke it?”

“No, because of what I said . . . as far as I know, he’s the only person on the planet immune to the virus. Anyone else has a lot higher risk of being infected.”

Turning to look at her, Dean said, “Something like that wouldn’t stop you if you really thought you could cure them.”

“Well, I know my Dad can’t cure them and Chuck either won’t or can’t . . . I’m going with won’t . . . It’s just one of those things that He wants us to fix ourselves, I guess, because I’ve asked, especially around the time when the snow first started melting, and yet the Croats are still out there and active, so I guess if he expects us to fix it, then there must be a cure . . . not that any of the Croats would survive it, but like you said, their souls might, or the cure might just destroy their souls too. To us, that or being sent to Heaven might seem like a better option than being twisted into the demonic things they are now, because we see it through the lens of not being infected . . . That lens is one of fear, because what we see is what will happen to us if we or people we care about are infected, but I guess a demon doesn’t care what it is, and Croats probably don’t either, which means they’re fine with being what they are, so if it comes down to trying to cure one and me or anyone else who works on it being bitten and turned, or being contaminated by the blood, then I’d rather just put a bullet in their heads and focus on the living. It sounds cold and calloused, but the last thing we need is another outbreak in the camps or for any of the hunters to be infected when the hunters are the only ones who can leave the camps to fight back against everything else that’s out there. If it can be done, then Sam’s the only one who can do it.”

“And you’re okay with that . . . leaving them the way they are if there’s a cure that Sam can’t find on his own?”
“I am because I have to be. Triaging a battlefield isn’t easy, but it’s the only way to save the most lives. I mean that’s what Michael had to do . . . with the snow. If he extended the Antarctic Circle north the way he extended the Arctic Circle south, then that’s half the planet covered in snow. Everyone not in those regions is probably a Croat or dead. Everyone stuck in the snow either froze, starved, were found by people who traded them for their own gain, or they were found by people like us . . . Him triaging the situation the way he did is the only way any of us are still alive . . . well, outside of the 40 or so who made it to the cabin in Wisconsin after we got there or that you brought back with you after that first supply run. The snow bought us time to find everyone else, and we ran out of time to find more . . . if there are more, but I guess if whoever is controlling the Croats isn’t letting them kill or infect people, then maybe they’re unintentionally buying us a little more time to find more . . . until they unleash that army when they find what they want.”

When did she go all doom and gloom? If she was really feeling down, then she didn’t talk a whole lot and kind of retreated into herself. Usually, when she talked a lot like this, she was uplifting, whether it was to sell people on a camp or him on himself. And the way she delivered it was just kind of matter of fact . . . no positive spin, but no ‘the world is coming to an end’ either, which made it a little more depressing. Had the mask come off, and this is the way she really saw things, or was this something new that’d happened during the mission, and he hadn’t really noticed, because he hadn’t been around her as much?

Maybe it was his turn to put a positive spin on things? “We finally got Wisconsin cleared though.”

She smiled briefly and said, “Yeah, we did.”

“And we found 7 more people –“

He almost laughed when she said, “So, a net addition of 2 after I accidentally banished 5 to Ohio in Iowa.”

“I think it’s safe to say Chuck didn’t want them there. He ignores you when he wants to get a point across . . . banishing them got a different point across.” She reluctantly nodded, so he said, “And the 7 people we found . . . When was the last time we could take anyone to Wisconsin? There are still people out there and if we have a limited amount of time to find them, we should get on that instead of going from camp to camp to see people we’ve already saved, right? There’ll be time to do that later.”

“So, you want to do that instead of finding who is controlling the Croats?”

Maybe. When she put it the way she had about it buying them time to find more survivors, it made it seem like that was the right choice. “Yeah, I mean, we still need to get those generators to the camps and find something they can use to store the liquid nitrogen. All the camps in Wisconsin will have to share it, so we’ll help them figure that out. Maybe before we get there, we can load up on fire extinguishers, and then after we leave, we can skip grabbing supplies and just look for people . . . give it a couple of months and then see what’s controlling the Croats?”

“What about the kids here?”

Getting out of having to be here and the other camps is exactly what she needed right now. She just wanted him to tell her that it was okay. “Beth, we’re hunters. This is what we do . . . The kids here know that.”

“What about Rogue?”

“We’ll stop by if we’re in the area and when we’re not, we’ll have your Dad drop her off with us
when it’s safe.”

“Okay . . . But we should see her before we go. Might be the shortest amount of time we’ve been gone when we told her we were going to work.”

Yeah, Rogue gave him more problems yesterday when he went to leave than she ever had. He couldn’t put her through that again. When he said he’d be back, he had to make it back. He remembered when Beth had told her he wouldn’t be coming back. He’d been a demon at the time, and he’d mostly wanted to know how long it would take, because he wanted to talk to Beth . . . hadn’t really cared about Rogue, and he hated that he’d been like that . . . had felt like that. She didn’t know that’d been him or that he’d felt that way, but he knew, and he didn’t know how to make that right other than to do what he’d been doing and spend as much time with her as he could when he was here.
After we explained to Jody what was happening, she said she’d handle telling the kids that we wouldn’t be back for a little while. Gabriel was staying, and the camp was invisible now, so she wasn’t too worried about the Croats. I think she was planning to take some people out to look for CO2 fire extinguishers just in case, but our camp, like the other camps was in a good place as far as being protected went. Gabriel staying there would make this the safest camp though, so all in all, she was good. The kids were good. Rogue was good. The unknown people out there in the wild were the concern.

The other hunters, with the exception of Carrie, Meg and Abbey, were finally finished closing down the other monster trading posts. They’d found maybe 50 or 60 more survivors to add to our Colorado camp numbers. She’d fill them in on the Croat situation, and then they were going to be re-directed to look for survivors before the tsunami of Croats was unleashed. Right now, beating that was more important than finding out who was controlling the tsunami. We’d figure out who was doing that too, but this might be the last chance we had to find people alive. I think maybe we might need to set up a new camp. There were almost 2600 in Colorado, almost 1000 in our camp, almost 1000 in Iowa, close to 2000, including kids in Kansas, and the others were all spread out across 8 camps in Wisconsin, which meant each of them had roughly 500, some had more if they were more popular and others had less, but that’s roughly the way things had been spread out. We had to leave room for growth.

Where should the newest camp be put? Right now we had a circle of camps in the middle of the country: South Dakota, Colorado, Kansas, Iowa, and Wisconsin . . . Maybe it should go in Nebraska or Minnesota, so it’d be close to the other camps and further strengthen our hold on the middle of the continent? Maybe we should clear all the square miles in the middle of our circle first. If there were more people, they might be there, because it wasn’t close to Georgia, Washington/Oregon, or Vermont/New Hampshire where the greatest concentrations of monsters had been.

Other places that might have people would be cities. The populations of those prior to the outbreak had been much higher, so the odds were better of finding people there, and people tend to stick with what they know or want to be a part of something, so if they’d known those cities or found others congregating in them, they might be there. Of course they could’ve turned into the kinds of people that’d been in Madison, and there were a lot more places to hide in cities, for both survivors and monsters, so while cities may yield more results, they might also be the riskiest places to look for people.

Maybe Minnesota would be the better fit? It’d be hooked up to electricity a lot faster. The electricity crew were already in the southern part of Wisconsin. It was taking them a while, because not only did they have to choose hydroelectric or wind farm power stations to get back up and running to keep us from constantly having to refuel them, but they had to fix all the electrical lines in between. They’d be heading west after they got to Sayner, so they could try to get the electricity to us in Sioux Falls. Minneapolis or St. Cloud might be the best place to put a new camp, but I’d found that putting people somewhere they didn’t have to work, like in Iowa and Kansas, led to problems. Whether people wanted to do it or not, working was something people needed. I guess that whole ‘idle hands’ proverb might have some validity.

If we put the camp somewhere that already had houses, they needed to build a wall, so they had to work to make it their new home. If we put them somewhere that didn’t have houses, they could build the houses and do what we’d done in South Dakota and ward themselves for protection and
invisibility without needing a wall. Colorado’s wall was up, and now they could get started on the new jobs they had. I think maybe we needed to get them some of the supplies we said we’d get them before we went back. We were stopping to get as many fire extinguishers between Sioux Falls and Denver as we could, but when we got closer to Denver, we could stop off at some of the biotech companies dotted around the area . . . well, I could . . . what to do about the new camp though?

Where in Minnesota should it be? I pulled out one of my maps and tried to keep it from flying out of my hands in the back of the truck. I was supposed to be keeping watch, but we were driving too fast for anything to be a problem. In the meantime, I was coming up with plans on what to do next and making sure the tarp that was covering both the liquid nitrogen generators and blocking vampire Dean from the sunlight didn't blow away. The tarp was tied down, so I didn’t really have a whole lot to do.

I think maybe Bald Eagle Island in the middle of Bald Eagle Lake might work. It was right outside Minneapolis. The lake would provide some protection, hopefully. At least most monsters and Croats would have to work to get to the island and wouldn’t necessarily think to look there. It was in the right direction. It shouldn’t take the electricity crew too far out of their way if they were working towards Sioux Falls. The only problem was I didn’t know if the electricity crew would have a problem getting to that camp, because it’d be in the middle of a lake, but then that wasn’t my job. It was theirs, and they’d probably figure something out.

We’d have to clear Minneapolis of monsters again. Anyone we found there that'd moved in since the last time we searched that city could go to the new camp. It’d be another major city down and anyone else we found in the part of Minnesota we hadn’t checked could go there too. I didn’t think we’d find a whole lot of people, so the island should be the right size to accommodate the number I was expecting. And if we had the other hunters start searching other parts of the circle between camps, then any survivors they found could go there too. Once that vast area had been searched, we could spread out and look for survivors outside the circle of the camps.

What would the Minnesota camp do? I had no idea. Some kind of food production, not fish. We were good on fish. I didn’t want any of the camps competing and potentially putting the others out of business or going to war over it. In time, when we went back to a monetary system, it would help drive prices down not to have monopolies, but right now, everyone was just trying to survive. Maybe if the other camps growing food were focusing on grains and vegetables, the Minnesota one could concentrate on fruit? They could grow it on the outskirts of the lake and come back to their homes on the island at night? They could maybe set up greenhouses too. They could start seedlings for apples, pears, apricots, cherries, strawberries or whatever else over the winter now that it was autumn again and then plant those things in fields in the spring? They could maybe use the greenhouses to grow more difficult things like blueberries too. They could can their products the way the Iowa camp was planning to do too.

If my expectations were wrong and we found enough people to fill that camp and start another one, I think that one would go in Nebraska, and then that one could maybe be in charge of infrastructure. The roads were abysmal after the extended winter. Since that camp would be central to all the camps, it would work on repairing roads and maybe get some kind of a railway network set up, so real trade routes could be built up between the camps, and the hunters wouldn’t have to be responsible for taking things from one camp to another . . . of course to do any of that, we’d have to clear the middle of the ring of camps of any and all monsters and then maybe put up wards to keep anything new from showing up. That way people could work on the roads and travel between camps with fewer worries. I wondered if they would. I supposed given enough time, it was a given.
Of course some of my plans would take a really long time to ever happen, like a monetary system, the railroads between camps and free travel, but then I guess I had a long time to oversee them. I had no idea what I would do when my job was done. It was starting in North America, and I’d be here until the bitter end with Rogue and her father, I guess. Then I’d eventually end up in South America to see what people down there were doing, if any of them were still alive. I’m sure they had to be. Then I guess, I’d end up on other continents. Once a network between all the camps on the face of the planet had been created what was I going to do? Hunt? What if we succeeded in making this a monster-free universe? Then what? What happened when I’d been alive long enough to read every book ever written? What happened when I saw every side of humanity enough that I got to a point where nothing surprised me? What happened when I became jaded and no longer had something to help me keep putting one foot in front of the other? What –

“Got me, right?”

I looked towards the tarp. “Thought you were supposed to be catching some sleep.”

“Yeah, well you might be right about someone needing to fix these roads. They suck . . . And there’s a lot more out there than just monsters.”

That was true. “Can’t just kill off the angels for something to do.”

“There’s Hell. We could wipe that out.”

“It serves a purpose, and if I were going to wipe out all the demons, I wouldn’t bring you.”

“Why not?”

“Because, you can die.”

“Don’t think you’ll be going too far if your head gets cut off even if you can’t die.”

“Probably be like the headless horseman.”

“Okay, but how would your body find your head?”

I smiled at the weird conversation. “Probably be able to sense it if they’re close enough . . . just pick it up and put it back on.”

“You’ll be in Hell . . . alone. Bet the demons would punt your head as far from you as possible.” I laughed briefly, and he said, “And even if they didn’t . . . You’d need someone to sew it back on until you got back out, so your Dad could fix it.”

“Forever is a long time. What happens when we're done –“

“There’s lots of gods out there we could hunt.”

“Hunt or play poker with the way my Dad does?”

“We’ll kill ‘em if they kill people . . . play poker with the ones that don’t.”

“And when we’re done with them?”

“We’ll find something else. There’s always something else . . . And if my head gets cut off, you don’t have to go the dark magic way to bring me back. Could always come track me down, help me clear out Purgatory, and bring me back.”
“Like with Benny?”

“Yeah.”

“How would I get there? Chuck sent our head Leviathan there already.”

“If you’ve got forever, you’ll figure it out . . . find the right spell or a way in through that portal.”

“Would you even want to come back?”

There was a hesitation as he thought about how to respond. “It's like I died when I signed up for the mission . . . Maybe I didn’t really die, but I might as well have. I’m as good as dead in my universe. I left everything I knew behind . . . everything is as permanent as death. Doesn’t matter if I live or die after that . . . this is all . . . an afterlife.”

“Doesn’t have to permanent.”

“I’m not going back.”

“Because you got turned, or –“

“You guys don’t get do-overs or to re-write what happened.”

“You could.”

“Why would I want that?”

“Because of Sam?”

“And when he dies?”

That was a fair point. “So, it is because you got turned . . . in a way?”

“No. I made my choice, and I’m sticking with it. What’s dead should stay dead, and since I’m already dead, it doesn’t count if you bring me back from Purgatory.”

I guess he really did think of it like he was dead. Was it weird that I thought that seemed like the healthiest way to look at it? Just wish he could’ve gotten a better afterlife than the one he’d had so far.

“It’s not so bad. Party all night. Sleep all day.” I smiled, and then heard him say, “Hey, you’ve got your Dad too.”

“Yeah . . . how long until our 14 billion year difference doesn’t matter?”

“Nah, the sun will burn out before that happens.”

He was right. I hadn’t even thought of that. There was only like 1 or 1 ½ billion more years that the Earth would be habitable . . . give or take a few hundred million years. “Think we’ll have to worry about starting camps on other planets the way we are states now?”

It sounded like he was smiling when he said, “You gonna start planning for it now?”

“Do you think I should?”

He laughed. “Think you have enough to keep you busy for now, but maybe it’s something to keep
you putting one foot in front of the other on down the road.”

“You think there’ll be evil aliens we’ll have to hunt?”

There was a pause while he thought about it. “Probably. Told you there’d always be something else . . . have to start all over again on lore. Might be all right.” I think that might have been when he went from saying everything he’d said to try and keep me from dwelling on the negatives to maybe believing what he’d said.
The Good and Bad of a New Reality

Chapter Notes

This is from the vampire Dean POV.

Should’ve just stayed home. That’d been one of the worst drives Dean had ever been on . . . maybe ever. He didn’t have to stay under the tarp. He could sit in the cab and kick one of the other Deans or Cas out, but the light would give him a headache and make him hungry, so it was either that or sit in the back and get pissed off at being under a tarp and not being able to sleep with all the bumps in the road. They’d stopped so many times that it'd taken them a few days to get here. Getting out to help find fire extinguishers in all the fire stations they went to along the way meant he got a headache during the day anyway, and when they got so many fire extinguishers there wasn’t room for him to go back under the tarp, he had to sit directly in the sun.

Now, he just wanted to go somewhere private where he could decompress and drink one of the bags of blood Beth had given him. He refused to drink it anywhere near the others, so he hadn't had any in days. Unfortunately, he needed it to get rid of the headache and whatever sunburns he’d picked up, but apparently, he wasn’t being allowed into the Colorado camp. Beth’s Dean got a hug from Yuri. Cas was fine to go in. The other Dean got a pretty good fucking reception from that blonde chick, which was maybe a little funny considering the other Dean didn’t look like he knew how to react to it, and Ivan was standing there saying that Jody had told them one of the Deans was a vamp and that the people here didn’t feel comfortable letting him into the camp even though Ivan and Yuri and tried to reason with them.

“That’s okay, Ivan. I was just going to come in to get my truck and then head back out, so I could try to find the things on Dr. Whelan’s list, and the list you said you’d –“ Ivan held out a piece of paper for her, and she smiled, while she read through it. “Yeah, I’ll get this stuff too, and I figured I’d need help, so I was going to bring him with me anyway . . . no worries.”

Ivan rolled his eyes and said something in Russian, and Beth muttered back in Russian as she walked past him through the gates. When she got back about 5 minutes later, she pulled up next to Dean and waited for him to climb in. He was a little surprised nobody else was coming with them. “So, it’s just us?”

“Yeah, they need food and sleep.”

“And you don’t? You don’t have to babysit –“

“You sound like Ivan. I was going to do this anyway.”

“So, you were going to –“

“Yep. I’m having one on of my non-social days. Need to get it out of my system before I spend all day tomorrow sitting in a room for office hours.”

Her clinic? Why was she the only one doing that anyway? “Out of 10,000 people, you couldn’t find one doctor?”
“We did. She died. Other than that . . . I don’t know. Maybe we just haven’t found them yet or they’re possessed out there somewhere the way she was when I met her or they’re dead.”

“And the woman who’s running the show here . . . she couldn’t do it?”

“She’s more into microbiology.”

“And that’s . . . “

“Uh, bacteria and yeast . . . things like that.”

“What’d you study?”

“Biomedical Science.”

Medical? “So, you learned everything you’d need to know – “

“No. It’s complicated.”

“What, you think I won’t – “

“Did I say you wouldn’t understand it? I just didn’t feel like talking about it. The science side of things, I understand, like the biochemistry and anatomy and physiology and things like that, but using it to treat people . . . not so much. Research like mine is what is eventually used to develop drugs or understand how the body functions or how certain diseases happen . . . I understand things on a cellular, sub-cellular, and genetic level, and I know first aid, but diagnosing people and knowing what to give them . . . I could understand the drugs and what’s needed if I read up on them, but they’re not something I would know about without researching them first. If anyone came to me presenting symptoms, and I didn’t know what was causing them, I’d have to research that too without knowing immediately what it might be, not that doctors don’t have to do that, but someone who has been to medical school might have a better idea of what it is without having to do a lot of the research I’d have to do . . . and with things like suturing techniques or whatever, it used to be something that I could do to maybe a field medic level, but Dr. Thomas taught me better ways of doing it . . . She might’ve also given me medical text books to read through in my down time, so I did, and I guess some of it must’ve stuck, because when the do-over life, the mission before the big mission, I kept the same techniques, the same way I kept my techniques for shooting a gun . . . anyway, I don’t know . . . It’s not an approved medical school program or anything, but until we can find someone who is the real deal, I guess, I’m all we’ve got.” She tossed him a bag of blood, and he looked at it. “They’re not the only one’s who need to eat. You’re getting cranky.”

“I’m not getting cranky. You’re getting cranky.” He stared at the bag, and now that he had it, he wanted it, but . . . no. “I’ll have it later. I’m not – “

“I don’t mind. It’s like a slightly thicker Capri-Sun . . . or like a blood orange Capri-Sun.”

Kind of was ‘cause he used the part where the IV tube went, like a straw. “Nah, I’ll wait until – “

“You’re making this weird.”

“No, you’re making this weird.”

“Is there something wrong with it?”

“What?”
Beth looked at the bag and shrugged. “Maybe it tastes weird. Maybe it’s watery or something because I have to keep getting topped up by my Dad.”

“Are you seriously asking if . . . You know what? It’s fine.” His eyes narrowed, and he pulled the cap on the bag and then thought about it before putting it back on. “Can’t . . . feels wrong. Makes it real.”

“If there are witnesses?” Yeah, he guessed. Right now everyone pretty much treated him the same. They might jokingly give him a hard time about it, but nobody really looked at him any different. If he started chugging pints of blood in front of them, they would. “Okay . . . then take a nap.”

He exhaled a brief laugh before looking out the passenger-side window. He wasn’t in a great mood, but he didn’t need a nap. If she’d really planned on doing this supply run as soon as they got to the camp, then she’d planned on doing it alone, and he was crashing her party. “How long do you think it’d take to get back to the South Dakota camp?”

“You thinking of going back?” He shrugged, like it was the obvious choice, and she said, “I’m guessing you mean by foot, because I know you know how long it is in a truck without all the stops . . . even for a vampire, it’d be months on foot. I wouldn’t recommend it.”

“Think I’ll fall off the wagon?”

“You’re not really on the wagon. You drink human blood every couple of days.”

She had a point. “All right, then do you think I’ll go full-monster.”

“Maybe. Depends on if you find any cows or whatever between here and South Dakota.”

“Lots of deer.”

“True, but could you kill Bambi or his mother?”

He hadn’t thought of that. Was it worse that she thought he’d have an easier time killing people than deer or that maybe she was right? He never could pull the trigger on animals. Skinwalkers were probably the monsters that looked the most like animals when they changed, but he never hesitated with them . . . a dog was a different story for some reason. Same went for the deer Bobby used to try and get him to hunt when Dean was a kid. “You’re just saying that because you think you need me to help you find anyone if they’re out there.”

“Maybe. Or maybe I think you need us, and we need you.”

He guessed being what he was would make it easier for him to find people, but it was only because he was designed to be something that hunted people down now. Killing monsters at night around the camp helped with getting it out of his system. Before the talk they’d had the other day, he might’ve thought if he lived long enough, his job as a hunter would become obsolete, and he hadn’t known what he’d do when that happened for completely different reasons than she had, but this other planets thing might do the trick . . . if he lived that long. He’d given her permission to bring him back, so he guessed he would.

Thinking about dying and whether or not he’d be able to clear out Purgatory if he did die, he wondered what actually happened to monsters that died there. Not even Cas knew the answer to that one. Maybe after he thought he’d killed them all, he’d find out that they’d all just been reborn somewhere else in Purgatory. Or maybe they really did disappear. He wondered if he’d run into the Benny in this universe. If Beth came to get him, could he bring Benny back too? Maybe not for a while, or at least not until more people were donating blood. It’s not that people didn’t donate. He
knew there were stocks of it in South Dakota and maybe there were some in the other camps too, but there wasn’t a lot . . . just enough to buy someone time if they were bleeding out, so that more people with that blood type could donate. Until there was a way to have blood drives and store it the way people used to do it, he probably shouldn’t bring Benny back. Beth feeding one vamp was already too much, or Dean thought it was. Bringing his friends into it didn’t seem right.

Somehow, after thinking all of that and in the middle of wondering something else, he fell asleep. The next thing he knew, he was waking up in the truck alone, and he had no idea how she pulled that one off, because he slept even lighter as a vamp than he had as a human, or he thought he did. Maybe not. Getting out of the truck, he checked the back, and it was half full of boxes. Why hadn’t he woken up? Was he a weirdo vampire that slept better at night than he did during the day? Maybe his body just hadn’t gotten used to sleeping during the day yet. Nah, that was dumb. His body had adjusted to a totally liquid diet of blood in no time. He craved it all the time, or maybe that’s just the way it felt, because he hadn’t eaten anything in almost a week.

Walking back to the cab, he pulled the door open, grabbed the bag Beth had given him earlier, and tore the cap off before drinking down the contents as fast as he could. He wanted to finish it before Beth came back and caught him. It was still disgusting and still wrong on so many levels. It wasn’t the taste, consistency, or even smell of what he was drinking that was disgusting . . . It was the fact that none of those things were gross to him anymore that was, and so was the fact that drinking it seemed to have done the trick, because he already felt a lot better.

He hated it, hated himself for what he was. There was almost nothing about being a vampire he didn’t hate. He hated that he wanted blood, needed it; could kill to get it if he didn’t have it. He hated that the sun burnt him and gave him headaches. He hated being able to hear heartbeats and the rustling of leaves half a mile away. He hated being able to differentiate people by their smell before he even saw them . . . Just about the only thing he didn’t hate was being able to see in the dark and maybe being faster and stronger. Those things were useful, but the rest of it . . . if he could give it back, he would, but that wasn’t in the cards.

This was the universe of no do-overs. That’s why there were so many Croats, so many monsters, so few people, and everyone here had to live with what the ‘evil’ Sam had done. It’s why Beth couldn’t die, and he was a vamp . . . You got one chance here. It’s something he’d only ever thought he had in his other life too, but he’d been wrong. The number of times he’d been brought back, or Sam had been brought back, or they’d been able to find a way to fix the bad shit that’d happened to make it like it never happened or had a minimal impact on people . . . Those things might’ve been something he took for granted in his old life, not that people who died here necessarily stayed dead. Beth and the Dean from here had both died and been brought back, but it’d been part of a cosmic joke. ‘Are you mad because I played a perfect hand and won?’ That’s what Chuck had asked Beth when she came back and was pissed off that Chuck wouldn’t take back what Amara had done to her. To Dean, that meant that everything that’d happened here had been done to push these people in the direction Chuck had wanted them to go, and now Dean was a part of that and had been since he joined up with them on that mission, not that he regretted it.

He’d meant what he’d said to Beth the other day about how this was essentially his afterlife. He was dead to his Sam and Cas, and they were dead to him, and he’d had to learn to accept that . . . mostly because he’d had a little girl to take care of and an archangel to keep in line when all the archangel had wanted to do on their mission was find his daughter. This was his life now, and it’s not like he was completely removed from Sam, because there were two in this universe, one good and one bad, who really seemed to be trying to be good for his own sake. That was something. So was the human Cas.

It’s just that Dean never thought this was how it’d turn out . . . with him being a fucking vampire . .
One who could smell blood in the air, like a shark can smell a drop of blood in the ocean . . . one who could smell it coming from the building they were parked outside . . . wasn’t Beth’s. He knew what her blood smelled like. It’s the only blood he’d ever had . . . well, that wasn’t necessarily true. Beth’d had him try some deer blood back at the camp, and it’d been gross . . . kind of like the difference between a double bacon cheeseburger and a salad used to be for him. Didn’t mean he wanted to drink it in front of her, but he’d stick with what she was offering if she was okay with it. This smelled more like the deer blood had, and he still found himself walking towards the building to investigate. Maybe Beth was in trouble, or maybe she was fine, but either way, he had no idea how long she’d been in there or why there was the smell of blood in the air. Maybe it was some science-y thing she’d found, or maybe it wasn’t.

Walking through the doors at the front of the lab, the smell got stronger and mingled with other smells . . . a lot of them were chemical based. He could smell Beth now too and there was something else there that he didn’t know . . . listening, he could hear heartbeats down a hall to the left and then right. Standing outside the door, he heard someone talking, but not Beth . . . no wait, there she was, but she sounded like she knew whoever this other person was by the way she was talking to him. How should he go in? The smell of blood was definitely coming from that room, and it definitely wasn’t human. Maybe just walk in and see what was going on? Maybe some people from the camp changed their minds and decided to help?

Opening the door . . . nope. Not human . . . must be what a djinn smelled like. It was helping Beth carry the body of another djinn towards one of the rooms at the back. "Move on . . . if you're looking for food go somewhere else."

Right. He guessed that he and the djinn were on the same kind of diet. There was a weird smell to his left, and Dean kept his eyes on the djinn, while he circled towards it . . . awesome. That whole shedding their skin thing was still disgusting. He was going to guess that Beth was a shifter. So, the shifter and djinn were working together? That’s not something Dean ever thought he’d see.

“He’s not here for that. He’s –“

Dean didn’t have time to load a magazine with silver bullets, but he did have time to pull his silver bladed knife and throw it into the back of the shifter, who’s hands were still full, before she could say Dean was working with Beth. Maybe there were more than just these two monsters around here. Might as well use this vamp thing to his advantage until he figured this out. As the shifter’s body fell and the djinn’s body followed it back onto the ground, Dean played it cool and shrugged. "Think a new position just opened up on your team."

“It’s not like she would’ve eaten us out of house and home the way you will. I’m not fighting with you over resources."

“Plenty to go around though, right?”

“What would you know about it?”

“Well, he’s dead, and now she’s dead. Guessing you were planning on having her use the human’s memory to get into that camp on the other side of the city. Have to wait for another one to leave before –“

“Don’t have to wait.”

“Right, because you . . . “

“We have another one with her abilities . . . all right. Get Kahn’s feet. Could maybe use someone
with your skills after what we’ve seen the people in that camp do.” Dean stepped over the shifter’s body and retrieved the knife before wiping the blood on his jeans. It was weird. It didn’t just look like Beth, smell like Beth, or have her memories. Even its blood smelled like Beth’s blood . . . mostly. Maybe like a really good knock off. Taking a few steps back Dean looked behind one of the lab benches and saw a pool of blood on the floor. That’s what’d brought him in here to investigate. “Don’t tell me you’re going to get side-tracked by the cheap stuff. I know times are tough, but – “

“What is it?”

“You don’t know lamb’s blood?”

Guess he did now. Wasn’t like he had to worry about it killing him the way a djinn did. Did Beth just carry the stuff with her everywhere she went? No. She would’ve had it in her weapons bag. Where was that? “Lamb’s blood, so you’re thinking that the woman from the camp is a –“

“Hunter. No doubt about it. I’ve known Khan for centuries and look at the mess she made of him . . . There was no need for her to take his hands that way.”

Dean looked at the body on the floor and said, “Was he trying to touch her?” before crouching down to dip his silver blade into the lamb’s blood on the floor.

“What difference does that make?”

Standing back up, Dean licked his fingers to make it look like he’d bent down to try the lamb’s blood and then made a face. “Think you were right about the cheap stuff . . . Looks like she got a good dig in on you too.”

The djinn looked down at the hole in its side and then at it’s arm that was hanging there and almost useless. Probably the only reason the djinn even needed help carrying the dead djinn, ’cause they were both big guys. “Would’ve finished me off too if it hadn’t been for Sadie.”

“Sadie?” Dean nodded towards the dead shifter and said, “That her, or –“

“No, she’s with the hunter now. She wanted to speed this along before the hunter’s partner came in here to investigate.”

Sounded like there were just the four of them. 3 down. 1 to go. Dean looked towards the door as he got closer to the djinn and said, “Partner? She say anything about this partner?”

“No, just that he was a hunter too.”

“So, if she knew about this partner, I’m guessing that Sadie is the other shifter you mentioned, or –“

“Yeah . . . shifter. You know it’s funny. I’ve only ever heard –“

The djinn bent down to try and pick its dead djinn friend up under the arms, as Dean stepped forward, grabbed a hold of the djinn’s shoulder, and thrust his silver knife up into its chest. “Hunters call a shapeshifter that? Well, I’m a hunter first, vamp second.”

As the life slid out of the djinn’s eyes, Dean released his hold, let the body drop, and looked around the room. Where the hell was Beth? If they were bleeding her right now, he should smell it . . . unless they were going the IV bag route . . . shifters didn’t drink blood. They mostly lived like humans . . . dirty humans who shed their skin and lived in sewers or abandoned buildings, but they
could pass for human. They just had something in them that made them kill people. Why the hell would shifters team up with djinn and start getting djinn their dinners to go?

He should still smell Beth’s blood if there’d even been a drop of it getting the IV started . . . except this Sadie would know he was a vamp and probably wiped the blood up straight away to hide the smell or was using something else to mask it . . . maybe that’s why the chemical smell was so strong in this building even though this place had been closed down for years. Still didn’t explain why the hell shifters would team up with djinn. Weird times.

After about 20 minutes of looking, he found where the chemical smell was coming from. It was so strong it burned his eyes and maybe the lining of his nose . . . The entire hallway was covered in whatever it was . . . wasn’t bleach, but it was just as strong as that. It was disorienting. He guessed that was the point. If this shifter was becoming Beth, it meant that the shifter was probably becoming just as lethal as Beth, so opening the door into the room where the smell seemed to be the worst he kept his gun drawn. He didn’t see anything . . . obviously couldn’t smell anything. He did hear something in the back utility closet. Two heartbeats. No movement other than that.

If this bitch had Beth’s memories and weapons bag, she probably knew about that fucking dog whistle . . . how could he counteract that. He didn’t have anything to block his ears. Taking off his jacket, so he could tie it around his head, he thought that was the best he could do under the circumstances, and went to the door of the closet. Pulling it open, and expecting a shifter-Beth to come out angel blade at the ready with a dog whistle ready to drop him to his knees before he could get a shot off, Dean was a little surprised to find two Beth’s on the floor, both with IVs attached to them, and both knocked out or seemingly knocked out. Now which one was his?
Jumping Into Nothing

Well, this was boring. Since I was essentially floating in nothing in complete darkness, I decided to try doing some somersaults . . . not really sure how many I did before I got tired of doing that, because I had no frame of reference for what was up and what was down. Was I supposed to be using this as time for some kind of introspection? I supposed I could, but I didn’t really feel like indulging in self-reflection. The nothingness surrounding me could just fuck off. I wasn’t going to make peace with it and become part of it. Maybe I should sing.

I decided to do somersault spins while I sang after a few songs of just floating there and singing. I think I was on the third verse of *I Want to Hold Your Hand* when my foot connected with something. I then spent the next 20 seconds trying to swim away from it in the air without going anywhere and just ended up kicking it a few more times. “Get away. Get away. Get away.” I heard laughter. I knew that voice. “What the hell’s so funny?”

“I’m not a spider.”

How’d he know the first thing I thought was that it might be a big creepy ass spider? “What are you doing?”

“Pulling your ass out of whatever this is.”

“I think it’s the Big Empty.”

“What’d you wish to die?”

“I didn’t wish for anything. I was doing something, and then I got hit in the head, and then I was standing in front of Michael, and I don’t know what I said to him, but it must’ve pissed him off because here I am.”

“Probably told him what Raphael had the avenging angels do to your soul and Death decided your soul wasn’t worth keeping.” There’s only one man who’d know that had been my wish.

“I left you at the camp.”

“Yeah, the vamp called it in after he got you out of the closet.”

“Awesome. Think I’ll stay here.”

“You can’t –”

“I can. The Dean brigade can go home . . . just put me in a glass coffin and tell people I ate a poisoned apple or pricked my finger on a spindle.”

“What the hell’s gotten into you lately?”

“Terrible track record. Can’t leave on a freaking supply run without screwing up . . . twice in two runs.”

“It’s easier for things out there to get around now with the snow gone, so we’re running into more than we used to run into out there, and it happens. It’s hunting.”

“You’re not hearing me. I’m done.”
“So, that’s it? You’re just gonna quit.”

“Already have . . . go home and –“

“I can’t get out of here without you waking up.”

“Well, I’d offer you a chair, while you wait, but there aren’t any. We could pretend like we’re blind acrobats . . . if you want.”

“We could, or . . . we could figure out how to get out of here.”

“Think I already know how.”

“You wanna fill me in on it?”

“I have to make peace with all of this . . . give up who I am and become one with the Big Empty.”

“So the opposite of what you’ve always done? In Heaven, you always held yourself together and separated yourself from whatever they were doing to you, right?”

“Yeah.” And this was definitely my Dean.

“Can you even come back from that?” I didn’t know, so I didn’t say anything. “So . . . blind acrobats, huh?”

Yeah, can’t even get being dosed by a djinn right, and now I’d dragged him into it. “I’m sorry. You shouldn’t have –“

“I’m good.”

“Yeah, but you’ll die out there if you stay in here too long, right?” I couldn’t let that happen.

“Maybe, but if I’m in here with you, I think my consciousness will just stay here.”

“African dream root?”

“Yeah.”

So he’d found a way to go with me to the other side again. Just without hopping a ride in my soul and without knowing that’s what he was doing before he got in here. “How’d you find –“

“If we get out of here, I won’t tell Bobby you’ve been raiding his stash.”

“Stash of what?”

“Stash of everything. You’ve got hundreds of little envelopes with labels on them. I don’t even know what most of the stuff in there is for.”

Must’ve gone through my bags. “Me neither. Just figured we might need it some day. And it’s not Bobby’s. It’s just stuff I found around the bunker or in occult shops.”

“Okay, so I won’t tell Bobby about your stash . . . Are we really staying in here?”

“No, but forever’s such a long time, Dean.”

“Better to spend it out there than in here, right?”
“I don’t know. Is it?”

“What about Rogue?”

“I’m going to . . . I’m going to have to watch her get old and die, Dean.” There was a deafening silence after that, so I said, “And it’s not just her . . . it’s everyone else . . . all the kids at the camp . . . every time I see someone, it doesn’t matter who they are . . . All I can see is this tombstone over their head. . . Out there that’s all I have, and hunting . . . I’ll hunt until there’s nothing left to hunt, and then when our sun expands enough that life is no longer sustainable on this planet, I’ll have to do all of this all over again. Only instead of camps, it’ll be colonies on other planets . . . and so on and so forth. . . forever.”

“Why’d you do this?”

“I didn’t mean for this to happen. I’ve always had bad luck with shifters.”

I heard him breath out a laugh. “Yeah, you have . . . And no I mean, I was there. You knew exactly what Amara would do. You egged her on.”

“Short term solution to a very big immediate problem . . . It was a distraction to keep her occupied and to keep her from killing me, I guess. I knew that as soon as you took me, the team at the house would start trying to kill the witches who were powerful enough to pull off the spell to remove the Mark. We had no idea who had it in that universe. Could’ve been anyone that wasn’t a Winchester, because I checked . . . and I knew our team would start with Rowena, because it probably was her given the way strands of fate tie things together in the universes, but even if it wasn’t her, the other witches on our hit list were powerful enough that it could’ve been them, and as soon as the witch was dead, Amara getting out would be erased, so nothing she’d done to the universe or me would stick, but Chuck pulled us back before they could kill any of the witches, so it stuck.”

“If that’d worked, I would’ve gone back to being a demon.”

“Yeah, but I was just going to get one of the witches in New Orleans to like me and kill me to remove the Mark.” I wasn’t expecting him to laugh again. “I’m serious.”

“I know . . . Guessing it’s the only way you could think of separating him and me too?”

“Yeah. It should’ve pulled you right along with me when I died.”

“Amara’s still out of her cage in that universe, right?”

“Yeah.”

“We could try to go back and get her to fix it.”

“I’m not entirely sure how possible that is. When the Dean with the Mark went back, Chuck said if that Dean found a way to come back, he wouldn’t stop him, but I’m thinking it’s nearly impossible. . . just the impression I got.”

“Could’ve said the same thing about you getting out of Heaven or most of the things we’ve done.”

“I guess, but Amara would have to agree to it, and I just don’t see her doing that.”

“Won’t know unless we try.”

“You don’t have to handle me to motivate me to get out of here. You being here is enough to do
“I’m not handling you . . . We’ll fix it. Maybe not by going to her or Chuck, but we’ll fix it, and in the short term, I’m not sorry you can’t die.”

“So you can get out of here?”

He sounded like he was giving me one of his charming smiles when he said, “Never got that third date.”

“You don’t have to —“

“You owe me one. I want it.”

“Does this count?”

“Not even close, so start doing your meditation thing, so we can get out of here.”

“Okay. Got any ideas on how to will yourself into nothing?”

“Not sure that’s such a good idea. I’ve seen what happens when you do that.”

“I can’t die.”

“I know. I still don’t think anything good can come from it. Maybe . . . stop trying to fight wherever we are or being an acrobat or whatever it is you were doing when I got here . . . If you think you won’t come back from it, stop, and we’ll figure something else out.”

I could try. That’s all I could do.
How long was this going to take? Dean wanted to get out of here. If this is really what the Big Empty was like, then he wasn’t so sure about being wiped out of existence. Why couldn’t something like that be simple? Why couldn’t it just be that you were done and you didn’t know it and there was just nothing of you left? Why did it have to be like this? This sucked.

If Crowley’s final act in this universe had been to make Dean be a witness to Beth being tortured in Heaven, then what Cas had seen when he took that from Dean sounded a hell of a lot like this. He’d come back worse, and Cas had come back a lot more chilled out.

Over 6 weeks is what it took Cas to figure this out, or Dean guessed that’s what Cas’d had to do to wake back up, but Cas hadn’t had to become one with nothing. Maybe he’d just stopped fighting it and made peace with where he was. Cas had said he had a lot of time to think. Maybe that’s what Beth needed to do to get them out of here. She’d figure it out . . . hopefully in less than 6 weeks, because Dean didn’t have that long out there in the real world, and he did not want to be stuck in here like this forever.

It’s the only reason he wasn’t asking her every 5 minutes where she was at on whatever she was doing. The longer he was here, the more impatient he was to get out. It was boring and isolating. He knew she was nearby . . . close enough to kick him, but he couldn’t reach out and touch her. He couldn’t see her. He was lucky he could hear her. It’s like he was floating in place, but it still felt like he was moving . . . not fast or slow . . . but near wherever Beth was going, or they would’ve been separated. Maybe they had been. She was being really quiet. Maybe she wasn’t anywhere near him anymore.

Dean reached out to touch her and felt nothing. He thought about breaking his silence, but what if she was nearby and needed the silence to concentrate on getting them out of here? Maybe she wouldn’t notice if he touched her with his foot. Leaning back and stretching his foot out in the direction where he thought she was, he might’ve started to freak out and said, “Beth?” when he didn’t feel her.

“What?”

He looked down in the direction that’d come from . . . couldn’t see anything, but her voice was below him now, like more below him than it usually was when she was standing. “Are you sinking?”

“No. Trying to lie down . . . not sure if that’s what I’m doing or if I was actually lying down before and now I’m standing.”

At any other time, something like that would sound insane, but it made sense given the situation. “I think you’re standing on your head.”

She laughed, and he missed that sound. “Was that all you wanted?”

Yes. No. “I don’t like this. I don’t want you to . . . Maybe we should figure something else out. I mean this isn’t really the Big Empty, right? It’s just what you think it’s like because you think it’s where Cas was when he took what Crowley did from me.”

“Maybe, but it’s not exactly like I can kill myself and wake back up. I’m already dead in here.” Damn. She wasn’t wrong. “Did you try an antidote?”
He hadn’t. “The vamp did. Found everything he needed in your bag. Didn’t work. That’s why he called it in. He would’ve done what I’m doing, but he didn’t think the whole African dream root thing would work with a vamp, and if it did, it might make a whole mess of other problems.”

“Hard to imagine other problems being a whole lot worse than they are right now.”

Yeah, she couldn’t have picked a worse wish if she’d tried, not that she’d picked it if she was knocked out, when it happened, but still. “Thought you were okay with staying here.”

“I don’t want you to die and get stuck in here.”

Yeah, he didn’t either . . . well, he guessed that it hadn’t been so bad when they were talking, but knowing she was somewhere nearby and not being able to see her or feel her was just . . . Now that he thought about it, this was kind of the way things had felt since they’d come back from the mission. They were still kind of around each other, hovering the way they were now, but they were separate and alone. He didn’t know if it was because Amara had taken what had kept them together or if it was on his end or if it was hers or both. All he knew was that it was there.

It hadn’t even occurred to him that she was going to have to watch Rogue grow old and die or all the kids at the camp. He’d been so wrapped up in his own thing he hadn’t really considered hers. She was wrapped up in hers too, he guessed. He didn’t know, and he should, and the reason he didn’t was . . . maybe because he didn’t want to lose what they’d had so much that he was unintentionally losing it? Is that what was happening?

Being a demon . . . feeling that way and thinking that way . . . it’d been a total shift in who he was, but he’d still him at the same time. And he’d also forgotten who he really was, couldn’t separate himself from the other Dean . . . hadn’t felt like himself, and hadn’t cared about feeling like himself. It’s not like he’d had any warning that it was coming. He hadn’t gotten the Mark, hadn’t felt it changing him . . . hadn’t died to get out of it changing him only for it to turn him into something else. He’d literally been himself one second and not the next.

When he’d been cured of being a demon, he hadn’t had the Mark. He didn’t know how to explain it, but it wasn’t on his arm when he was cured, because he hadn’t had an arm. He’d been in a place kind of like this. He’d known why he was there and where he was, and he’d been aware of what was going on in the outside world, but he hadn’t necessarily been able to hear or see what was going on out there. Maybe the best way to describe it was that he could tell what was going on out there based on how he felt about things, maybe a little like the way Beth used to know what he thought by interpreting how he felt.

And then there was the being brought back as a demon again, knowing it was coming, because it felt like that’s the direction it was going, not wanting it to happen, but being unable to do anything to stop it, and then the next second it was happening, and then he didn’t care that it’d happened . . . and it’d been pretty much the same way with Amara. But that was his story. He knew all of that and was working through it. He was pretty sturdy on who he was now even though he hadn’t had the typical things he used to centre him, namely family and hunting . . . He’d been good with Rogue. What about the others?

Sam . . . Sam had died. Beth had killed him. Dean, as a demon, had actually been the one to rip Sam’s body apart using some of the crap Sam had put up for the other Deans when they came through the doors . . . What was Dean supposed to do with any of that? What Sam did? What he did? Sam went full on evil again . . . had Sam torturing him been worse than any of the other things Sam had done? No. Not by a long shot, but it’d been the final straw, and now Dean knew without a doubt that there was really no coming back from what Sam had let himself become.
Even now, Sam was out there somewhere apparently trying to cure Croats, and Dean wasn’t entirely sure that Sam wouldn’t do something shady, like infect people he found to see how to reverse the virus. And what happened when Sam got frustrated because nothing worked? How dangerous would Sam get? Dean had no idea.

Was curing the Croats a good thing? Yeah, Dean thought so. Was Sam being the one to do it a good thing? Who knew? Time would tell, and Dean would be keeping as close an eye on it as possible given that he had a lot of other things to do, but keeping an eye on Sam had to be a top priority, and he had to be the one to do it, because keeping the world safe from his brother wasn’t anyone else’s job. It was his. He’d passed it off way too many times over the years and look at how things had turned out.

Cas . . . Dean had no real idea how Cas was doing. His relationship with Cas right now was about the same as with Beth. He and Cas were around each other at the camp, but there was never anything real in their interactions. Cas died too, and Dean didn’t know a whole hell of a lot about it other than that it’d happened, and now Cas was back.

Dean would guess that Cas had watched another Dean and another Sam die, and it’s not like they were strangers. They’d gotten to know them. Dean still wasn’t sure how he felt about it . . . maybe a little removed, because he hadn’t been there, and there were other Deans around now who were just like that Dean, and there were other Sams around now who were at least on some level just like that Sam, but the original guys who’d joined their team were dead. Probably wasn’t a very good death either. Cas had seen all that and then died himself. Had anybody talked to Cas about it? Maybe one of the other Deans had, but that wasn’t their job. It was Dean’s job.

Then there was Beth. Dean hadn’t really thought about it a whole lot until now, but she hadn’t died. She’d known Cas had died. She’d definitely known that Sam had died. Guess she also thought Dean had died. She hadn’t had Gabriel or Rogue . . . maybe she’d thought they were dead too? It was another thing he hadn’t talked to her about.

He guessed that in a way, she’d already gone through what it was like to lose everyone and now maybe she’d shut herself off from everyone . . . maybe they didn’t really seem like they were alive, or maybe she was picturing those tombstones over their heads, and distancing herself from them for when it happened again? Did she even know that’s what she was doing? Or was she doing that at all, and it’s just what he thought she was doing, because he’s the one who’d put a wall up between them? He’d done it with the others, hadn’t he? Maybe they were all distancing themselves from one another . . . How could you get around that?

Save people together? Fight a common enemy together? Is that why Gabriel had sent them all out on the road together? What, they were their own worst enemies now, and they needed to defeat those before they could all be together the way they used to be? Is that what this was? Dean didn’t know. He felt a little like this kind of thing was above his pay grade to think about. He wasn’t really all that philosophical.

Being in here with nothing but the dark, without ground to stand on or light or sound did make you have to stay calm, so you didn’t lose your mind. At the same time, you also needed something to do, and he guessed that thinking was it. Couldn’t exactly take a nap. Felt like he was in time out. He really hated this. They needed to get started on finding spirits, so they could maybe use them to bribe Death for something . . . didn’t even have to be all of them going to Heaven. Should be so none of them ended up here. Maybe the souls they’d found in that sanitarium would count? Probably not. They needed to summon Death, set up the deal, and then execute it.

He wondered how Beth was getting on with whatever it was she was trying to do. She hadn’t
kicked him, so she wasn’t doing flips. She wasn’t talking. She was probably thinking, like him, right? Did she really have to do more than that to stop fighting this place? Maybe mentally, he still was, but he refused to give himself over to this place. If that’s what this place needed her to do to get them out of here, he didn’t want her doing it either.

He needed to come up with an alternative way to get them out of here, something to sell her on to keep her from doing this . . . couldn’t take too long to do it though, because he had no idea how long it would take her to meditate herself into nothing. Maybe he should talk to her and distract her until he came up with something else. They could probably come up with something else together if they talked it through. They always did. This shouldn’t be any different. It was just a freaking djinn, a dead djinn. Its venom should wear off, shouldn’t it? Or was this a different kind of djinn than the ones that’d dosed him outside Vegas? He didn’t know. Should’ve asked before he came in here. The other two seemed to know about this antidote or whatever, and they’d seemed to know about someone needing to come in here to get through to Beth.

Maybe this was that djinn-relative she’d told him about a long time ago, not the ones that the other two had run into or even the one she’d seen on that show, because neither of the other Deans recognized the type of djinn, just another shitty thing that Fate was throwing their way to remind them it was still here, but in a fucked up way to throw them off. Thinking about when Beth told him that on the front porch of Bobby’s house . . . it brought up a whole lot of emotions for her . . . kind of the way seeing her sitting outside the hunter’s shack after she’d told him she was pregnant had. Maybe being in here in this sensory deprivation tank had been what he needed . . . didn’t really know why that particularly memory dislodged the numbness he’d been feeling ever since they got back to this universe, but it seemed to have done that, maybe not entirely, but enough. “Hey, Beth, I don’t want to do it this way . . . I want to try something else.”
Cas maintained his vigil over Dean and Beth. There wasn’t any progress in either. He knew that the other two Deans both thought that maybe there was something different about the djinn Beth had encountered. Maybe they were hybrids of some kind. That would fit with the kinds of experiments they knew Eve had been conducting to make new monsters. He actually missed the days when every monster was a straightforward monster. The Dean who was a vampire was a good old-fashioned monster. Cas took some kind of comfort in that.

Monsters, Croats, Witches, Demons . . . all of them were a problem. They should focus on one. He guessed right now they were focusing on saving people and the Croats at the same time. If came down to it he would not hesitate to kill a Croat, even though Sam might be trying to find a cure. There is no way that he would allow something like that virus to infect him the way that Amara had infected him. He didn’t want to feel himself slowly slipping away as he became something else. He wasn’t even entirely sure what the virus would do to him, because he didn’t have a normal soul. Whatever he had could definitely be twisted into something else though.

He would not allow his family to become infected either. They were not exactly at their best. Things seemed more chaotic now. The snow had helped slow down the entropy of the human, monster, and Croat populations after the outbreak, but now the chaos had returned. Everything that he’d missed, while he’d been in Heaven, the randomness and very real possibility of bumping into monsters or croats or bad people had returned. everyone was so used to the ordered world that the snow had provided that they were having a hard time adjusting to it, and they weren't taking the proper precautions that had been like first nature to them in those early weeks. And that was on top of all of the ordered chaos they’d been living through when they did their mission.

It was going to get one or more of them killed or worse . . . something like being turned was worse, and it was something that could happen to any of them, including Beth. He wouldn’t let that happen, so Croats were not something he would hesitate to kill . . . possibly even if there was a cure, because it would require taking the Croats to a facility where they could be treated, and that was just too dangerous of a risk for any of them to take, or he thought it was when he heard Beth’s ideas on how a cure might be possible.

If killing the Croats that were being sent North as scouts was on the agenda and saving people was on the agenda, then he supposed that next on the list would be dealing with the numbers of the Croat army in the South. Perhaps the Croats in this country were keeping the ones from Central and South America from getting past them, or maybe the same thing was controlling all of them. In a way he hoped that it was the second. It would make it easier to defeat them if they were essentially one unit now.

On the other hand for something to be that powerful . . . Was anything other than Chuck that powerful? Gabriel wouldn’t do it. Cas wasn’t even sure Gabriel could do it. If Michael had to use the weather to push the Infected out of some portions of the world, then it wasn’t likely that Gabriel would be able to have the kind of power necessary to mind control hundreds of millions of Croats, and other than Chuck and Amara, who was locked away in her cage, Gabriel was the most powerful being on the planet now.

What other being would have that kind of power? It wouldn’t be one being. It’d be multiple beings, or that’s what Cas thought. He guessed they’d find out. He wondered what it was they were looking for as well. He guessed that they would find that out in due time too.

Once those things had been dealt with then they could focus on the monsters and then the witches.
...unless the witches were controlling the Croats. Heaven and Hell would always be there. As long as people died, there wasn’t a whole lot they could do about Hell, and angels were... there weren’t very many of them left. Other than that... he was really very tired of supernatural beings. He’d spent his whole life as an angel, and he’d fought in many battles, but the last few years had been the most trying of any he had known.

Cas was drawn from his thoughts when Dean twitched. For a fleeting moment, he thought that was a good sign, that maybe it meant that Dean was about to wake up, but that moment quickly passed as Dean twitched again and then started convulsing. Immediately there to cushion Dean’s head, so it didn’t get damaged, Cas looked toward the other Deans when they crouched next to him. “Is this what happens with your hybrid-djinn.”

“I don’t... it liquefied their insides. I don’t know what that looks like, and it fed off of fear.” Reaching for Beth’s bag, that Dean added, “There anything Beth’s afraid of that might—”

“Spiders.”

His focus was on Dean who was going blue. If he could turn him on his side, maybe it’d help his breathing... it might be difficult, but it had to be done. He found a way to do it and got Dean in the recovery position. He didn’t know if that would make much difference if this continued much longer. Glancing towards the other Deans to maybe ask if they had any ideas, he noticed for the first time that one of them was getting ready to use the African dream root. “No!” They both turned to look at him, and he said, “She is not so afraid of spiders that she would not be able to face it... it isn’t that. Nobody knows her better than this Dean. This is something else, and we cannot sacrifice either of you.”

The Dean who was a vampire looked down at the Dean seizing. “Cas, we’ve gotta do something. He can’t—”

“There is nothing you can do.”

“So that’s it? You’re just going to give up on—”

“I did not say that there was nothing I could do. I said there was nothing you could do. Come hold his head.”

The other Dean came forward to do it, and Cas turned his attention behind him towards Beth. He searched her until he found it... pretty much where he’d thought it’d be, so it didn’t take much time. Leaving the room at a jog, he told them to stay with his Dean and then when he was far enough away he was sure that it wouldn’t effect them or Beth or his Dean, Cas smashed the vial off the ground near his feet. There was no hesitation, no questioning if it was what he wanted or what he should do.

There wasn’t time for that. There wasn’t even time for him to analyze the difference having his grace made or how he felt about it. There was only time for him to absorb his full power, his full-waning power, because the Host had been shut off from Heaven, and then for him to return to Dean, kneel next to him, and place his hand on Dean’s forehead, so he could focus on altering Dean’s dream state and try to pull him out.

Oh, it was much worse than he’d thought. He knew this place well. “Dean?”

“Cas?”

“Dean you need to leave here now.”
“I can’t find her. She was right here, and now she’s gone and –”

“You’re dying. You need –“

“I don’t care. I’m not leaving without her. Help me find her.“

“Dean –“

“No. She thought maybe she needed to will herself into nothing to get me out of here, and now I can’t find her.”

Times like this required a judgment call, and Cas made his. “She’s already out, Dean. The others are with her. She wanted to come back in here for you, but I convinced her to let me come instead.”

There was a long pause, and then Dean said, “If she’s out there, then why –“

“Perhaps this djinn did not send her into her subconscious at all. It is a hybrid unlike any I have seen or the others have seen. Maybe it did something similar to what Crowley did, and for some reason when she woke up, you got left behind.”

There was silence again. “Okay, how do I get of here?”

The speed with which Dean believed him made Cas feel guilty, but he would not lose Dean. This world needed Dean, specifically, this Dean. This Dean had been forged in the flames of this life in a way the others hadn’t been. The others were good men and similar, but this Dean was also the one who was Cas’s true brother, the one he’d fought wars with . . . who had maintained the vitality and zest for life that Cas loved. He wasn’t ready to see that life snuffed out and become stagnant in Heaven. “Can you find my hand?”

“Can’t see a damn thing, Cas.”

“Technically, it isn’t my real hand. It’s more of a metaphysical hand. My real hand is on your forehead.”

“So, I should touch my forehead?”

“You could, or you could focus on the fact that you have a forehead and then go from there. I’m not going anywhere.” He’d wait as long as it took. Dean wasn’t convulsing anymore. He might’ve been panicking before Cas got there, but he wasn’t now, and there was no reason for him to panic. Beth was still there. Cas could sense her through the connection that the African dream root was creating between Dean and Beth. She wasn’t aware of anything that was happening at the moment, but she was still there.

It took maybe 5 minutes, and then Dean’s eyes shot open as he took a massive gasp of air. Sitting up, he immediately looked for Beth, and saw her lying next to him, where she’d been when Dean agreed to do this. The look he gave Cas was loaded with a lot of negative emotions. “You lied.”

“I did what I had to do.”

“Put me back, Cas.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Well, then give me more of the damn –“

“It won’t work, Dean. She has to figure this out on her own.”
“Figure it out on her own? The only reason she’s even doing this is for me. She –”

“Is still there.”

“Yeah, but for how long?”

“Dean, nobody can will themselves into nothing. It isn’t –“

“If anyone can, she can. Since you’re all angeled up again . . . Go in and get her the way you got me.”

“By doing that, I may be making things worse. This could be what she needs to do to get out.”

“Then why didn’t you leave me –“

“You didn’t have the time to wait for her to do it.”

Getting to his hands and knees, so he could crawl over Beth, Dean shook his head in disappointment before touching his forehead to Beth’s, so he could apparently try to talk her back. If she couldn’t hear Dean when he was inside her head, she wouldn’t hear him now, but perhaps it would make Dean feel like he was doing something. Cas didn’t regret it. He didn’t regret lying to Dean, because it was the only way to calm Dean down and keep him from dying much too soon. He also didn’t regret taking his grace back, so he could do it.
Liberation

What does it take to become one with nothing? Well, you don’t expand your focus outside of you. Thinking of becoming part of a big black void of nothing is as frightening as thinking you’re going to live forever. The idea of infinity and your role in it does not provide for a comforting feeling. Every human that’s ever lived only gets a brief speck of time that belongs to them in the infinity timescale. There’s infinity before you, infinity after you . . . but people don’t generally think about that.

They worry about what happened today or will happen tomorrow. They get hobbies and talk politics or religion. They make 5 or 10-year plans that they either achieve or don’t, or they remember childhood memories fondly, or not, depending on their childhoods, childhoods that helped define their outlook. They rarely think about what comes next. Oh, sure people spout their belief on it, argue their points, and even kill or die in the name of said beliefs, but what comes next? Are you just gone, so you don’t care, and it’s nothing forever? Is it happily ever after forever? Is it pain and torture forever? Nobody really puts much thought into the forever part, how long that is, how unending . . . The thought of forever even after death is uncomfortable.

When I was a kid, the second time around, I remember not liking the idea of being in Heaven forever. Maybe some of it was due to the residual feelings I had about the first time I grew up there, but overall, I found the idea of being there forever worrisome. I wondered what would happen if I got bored? What if all it was were choirs singing and banquets? What were the alternatives? Hell? Being tortured in Hell hadn’t held any real appeal to me as a kid and still didn’t . . . Nothing? Well, dying and going nowhere was one thing, but being aware that you were nowhere was an entirely different thing, and not only that, but the nihilistic thinking it conjured up, that nothing mattered, nobody I cared about mattered, that I didn’t matter wasn’t particularly something I was too fond of holding onto either, nor did the finality of it . . . nothing forevermore wasn’t all that comforting.

I’m sure my archangel Father must’ve thought it was pretty funny when I started saying I was agnostic . . . couldn’t rule anything out, but I tended towards disbelief on anything supernatural. Of course the only reason I ever thought that was because I didn’t remember being raised in Heaven. As a hunter, I had incontrovertible proof that Heaven and Hell both existed. So did Purgatory. So did the Big Empty. I’d been to all of them, even if it’d just my body dangling in the Big Empty or now the Big Empty in my mind, which may have well been the real deal. If I struggled with the idea of living forever even after death, then becoming part of nothing was the same, except instead of time, it was space that was the enemy. Can’t focus on your overall surroundings, because you know they go on forever, and that’s what you’ll become a part of if you succeed. It'll make you nothing, because you’re part of nothing. The idea of it makes you feel a little like you’re drowning, the panic, the fight to survive, the surrender when you can’t . . . unfortunately I had experience with drowning too, so I could say it was a fair comparison.

I hadn’t the time to go through the panic and fight to survive if I wanted Dean to make it out of this ridiculous situation, so I had to ignore my surroundings completely. Cut myself out as a little island in the surrounding void and stake my claim, relax, stay calm, focus internally, and remove all external stimuli or lack thereof from my awareness. Once that was done, it got harder.

I had to strip back each and every thing about me from my memories to my ideals to who I was as a person and who and what mattered to me and discard it into the void, like taking strips of my flesh and setting it free in a black ocean. Facts went first. The Earth rotates the Sun. Our galaxy is the Milky Way. In DNA, cytosine always pairs with guanine, and adenine with thymine. And so on...
and so forth until I couldn't think of anymore. Philosophies on things, like parenting or teaching or hunting or surviving, living and dying . . . all of those things went next.

Then I had to get rid of my memories. That was harder still. Oh, there’s a time Adriel did something particularly hurtful, feel nothing about it, think nothing about it, just get rid of it, because it doesn’t matter. It was easier to do with the bad things. The good things were more difficult. There’s where I saw my Christmas tree with lights and a stand that Dean and Adam put on for me as a surprise . . . feel nothing about it, think nothing about it, just get rid of it, because it doesn’t matter.

Then it was possessions or things, like my first aid kit, watch, and my angel blade . . . feel nothing about them or who gave them to me, think nothing about them, just get rid of them, because they don’t matter. Then it was my hopes and fears. The hopes were easier to discard than the fears. I don’t know why. They just were.

Last, but not least, it was people. That was the hardest one of all. Not past memories of things people had done, because I’d gotten rid of a lot of those, but who people were, future plans, what those people meant to me . . . all of those were things I had to discard. It was nearly impossible when it got down to the final 4, my Dad, Cas, Rogue, and of course Dean. It took awhile, but it had to be done, and then all that was left was me. By then, I didn’t really matter, so I guess that was the easiest piece to set free.

I don’t know how long I was gone after that. I just know that I suddenly wasn’t, or I didn’t think I was, because if I was then I wouldn’t be able to hear. There wasn’t anything for me to hear, but the fact that I could hear silence as I rushed towards it was like going from being submerged under water to the surface. If I could hear, then I had ears. If I had ears, then did I have eyes? Opening my eyes . . . yeah. It was dark, but there was a ceiling up there. I could see. I felt a weight on my chest and looked down . . . an arm. Looking to my left . . . a face. I took it in, examined it. I knew it, but it was like seeing it with a fresh pair of eyes. It was relaxed and youthful. Those eyelashes were something else. He looked innocent, not like a killer at all. His hair was messed up and standing on end. He’d been asleep for a while.

He stirred a little when I rolled to face him. “Beth?”

Beth. That’s what I used to be called. I guess that’s what I was still called. “Hm?”

I had a voice. Forgot what that was like. His eyes scrunched together as he inhaled deeply and stretched a little. “How long have you been awake?”

“A couple of minutes.”

As more of his sleep fell away, he opened his eyes. I couldn’t see what color they were, but they were sleepy, then briefly happy before he had a chance to think about why, and then as he registered that I was awake and looking back at him, alert . . . then a little confused. “What are you doing?”

“Looking at you.”

He was confused again and smiled maybe in slight discomfort at being scrutinized as much as uncertainty. “Why?”

“I’m rebuilding my mental image of you.”

“You sound different.”
“Do I?”

He gave me a reluctant nod before looking down at my mouth. “Your voice is the same, but you’ve got an accent going on now.”

“What kind?”

He inhaled sharply and shook his head slightly as he tried to think of how to answer. “Guess it’s not the one you get when your annoyed, and it’s not the twang you get when your drunk . . . just different.”

It seemed to concern him. “Is that a problem?”

“I don’t know . . . You wanna talk about it?”

“What? My accent?”

“No, you’ve been out for over a week. That’s a long time in there.”

“Nothing to talk about. You’re okay?”

“Cas brought me back the same night it happened. I’m fine.” He waited a few seconds and then licked his bottom lip while his eyes looked down. “Where’d you go?”

“Wherever you took me? Where are we?”

He smiled before his gaze flicked up to me again. “We’re in the bunker. We got the rest of the stuff on your list, dropped it off at the gates, and headed back out, got here, and explained it to Bobby. Thought it was better if nobody knew anything was up. Been telling people you’re sick . . . and I meant where’d you go in your head when I was still in there. You were there and then you weren’t.”

“I never left . . . until now. I just had to shut everything else out and focus on me.”

“And then what?”

“And then I . . . I’m okay. I don’t have anything to talk about. It’s in the past. I’d rather focus on the present.”

He looked like he wanted to say something, but changed his mind at the last second. “Okay. The present, uh . . . You hungry?”

“I don’t know.” Might’ve forgotten what hunger felt like.

“Well, I’m starving. Let’s go see what they have in the kitchen.”

He rolled over to get out of his side of the bed, and I followed suit, but stopped when my feet hit the ground. Mostly, I just sort of tapped them against the floor and stared at them. It was a strange feeling to have after floating for so long. Slowly, I stood and tested my body’s ability to stand and then focused on how it felt to have my weight on my feet . . . another strange feeling. Lying down felt more like floating even though the bed was beneath me, but there was a definite difference in how it felt to put all of your weight on your feet . . . it required balance . . . and walking? That required something else entirely, not just balance, but an ability to coordinate your muscles in such a way as to make you move forward. I took a tentative step, and by the time I’d taken it, Dean was in front of me. “You okay?”
The tone of his voice topped off my impression that he was kind. I looked up at him with a soft smile and said, “Yeah. I, uh . . . I guess it’s like having a blank slate. Every experience is like a brand new one.”

“You remember everything though, right?”

“Yeah, this isn’t like when I didn’t remember my past. I guess, I just . . . I don’t know how to explain it. Maybe I’m experiencing my 5 senses, like it’s the first time I’m experiencing them even though I know I have in the past . . . it makes them feel new.”

Looking down at my feet, he took a silent breath. “Can you walk?”

“I took a step, so I suppose I can. I don’t know if it feels strange because it’s something that always felt strange and I just got accustomed to it and never really had to think about it after I learned, or if it’s because I’ve been laying down for a week, and my body isn’t used to movement.”

He was pretending for my benefit that he was calm and could handle this, but his eyes, the little tells they had betrayed him. You just wouldn’t notice if you didn’t take the time to pay attention to him and all the magnificent little details involved in his expressions . . . I really liked him, and I could feel that I liked him and liked how it felt. “Do you want help?”

“I don’t think I need help, but if it makes you feel better, then I wouldn’t mind your help. What do you propose?”

He looked over his shoulder towards the door and then down at my feet before his gaze landed on me. “You wanna practice?”

“Like when I had to wear high heels?”

He smiled before putting his hands out in front of him. “Yeah, something like that.” I guess he wanted me to hold onto his hands, so I did. His hands felt . . . strong and steady, like they could hold anything, and it wouldn’t drop . . . a little calloused, a little weathered, but not dry . . . not sweaty. Soft? Can something be soft and calloused? I guess – “What are you doing?”

I looked back up at him, and he was studying me. I guess if he didn’t know what I was thinking, the best way to reduce his anxiety was to eliminate his uncertainty on at least one thing by telling him. “I’m just reacquainting myself what it’s like to touch someone.”

Looking at his hands, he said, “Wow, I uh . . . Why don’t you try taking a step towards me.”

I did and then stopped and looked up at him again. “Shouldn’t it go both ways?”

His focus was on making sure I was steady on my feet, but I was pretty sure it was to cover his discomfort at the situation. “What?”

“I told you what I was thinking. Shouldn’t you do the same?”

He took a step back and indicated he wanted me to step forward again, so I did. I didn’t think he was going to say anything, but he did. “I think you got reset to factory settings.”

“How so?”

“The accent. Not knowing how to walk. You’re sure you remember everything?”

Taking another step closer as he stepped back, I looked at my feet again. “But I am walking. I
know how. It just feels foreign.” When I looked up at him, a brief flicker of . . . I think concern that bordered on fear flashed across his face. I guess I hadn’t answered his question. “What do you want to know?”

“What’s our daughter’s name?”

“Rogue.”

“Where’d you have her?”

“A little house in Nova Scotia.”

“Where’d we meet?”

“Which time?”

“Any of them . . . pick a favorite.”

“I don’t have a favorite. Can’t remember how it feels to have a favorite anything.”

He paused and then said, “So, when you said you didn’t know if you were hungry, it was because . . .”

“I don’t remember what hunger feels like.”

A head tilt, and another deep breath, and then he took a step back and waited for me to step closer before he said, “Okay, then what’s my favorite?”

“Time that we met?” He nodded, so I said, “At Christmas when we were kids.”

His eyes flitted in my direction again. “What makes you say that?”

“You never said it explicitly, but I know I used to think that.”

“What if I said it wasn’t?” I waited for him to explain, but instead he stepped back, so I followed him, and then waited some more. When he stepped back again, I didn’t follow, because I was curious and wanted an answer, and I didn’t want him using me walking as a distraction. His shoulders drooped a small amount, like he wished he hadn’t said anything if I really wanted more than that. “The girl I met that Christmas could’ve been anyone. It being you made her mean more after I found out. Meeting you, and you agreeing to stay is my favorite.”

“In the do-over –“

“No. In Pontiac . . . Everything that came after wouldn’t have happened if it hadn’t been for that time. It’s the only time that really matters.”

That was a nice sentiment. “The negatives don’t spoil it?”

He focused on getting me to walk towards him again, while he shook his head. “No. They don’t.”

When we got to the door, he turned, and started heading back in the same direction. “I thought we were –“

“When you can do it without thinking about it, we’ll go out there.”

“But I thought you were starving.”
“It can wait. How far back does it go?”

“What?”

“The reset.”

“All the way.”

“So, if I ask about something that happened in Heaven, you . . . “

“I’ll remember it, but I don’t particularly feel one way or the other about it anymore.”

“The good or the bad?”

“There’s really no good or bad. It’s just something that happened.”
Dean watched Beth examine the weight of her gun in her hand. She was probably analyzing how it felt, the grip . . . everything down to the last detail. It’s what she’d been doing since she woke up. He was keeping her away from everyone else as much as possible. They knew she was awake. That’s all they needed to know. They didn’t need to see her re-learning how to connect with the world. It’d make them think she was out of it or done, and she wasn’t. She was still sharp mentally. She was just relearning who she was, what she liked and didn’t like.

Some things were different, but not everything, like the other day, she went missing from their room for a while, and he found her in the bathroom staring at a spider on the wall. When he asked her what she was doing, she said she didn’t like it. She didn’t like its beady eyes. She didn’t like how it moved. She didn’t want it getting out of the bathroom and coming into their room, so she was keeping an eye on it, but she didn’t want to kill it either. What made it different? She said she wasn’t scared of it. She just didn’t want it biting her in her sleep. He’d laughed and asked her if she even knew what fear felt like, and then she’d thought about it and shook her head. He’d walked her through the physical symptoms of fear, like sweaty palms or racing heart, a feeling in the pit of her stomach or icy chest, and she’d said none of those felt right. She was just being cautious.

His favorite thing so far was watching her eat . . . maybe not eat, because he wasn’t a creep, but meal time, specifically dinner, was all right. He’d bring her back stuff for breakfast and lunch, but for dinner, they usually snuck out of their room after everyone, except whoever was on the night shift for the computer, had gone to bed. Then he’d make her dinner and show her what he was making, but he’d have her try the ingredients along the way. Didn’t matter what he put in front of her, it was all new to her and watching her try things was kind of funny, or it could be depending on what he gave her to try. She seemed to like his cooking better now than she used to like it, and she used to be the strongest supporter of his prowess in the kitchen.

In all honesty, he’d kind of liked having her all to himself without having to worry about the world or himself for a while. But they couldn’t stay here on vacation forever. Before they left, he had to make sure she was up for it. Shooting was one of the basics, so here they were in the shooting range. He wasn’t going to give her pointers. She already knew how to do this. It’s just that he needed her to get up to the level she was at before all this happened, so that she could aim and shoot without thinking, the same way she knew how to walk without thinking about it after about half an hour of them pacing the floor of their room.

After getting reacquainted with her gun, Beth took up a firing stance, aimed . . . took her time with it, and pulled the trigger. Smiling, she looked at the gun in her hands again in almost-awe, the way she did with everything that was ‘new’ to her these days. Dean’s attention was on the target at the back of the firing range. Dead centre . . . great place to start. “Try a head shot.”

She did. Again she took her time with it, but she nailed it. “Now what?”

He smiled. “Got a long way to go. Try speeding it up.” Her mind was fine. The muscle memory in her body was fine. Those two things were working together to make up for any changes in her perceptions about the world, but he wasn’t letting her outside the walls of this camp until he knew she could handle it. Not just for her. She couldn’t die. Her coming out of that djinn dream fine after a week said that. Her brain should’ve been liquefied, but she was okay . . . for the most part.

After about an hour on the shooting range, Dean was confident she had that skill back up to the level it’d been before she’d been attacked, but there were a few other things he wanted her to be able to do too. He’d need Cas for the angel blade sparring. Dean could do the normal sparring.
Watching her clean her gun, he noticed how much slower she was at it, but didn’t say anything. She’d get it in her own time. It’s not like she didn’t know how to do it. She was just being thorough. “What now?”

“Think that’s enough for today. If we come back tomorrow, and you’re where you are now . . . I think we could move onto something else.”

“Okay, but are we going back to the room?”

For the most part, she’d been going along with his idea that she should have as little face time with the people around here as possible until she was ready for them. He didn’t want them to start turning on her for not being quite herself, and he didn’t want her getting overwhelmed by seeing too many people at once . . . might make all those new sensations she was experiencing overload her. She hadn’t really liked it when Bobby, the ‘good’ Sam, Cas, and the two Deans had come to see her after they found out she was awake. It wasn’t Cas and the Deans so much as the looks that Bobby and the ‘good’ Sam gave one another because she wasn’t acting quite right, and her accent hadn’t helped.

Dean figured it was her real accent, the one she should’ve had all along and probably did have the whole time she was in Heaven . . . maybe a little less harsh than it would’ve been when Gabriel found her by Rachel’s grave, because she was used to speaking English now . . . really, there was just a hint of it. They thought it was strange. She didn’t need the added stress of trying to get rid of it. Besides, he liked it. Felt natural for some reason.

“Do you not want to go back to the room?”

“There’s a whole world outside the bunker.”

“It’s dark.”

“That’s okay. There’s more to our senses than sight.”

“You wanna go check out the farm?”

Looking up at him, she gave him a slight nod before returning her attention back on the gun and finishing it twice as fast as she had been. Hitting the lights on his way out of the room, he paused briefly when Beth said, “You don’t have to go with me if you don’t want.”

“Why wouldn’t I want to?”

“I don’t know. You’ve probably got other things to be doing.”

“Do you not want me to go with you?”

“I didn’t say that.”

No, she hadn’t. So far, she’d been honest and open with what she was thinking. It’s not that she couldn’t lie if she wanted to do it, but it was like she didn’t see the need for it, so she wasn’t. And unless he was getting on her nerves, he wasn’t going anywhere. He’d been by her side day in and day out since Cas brought him back, and he wasn’t going to stop now. “Am I getting on your nerves?”

“I don’t know.”

“Uh . . . if someone’s doing that, you feel . . . a little like you do when you’re mad, but not as
“He automatically did it now, the explaining how something felt. There was a part of him that was starting to think there was a positive to all of this, but he didn’t want to get his hopes up yet until he figured it out and knew for sure.

“Oh, no . . . The bunker is getting on my nerves. I like having you around. It just seems like you do an awful lot of what you do because you’re worried about me. If that’s the case, you don’t need to worry. I’m fine. I’ll continue to be fine. You can do something else if you want.”

“How do you know that’s why I’m hanging out with you?”

She shrugged and then looked up at him. “Your eyes . . . not right now, but sometimes . . . a lot of times. You worry about me a lot.”

His eyes. Right. Maybe Beth could pick up on the same ‘whatever’ in his eyes that Rogue could now that she didn’t have decades of a bad life to be concerned about . . . worked almost as good as her being able to feel what he felt. Maybe he kind of liked that. Meant she couldn’t cheat and had to work to know more about him. “And this is new to you? Thought you remembered everything from before.”

“I do. I just . . . It’s like a book. You remember what happens when you’re done, and you can imagine the characters, but seeing them in person is entirely different.”

“Rebuilding a mental image?” She nodded. “Got any idea how I match up to how you saw me before?”

“That image is gone. I had to get rid of it.” Right. He wasn’t entirely sure that was a good thing, and then she gave him a flirtatious smile, or he was taking it as one, because she said, “But I’m liking what I see,” before she started walking down the hall again.

Following her, he said, “Maybe I just like hanging out with you.”

“You mean you like giving me teaspoons of cayenne pepper and seeing how I react?”

Laughing involuntarily as he remembered it, he thought about how that’s when he knew she wasn’t faking it. She’d taken the teaspoon, studied it, smelled it, and said she knew it was supposed to be hot, but she couldn’t remember what hot was and then she’d stuck the whole thing in her mouth. Sure, she could block pain, or she used to be able to block pain. He didn’t know if she still could, but she couldn’t block her face going red or coughing until he got her some goat milk from the fridge. Of the two, she said she preferred the cayenne pepper. She was not a fan of goat milk now. He didn’t know if she ever had been, but he knew she used to like goat cheese. He wondered if she’d even try it now. Probably would if he made something using it.

“Something like that . . . So, are we going to the farm?”

“Well, I am. You can come if you want.”

Yeah, if she didn’t think he was getting too annoying, he’d take her up on that. There was a negative to the blank slate she’d been given, namely, that he wasn’t sure if he was in with a chance or not, but on the other hand, it meant that there was nothing there holding her back. She wasn’t awkward around him. She wasn’t worried about living forever anymore, or she didn’t seem to be. Beth didn’t seem to care about any of the mistakes he’d made either. Maybe his mistakes were things she’d been willing to live with because of what he used to mean to her, so maybe that wasn’t all that different. Maybe what was really different was that she didn’t particularly care about any of
the mistakes she’d made. She knew about them, but she didn’t feel anything about them.

He had a chance to start over, really start over, and she had a chance to start over too, not just with him if that’s what she wanted, but on her own life. All those insecurities she’d picked up in Heaven, all the insecurities she’d picked up in life . . . they weren’t there anymore. Did that mean she was over confident? No. It just meant that she didn’t blame herself for everything that’d ever gone wrong in all their lives. She didn’t feel like she had to keep on the move all the time to stay out in front of the things that’d happened to her in Heaven.

Did that mean she didn’t remember how it felt to have finding him be the hope that made her survive Heaven and have to find a way out of there? Yeah, but he was okay with that if it meant that she didn’t feel the weight of being tortured anymore, didn’t feel like she had to take off when things got too overwhelming for her, and didn’t feel like she had to go chasing battles to feel a little bit of calm in the chaos he knew she’d felt for a while now, at least since their do-over life, or maybe longer.

Was he a little worried that she might’ve lost her fight? He didn’t know. It was her inner strength, the part he thought she’d probably been stripped down to now, that had always done her fighting. He thought she’d probably be okay.

What he was a little worried about was how he fit into things with her now, but maybe that was a good thing. Things had always been on his terms. She’d always said she’d stay around as long as he wanted, which always put the ball in his court. She was worth more than that. He should’ve told her that a long time ago. He’d tried to do that a lot over the years with different words and different actions, but maybe she’d believe it now, and maybe he liked the idea of this being a challenge . . . Well, he would as long as things worked out.

Still wasn’t sure if he’d ever be able to feel about her the way he used to feel about her. Maybe he already did and maybe that’s why he thought about it and her all the time. She’d said one time that she hadn’t known that their connection was gone, because nothing had changed for her. Maybe it was the same for him, and if Amara hadn’t told him what she was going to do, he never would’ve noticed.

He was kind of looking forward to this more now, not that he hadn’t been, but now he was making it a top priority. It’s what he had to do if he wanted this to work. He couldn’t keep putting anything and everything, from the camps to hunting, ahead of it. He’d been doing that since they came back from the mission. Maybe to some extent, he’d been in the same boat Beth was in now, testing out old experiences, because they felt new. It’s how it’d felt after going from being a demon to a man again, like he was testing out how he felt about Rogue to make sure how he really felt wasn’t what the demon had and maybe he’d been doing the same with Beth. Add in the mess with the connection on top of that, and that’s why he’d been confused.

It wouldn’t matter to her that he’d been confused. He didn’t have to worry about her thinking it was her fault, because it wasn’t, but that’s how she would’ve felt eventually if she hadn’t already felt like that on some level. Now she didn’t. All he had to do was make sure he got things right from here on out, because how he made her feel now, the good and the bad, that’s what she’d remember.
Training

“I just don’t see the point in all of this.” Cas wasn’t sure how to respond. Beth had always liked training with him. She seemed to understand that her comment had put him on the back foot, something she could’ve used as an entry for attack, but instead she decided to explain, or not explain . . . show what she meant. With a speed he wasn’t expecting, because everything she did these days seemed deliberate and slow, Beth twirled her angel blade around, and thrust the point into her stomach and out her back before falling to her knees. As she slowly withdrew the blade, she looked down at her abdomen, which was bleeding profusely and added, “If it’s so I know what it feels like to feel pain, I do . . . now, I guess. I just don’t particularly care or see the point. It hurts. You’ll heal it. I’ll get over it, but I can’t die.”

Sighing, Cas crouched next to her and put his hand on her back to heal her. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She looked away from him and shrugged. “There’s nothing to talk about.”

Oh, but there was. She had been odd for days now. “You didn’t really erase yourself. It was all in your head.” When she glanced in his direction, he added, “The Mark on your soul kept you in your body. You weren’t really in the Big Empty. Perhaps if you had really been there, you would have succeeded in your goal, but you weren’t, so you didn’t.”

“It was real enough, Cas. I had to erase everything that means anything to me or ever has from personal tastes and flavors and memories and people to me. I did it, or I wouldn’t be here.”

“But if you had truly done it, you would not remember your life from before the attack.”

“That’s a good point. But how many things that are erased ever come back to know that’s true?”

The flicker of a smile crossed his face before he said, “Well, I have died twice now. I was erased, and I came back. I am still the same.”

“You are. You also didn’t take yourself apart piece-by-piece . . . I’m not complaining. I’m explaining why I think it was different . . . I’m different. I know on a cerebral level that I am. I just can’t access who I was and every experience is brand new or it feels brand new even though I know I’ve experienced these things in the past. It’s a very strange place I find myself.”

Cas looked at her abdomen and said, “Well, do you at least know why you must train?”

She laughed before looking down at where her hand was still holding her stomach. “I do, and I don’t. I know that tactically speaking, if we’re in the middle of a battle, the people by my side can’t afford for me to be taken out of a fight because I’ve been impaled . . . but I still think that this would not take me out of the fight. It would if I could die, but –“

“Both the pain and the blood loss would slow you down, and you know that. You also know that there are things worse than death.”

“You mean becoming a Croat?” He nodded, so Beth said, “I think if I were a Croat, I wouldn’t particularly care if I was.”

That was probably true. “What if you were decapitated in battle and then you were cut into pieces and buried under cement the way Dean planned to deal with Lilith?”
“That I wouldn’t like. You’d put me back together though, right?”

“Not if I died on the battlefield or wasn’t there, and the same goes for your father . . . you know that though. You’re intentionally being obtuse, so that you can get out of training today. Why?”

“We have an audience.”

What? Cas looked around. They’d waited until after lights out, so nobody in the camp would be able to see them and become even more afraid of Beth than they already were. Not all, but many in this camp were still terrified of her after what happened when she and Gabriel relieved Tom of his command. They were primarily people who’d acted as informants or were given roles of minor leadership that they’d lorded over the others. They need not worry. If Beth were going to punish them, she would have done it already but that didn’t mean their fear had been assuaged.

Cas’s senses picked up the presence of five people, and he knew straight away who they were. The three Deans, the good Sam, and Bobby. “How did you know they were there?”

“I can feel a disturbance in the force. I don’t know where they are, just that we have eyes on us. I’m more in tune with my feelings on things, and not just sensory feelings, but gut feelings, feeling feelings . . . you name it, I feel it more.”

That was . . . well, it was interesting to say the least. “Why do you think they didn’t come out here when they saw what you did?”

“I don’t know who it is.”

“The Deans, Sam, and Bobby.”

“Oh. I don’t know. I assume because you’re here and healed me before it became a problem.”

Maybe. She had been very fast about it, and if he hadn’t expected it or been fast enough to do anything about it, he guessed they hadn’t either. “I’d expect to get a lecture from one or maybe all of them later.”

“A lecture . . . I remember getting them. I don’t remember how I felt about them. I guess it’ll be a new-old experience.”

Cas looked from the direction of the others back to Beth with another slight smile. “You didn’t like them, but again I think you know that.”

“I do, but I don’t remember why I didn’t. I guess I’ll find out. Are we done?”

“No. We haven’t trained yet. Train with me, and then you can go get your lecture.” Standing, Cas offered Beth a hand, which she took before standing as well. “Why don’t you want them to see you?”

“Well, before I knew it was them, I didn’t want to freak the other people around here out. Now that I know it’s them, I feel like the expectations are high for me to succeed.”

“What if we work so fast, you don’t have time to think. That will bring out your best.”

Looking up at him, Beth smiled unsurely and said, “Okay . . . now that I have not wanting to be cut up and buried all over the country as a motivation, I think I can . . . I like you Cas.”

“I like you too, Beth . . . Before we get started, do you want to tell me what happened with the
monsters? I think as your mentor, I should know what you did wrong, so we can work on it.”

Beth looked up and away while she thought about it. “I think primarily that I wasn’t expecting the djinn. I came out of a supply closet carrying some things, so my hands were preoccupied. I was still able to kill one, but while I was fighting off the other one, another monster came in . . . I think it was a shifter. I don’t remember why I thought that. It happened so fast . . . and that’s not even the one that knocked me out. It must’ve been another monster that snuck up behind me, because there was the djinn, the shifter, and then everything went dark.”

“I suppose you being more in tune with things like the feeling that you are being watched is a good thing then. Continue to cultivate it. We’ll work more on attacks from behind.”

Beth gave him a slight nod before stepping back into a defensive position. Closing her eyes and taking a slow deep breath, the way she always did to focus, she then opened her eyes, and Cas stepped back again. “What are you doing now?”

“I’m prepared to spar with you.”

“You don’t have to tap into your soul to do it . . . I thought you said you felt more. It should be harder for you to do now.”

“When you don’t fight your emotions, then there is nothing to overcome. In all honesty, I didn’t know I was doing it.”

“You should stop.”

“I don’t know how to stop. I feel calm and focused. It is what it is.”

Sighing again, Cas said, “You just said you like me, right?” Beth nodded, so Cas said, “Focus on that . . . why you like me . . . how it made you feel. It should go away.” It took about 20 seconds for her eyes to go back to normal, and then Cas stepped into a ready position.

“Are you sure you don’t want me to use it? It’ll make me less likely to hurt you . . . I know the nicks are part of our scoring, but I would be more precise about it, and they wouldn’t be as deep.”

As tempting as that sounded . . . no. “It is fine in the heat of battle, but the use of it for training isn’t necessary. You are good enough without it, and it weakens your soul and is bad for your health. It’s what will make people more likely to cut you into pieces.”

Stepping back into a defensive position, Beth acquiesced. “Okay. Are you going to stab me?”

“Why would I stab you?”

“Stabbing is to the immortal what cuts are to the mortal.”

“No, I’m not going to stab you. This is going to be a problem, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“You living forever . . . You were already reckless. Now you’re going to be worse.”

“Maybe. We’ll have to see. If I am, I’ll keep my rashness directed solely on me.”

“I know. That’s the problem.”

“Why?”
“Because I don’t want to see you hurt even if you can’t die.”

“It might make you lose your focus in a fight?”

“No, because I care about you . . . Would you want to see me hurt?” She shook her head, so he asked, “Why not?”

“You’re my friend, and I don’t want you to suffer.”

“It’s the same for me with you.”

She gave him a coy smile and said, “Cas, are you trying to teach me empathy?”

She might know what it meant in a dictionary sense, but she just said she was relearning everything she knew or thought she knew about feelings. “Right, because you knew how it felt before now.”

“Now you’re being sarcastic.”

“Now, I’m ready for you to stop delaying our training session.”

“I really annoyed you with the whole stabbing thing, huh?”

“It was perhaps the dumbest thing you’ve suggested . . . and I think I just realized how long of a road I have ahead of me.”

“With me?” Cas nodded, and Beth relaxed. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He immediately felt bad for what he’d said. He hadn’t meant that he wasn’t grateful that he’d have her in his life for much longer than he’d thought possible. “I didn’t mean –”

“I know you used to not be an angel, because you really didn’t want to be one, but here you are an angel. Maybe it’s because of that?”

That’s precisely what it was. “It’s not the longevity. I’ve lived for billions of years. I’ll be happy to have you in my life even longer. It’s what I am. The power . . . It may have always been a part of me, but it’s too tempting to do something wrong with it. I don’t want it.”

Beth looked to the heavens and said, “Well, technically, you don’t really have much in the way of power. You’ve got wings and can heal . . . that’s about it. Bet you couldn’t even smite anymore. You won’t be taking people’s memories or conjuring things out of thin air.”

Cas joined her in looking at the skies before he said, “But for how long? Chuck won’t keep the Host blocked off from the souls in Heaven forever.”

“Who knows what Chuck will do? The only one who knows what Chuck’s thinking is Chuck. If it helps, I don’t think you were ever the same as the other angels.”

“But I have it in me to be like them and do the things they did to you and the world.”

“Everyone has it in them to be evil. It’s not the power. It’s who wields it, and whether or not the person lets the power corrupt them. You’ve been around for a long time and kept getting in trouble for doing good things. I think that says a lot about you and how you compare to other angels . . . I think it says a lot about you that you tore out your grace as a form of protest against them and that even though that protest meant a lot to you, you ended it without a moment’s hesitation to save Dean’s life. That’s the kind of person you are . . . Are you ready to spar?”
Yeah, he was. He didn’t know why taking his grace back was something that’d only just hit him then, but it had. Taking his grace back . . . he’d always known that if he ever took it back, he’d keep it, which is why he’d held off on doing it for so long, and now that he had it again . . . it’d felt a little like a failed attempt at a hunger strike. He’d been presented with a feast before his demands had been met, and he’d eaten his fill, but Beth was right. He’d done it all to save Dean, and he wouldn’t change that in any way. He’d take the lessons he’d learned while he was human and do something positive with them. He wasn’t sure what, but he would.
Sam felt the Dean to his right tense and wondered if it was because of the smell of blood or something else. That one was a vampire. Oh what a difference two months makes. Beth’s Dean had already taken a step in Beth and Cas’s general direction, but stopped when he saw Cas go to over to heal Beth after she jammed her angel blade through her stomach. Looking at her Dean, Sam felt the need to say, “And that seems normal to you?”

Her Dean’s focus stayed on Beth and Cas, but he shook his head in response and said, “Beth’s always experimented with what her body can and can’t do. Surprised it’s taken this long for her to do something like this . . . kinda thought maybe . . .”

He left his sentence hanging, and Sam said, “That she let those monsters attack her to see what would happen?”

Her Dean didn’t say anything, but threw a side-glance in Sam’s direction that indicated that’s what he’d been thinking. So, this was potentially less about whatever she’d done to get out of the djinn-induced dream and more about her living forever? “Is that why she let those vamps attack –“

Sam looked over his shoulder at his brother when his brother said, “She didn’t let those vamps do anything. They knew what they were doing, and they were vamps.”

“Well, but it was still her fault –“

“It wasn’t her fault. She had no way of knowing –“

Beth’s Dean, interjected. “It was her fault.”

Sam’s brother shook his head. “How you can say that? You weren’t even there.”

“You two were new. She was in charge. Everything that happened was on her watch.” When Sam’s brother didn’t do anything but give her Dean his own version of a ‘bitch face,’ her Dean shrugged and said, “What? She owns it.”

“She wasn’t experimenting.” Sam, his brother, and Beth’s Dean looked at vampire Dean, and vampire Dean tilted his head in the direction of Beth and Cas before adding, “She was proving a point . . . said that training is pointless and showed him why. He talked her ‘round.”

Her Dean asked “How?” and Sam thought that was missing the point entirely. There was something seriously wrong there.

The vampire answered, “He said that there were things worse than dying, like someone doing to her what you all were planning to do to Lilith.”

Her Dean’s eyebrows rose before he nodded, like that made sense. If she meant anything to any of them, they should think there was something wrong. They should be trying to fix it, not ignoring it. Before Sam could say that, her Dean said, “You know that’s creepy right?”

The vampire shrugged. “Not like I can’t hear everything in a mile radius. Might as well use it.”

“What else?”

The vampire started filling her Dean on various points . . . Beth didn’t have to think about it to tap
into her soul anymore . . . She didn’t let the monsters attack her on purpose. She'd had her hands full of boxes and had been caught unprepared . . . She wanted to know if Cas was going to up his sparring to include stabbing her . . . Cas thought she was going to get more reckless . . . Now Cas was trying to explain why he wouldn’t want her to do that. And her Dean didn’t question any of it. Whatever her Dean was thinking, he had his walls up, but Sam would say he was . . . concerned and hiding it. Her Dean’s wheels were turning and maybe her Dean was thinking of a way to counter it before it got worse. Maybe Sam didn’t have to worry about her so much.

What was affecting Sam more in that moment was the way the Deans were all interacting with one another. It was something that’d struck him since they’d gotten here . . . It was like they were triplets. They were close and acted like brothers. A look here, a gesture there, and they knew what the other one wanted. They were all so . . . similar.

There’d always been an element of similarity between them. They couldn’t not be the same, because they were the same, but now even Sam was having a hard time differentiating between them . . . including the vamp. The only way he knew which one was which was because of the colors they were wearing, something he’d noticed since they’d been here. Did they decide to do that amongst themselves? Dean didn’t talk fashion or colors with anyone. Maybe they’d just decided to do it independently from one another, because they were the same person and all on the same wavelength. Sam didn’t know. He’d ask, but he was sure if he did, they’d switch up their colors just to mess with him.

He missed that camaraderie, being part of a unit. Maybe he felt like he was missing out on being able to bond with them. He’d been planning to suggest he go out with them when they left, not for long, just a month or so, because he had plenty of time before school started here, and he'd been planning to use Beth being unstable as a reason for why they'd need an extra set of hands. She was unstable, but as she and Cas started sparring, it became painfully obvious that she wasn’t incompetent. It was pretty impressive, and he could see now why her Dean had been excited for them to see her in action.

Maybe the other two Deans hadn’t needed to see it, but he and Bobby had, and she was more than up for the job. Even when Cas played dirty tricks on her by vanishing and popping up in random places behind or beside her, occasionally in front of her to throw her off, she was ready for it. The only time there was a break in their sparring was when Cas would back off, and the vampire Dean said it was because she kept tapping into her soul without meaning to in the middle of the fight. When she went long enough without doing that, Cas really started pushing her by using his angel powers to fling her across the open field, and . . . yeah, Sam couldn’t use her not being up for it as an excuse to go with them.

He did have something he could use though. “You guys are leaving tomorrow?”

His brother tore his eyes from Cas and Beth to answer, “That was the plan if Beth was up for it . . . Looks like she’s up for it.” Yeah, the caveat of her being up for it had been Sam’s idea, which was why they were standing here watching Beth train.

“What about the school?”

“What about it?”

“Beth was supposed to help me with the curriculum.”

Her Dean answered that one. “She knows. She brought her lesson plans with her. Said something about running through it with you when she found them in her bag the other day. She was talking about writing copies and leaving them with you if we’re going tomorrow.”
Crap. “Uh, I was actually thinking about going with you guys, so I could see how the school is set up in Wisconsin. I didn’t get a chance to see it last time, and I think from the sounds of it, I want our school to be set up like that one. It’s in one building, and I know their classes are different than the ones at your camp. I want to see how Beth converts their system into one like yours, so I can see how to do it here.”

All three of the Deans gave the same nonchalant response that it was fine with them if that’s what he wanted to do, and Sam felt himself relax. He didn’t know why. He’s the one chose to stay here, and it’s not like he wasn’t allowed to go with them. Maybe he just didn’t want to make it seem like he missed his brother as much as he did. Maybe a month with three of them would do the trick.

It’s not that he didn’t like it here. He did. He was actually fitting in pretty well. He’d made some friends, mostly people he’d been friends with in his old life but hadn’t seen in a long time, either because they were dead, or he just hadn’t seen them. It wasn’t the same as having his brother though. He wanted to get the full-experience. He wanted to be able to have a life and still have his brother. It was a totally new situation for him.

When he went to Stanford, he’d cut Dean out, so he could have what he thought was a real shot at a ‘normal’ life. When he’d been with Amelia, he’d thought Dean was dead, which meant he’d been entirely in survival mode then. This time he was filled with more . . . hope? A sense of belonging that said, he didn’t have to hide that he was raised a hunter for the first in his attempts at living a ‘normal’ life. He could still see Dean on a regular basis and go on hunts with him if he wanted. He could just sit down and have a beer with Dean without the pressure of hunting too. The last couple of weeks, he’d gotten to have 2-Deans in a laid back situation like that, while the other one had been with Beth most of that time, and it’d been great. Now he could go out, hunt with Dean, and come straight back to his ‘normal’ life, looking forward to the next time he saw Dean.

Did he worry about Dean? Well, he hadn’t until one of the Dean’s showed up at the gate as a vampire. It’s something they really should’ve told him, but maybe they hadn’t thought he’d want to know, because that Dean wasn’t his brother. He did. He wanted to know how all three of them were doing . . . maybe he hadn’t really thought about the other two before they got here a few weeks ago, but since they’d been here, he’d been reminded of how all three really were his brother.

Anyway, whatever problems Beth was having, there were 2 other Deans to have his brother’s back. Cas had his brother’s back. Sam wanted a chance to get out there and see how they all worked as a team before he made his final decision on how confident he felt letting his brother leave here on his own, but for the most part, he’d say that Dean was probably all right. From what he’d heard, maybe his brother was actually the most put together out of all of them.

Beth’s Dean was dealing with family issues. The vampire was dealing with being a vampire. Sam’s brother had gotten Beth and vampire Dean away from the vampires. Sam’s Dean had been there when Cas and the MOC Dean had been ambushed in Madison, and his brother had made it out of both of those incidents unscathed. His brother was doing pretty well. Besides, Sam wanted to see what the countryside full of monsters looked like now.

He’d been keeping an eye on it on the computer. Seeing it in person was his next goal. Sure, there were monsters and Croats that walked right past the invisible camp at night, but they couldn’t see the walls the camp had repaired after Gabriel cloaked them, and there was a feeling of safety. What was it like out there when there were no walls? How was his brother spending his nights out there in the wild?

Those also weren’t the only reasons he wanted to leave for a while. He also wanted to pay a visit to where the other Sam was. The Evil Sam had called to talk to Beth while she was knocked out, and
the Evil Sam’s brother had taken the call instead. They knew where he was . . . somewhere between the Iowa camp and the Wisconsin camp, so he could make use of the electricity. They were going to drop in and check things out, see if the Evil Sam was up to evil ways of handling his self-appointed task of trying to cure the Croats or if the Evil Sam was actually doing some good.

Right now, Sam had no idea how it was going to go. The Evil Sam hadn’t seemed so bad the last time Sam saw him, so maybe he would be doing things on the level. Sam hoped that’s what the Evil Sam was doing. If the Evil Sam wasn’t . . . well, Sam wasn’t sure. He wasn’t sure what would constitute doing the wrong thing in this situation. Trying to cure the Croats would undoubtedly kill them. That was a given, but how much were they suffering? Did that matter? Sam wasn’t sure if the ends justified the means, but he thought they probably did. Really, it depended on the way the Evil Sam was going about it . . . if he was torturing them unnecessarily or if he was taking random people he found, infecting them, and then seeing if he could cure them at earlier stages of the infection, or if he was taking people he found and draining them of their blood, so he could sanctify large quantities of it and use that to cure the Croats . . . those were steps too far.

If the other Sam was doing anything that was a step too far, then Sam would deal with it. One thing he knew was that it didn’t matter how on the outs the Evil Sam and the Evil Sam’s brother were, that Dean couldn’t be the one to kill his brother. That Dean might think he had it in him to do it. Maybe he did, but that didn’t mean that it wouldn’t destroy that Dean. It’d destroy that Dean if Beth did it too.

Crazy or not, she meant a lot to that Dean, and it’d change the way he saw her if she killed his brother. Maybe it hadn’t when that Dean had been a demon, but Sam had been thinking about it, and what if that’s why Chuck made that Dean a demon? If Chuck was always going to allow the demon to come on the mission, because they needed someone with the Mark on their team, then maybe Chuck knew the Evil Sam was going to do what he did to Demon Dean? Chuck would’ve had to know that Beth would kill the Evil Sam. Chuck would’ve also had to know what that would do to her Dean, so he made that Dean a demon. It prevented that Dean from caring that the Evil Sam was dead until he wasn’t a demon, and by then the Evil Sam was brought back when the mission was over. Bottom line. If the Evil Sam needed to go, then Sam would be the one to do it. He wasn’t going to do it needlessly, and he wasn’t going to look for any small infraction to say that it needed to be done, but if there was a reason it had to be done, it only seemed right for him to be the one to do it. Until then, he was going to enjoy going out on the road with his brother x 3 and being able to come back here when he was done.
“Why do you look disappointed?”

“Disappointed. Defeated in expectation or hope.” Since talking with Cas, I thought maybe I should start saying that I knew what emotions were on an intellectual level. Something people around me seemed to think I needed was for emotions to be explained to me. Of course I knew what they were. I felt things. I knew the definition of emotions; therefore, I could label what I was feeling for the most part. I was just feeling them for the first time... well, some of them I suspect, I’d always been able to feel, but I couldn’t remember them. Other feelings I’m not entirely sure I ever felt this way, but again, I couldn’t really remember, so I wasn’t sure.

Dean’s eyes darted in my direction before his head dipped as he looked down and nodded. “If we’re going for a dictionary definition, then yeah, disappointed.”

That looking down or away before a brief ducking of the head is something I’d noticed he did when he was uncomfortable about something. Sometimes it was because he was unsure of what he was supposed to do or say. Sometimes it was so he could get a hold of his emotions and not show that he was feeling vulnerable or like he’d been mentally punched upside the head. Sometimes it was because he didn’t want to talk about it at all. “Cas said you were going to lecture me, and now you’re not?”

Oh good. That made him laugh. “You want one?”

“No, I mean, matching it up against my memories, it does seem like the sort of thing you might’ve lectured me about in the past. Kind of wondering how I’d feel about being lectured now.”

Balling up his shirt and throwing it on top of his bag as he reached for a cleaner one, Dean kept his back to me as he shrugged. “Better ways you could’ve proven your point, but you tend to go over the top on things like that.”

“Things like what?”

Putting his arms and head through the shirt holes, Dean answered, “I don’t know... figuring out your body’s limits.”

Right. I guess I did do that a lot in my old life. That’s what I called it now. My old life. “Honestly, I think part of me wanted to feel what it was like. It wasn’t nice. Think there’s a reason I always did whatever I had to do to not get impaled.” He laughed again as he turned to face me, and I added, “But it’s something I could live with.”

“Yeah, I guess you could... What I wanna know is why you didn’t want to train with Cas?”

Looking down at the cuff of one of my shirt sleeves, I found a thread that seemed out of place and was just begging me to tug on it, so I did before saying, “I guess there were a couple of reasons. One, I felt eyes on us, and I didn’t want to be a performing monkey for whoever it was. And two, I guess I wasn’t feeling it. I remember training with him in the past, but I don’t remember how that made me feel, so it’s not like I was excited about it, and I guess I didn’t see the point if the only point of training is so that I won’t die, because I can’t... but now, I think it was fun, so I’m looking forward to it in the future.”

“Fun.”
“Uh, yeah . . . fun, something that provides amusement or enjoyment . . . Amusement. Playful entertainment. Enjoyment. From enjoy meaning to have a good time. The time that Cas and I spent training was good. I found it entertaining. It was fun.” I looked up, and he was only a few feet in front of me. “What?”

“Nothin’ . . . just . . . Are you gonna do that all the time now?”

”No. Maybe. I don’t know. We use words everyday and don’t really think about their meanings. There’s a lot of emotion in the words we use to describe everything we do . . . and I guess now, because everything is so new that’s the process my brain takes to label what it is I’m feeling . . . just in reverse, because I feel something and then have to label it.”

“But before you were — “

“Letting you fill me in? I know. Kind of adds to the illusion that I’m crazy. I’m not. I’m just not the same. Or maybe I am?”

He shook his head ever so slightly, probably didn’t even know he’d done it, but it was enough of an answer, so I looked down at that thread that needed to be pulled. “Well, you are, and you’re not.” I nodded without looking at him, and he added, “Like that there . . . you used to do that all the time when you didn’t want to talk about something.” I exhaled a laugh I didn’t really mean and nodded without looking away from the thread. “Right . . . Is there something, I’m not getting? Thought things were all right.”

“It’s not that they aren’t all right. It’s that I can tell something is wrong or to be more precise that other people think there is.” To change the subject, I said, “Why did I train all the time. I know on an intellectual level that I wanted to be better. Now I don’t have that drive. Do you think that’s going to be a problem?”

“I don’t think it was so you could be better. I mean, maybe at the start it was, but after the Zombie Apocalypse, I think maybe you did it to . . . I don’t know. Keep going?” When I looked up at him, he tried to explain. “You found a way in this shitty life to turn something we do every day into something fun for you.” That made sense. It had been fun. Putting his hand on my shoulder, Dean added, “And I don’t think it’ll be a problem. That’s why I wanted them to see you tonight. Cas has a way of bringing the best out in you.”

“Cas thinks it’ll make me more reckless.”

Dean gave a noncommittal nod before finding the right answer. “Nah, I think it’ll work out the same.”

“Why do you sleep in here?”

Dean laughed at the change of subject. “Do you not want me to sleep in here?”

“I mean, is it for you or me?”

His eyebrows furrowed before he took a step back. “Honestly?”

He’d already turned his back on me, so I couldn’t just nod. I had to say, “Honesty would probably be best.” I remember him saying that he wanted us to be like normal people who dated and that normal people who dated didn’t sleep in the same bed the way we had when we met, and I guess now too.

“Both, I guess?”
“Because you think I’ll wander off and straight into a pack of Croats?”

He turned, and it seemed like he was annoyed, but then he took one look at me, and the annoyed expression relaxed off of his face. “No. Feels right. Or do you not think –“

“It doesn’t feel wrong.”

He smiled briefly, like he was unsure. “Do you even know when something feels wrong?”

“Well, I knew before I stuck that teaspoon of cayenne pepper in my mouth it wasn’t something I should do. I’m thinking that was me feeling that it was wrong.”

Taking a few steps closer, Dean put his hand on the wall behind me before leaning down into my personal space. “How ‘bout now? Feel wrong?”

“No.” It didn’t feel invasive. It felt like because I liked him I wanted him there and that’s not even getting into how physically attractive I found him.

Looking at my lips and leaning closer, he asked, “How ‘bout now?”

I shook my head, and he smiled what I think was a genuine smile before he started to move away from me. It was a genuine smile, because I think he thought maybe that things were positive, but he was still too scared to do anything about it, so I did. I didn’t know why I wouldn’t. Made perfect sense to me given the situation.

Since I’d woken up from the djinn-coma, he’d spent almost every waking and sleeping moment with me. Maybe it was to differentiate him from the others, or maybe it was legitimately because he wanted to spend that time with me. Either way, his hard work had paid off, because there was something there on my end to back up how kissing him made me feel. Yeah, this was a different kind of like than what I had for Cas. It was more than attraction. I liked the way this made me feel.

When my back hit the wall, his hands slid to my sides, and he pulled back. “What about now?”

His eyes searched my face for signs of something, I don’t know what. “Uh, well, I think I know what right feels like now, and I didn’t?” Why does he look concerned? Maybe I shouldn’t have said that if he doesn’t think the same? That was something he was worried about before the djinn, isn’t it? That’s why he said we were dating. He wasn’t sure if there was anything there. Is this what being vulnerable feels like? “Unless, you know it’s not something you want now, and -“

Smiling, he leaned closer and said, “Shut up,” before his lips connected with mine again, but now I wasn’t sure.

Pulling back a little, I tried to read his eyes while I said, “Are you trying to force it to make it what it was?”

“What?”

“Are you trying to fake it ‘til you make it?”

He seemed sincere when he answered, “Nothin’ to fake.”

“But I thought you weren’t sure if it’s something you would want if it didn’t feel the same.“

“It doesn’t feel the same . . . All I’m getting is you. I like it . . . a lot. If we could get back to it –“

“Why’d you look concerned?”
Licking his bottom lip, he then shook his head before taking a step back and letting me go. “No reason . . . Think that’s enough for tonight.” I thought that was going to be it, but on his way to the bed, he stopped and said, “It’s just you know I’m going to die, right?”

“Yeah. And you think that’ll be a problem?”

"You did."

"That’s not why I was keeping my distance from you. I was trying to give you what you wanted.”

“If we go down this road . . . you have a chance for a clean break now.”

“Is that what you want?”

Turning to face me, his stance looked like he was getting ready to take a hit. “I want what’s best for you.”

“I remember talking or thinking about this a lot over the years . . . you wanting what’s best for me. Don’t really have any feelings about it now, or at least not the ones I did, or I don’t think I do, but that’s not the point. The point is that I think you know what’s best for me.”

“Yeah, what’s that?”

Taking a step away from the wall, I said, “I’ve shown you . . . for years I’ve shown you. That’s how I know you know. You just don’t know that you do, because all this other stuff gets in the way.”

He watched me walk to the other side of the bed, and said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about, Beth,” so I smiled as I climbed under the covers.

“When you figure it out. Let me know, and feel free to kiss me as much or as little as you want in the meantime.”
“We need to go.” Dean had told the others they’d be gone 15 minutes ago.

“I’m not the one stopping us.”

Dean smiled before letting Beth go, so she could get her bags and said, “You’re not exactly making it easy either.” The open invitation to kiss her anytime he wanted was a little too much for him to pass up. Hadn’t really left her alone since they woke up this morning. The only way to explain how things were now was to say that the blinders had come off. How it felt to be with her wasn’t hidden behind anything.

Kissing her still made him feel like he was home, but it’s not all he was thinking about when he kissed her. And kissing her felt pure, not that it’d felt tainted in the past, but it was just the two of them now, not the connection, which had become a third party involved in their relationship. A lot of the anxiety he hadn’t known he felt about being with her was gone, not all of it, because he still worried about what being with him would mean for her in the long run, but overall he was able to revel in the happiness being with her gave him in a way he hadn’t been able to do as much in the past. All the underlying reasons for why he kissed her were still there, like how he felt about her and how she had to do very little to turn him on.

The best part, though, was that he was pretty sure that he’d been right about what was going on with her. She might be learning how to feel things all over again, but he didn’t mind it as much as the others did, because to him it meant that the door that she’d never been able to open between her and how she felt about people, the one that’d made her think there was something wrong with her for so long, it was gone.

Yes, that was part of what concerned him, because when he died, which could be at any time, he didn’t want to put her through that, but at the same time, knowing she knew exactly how she felt about him was something that maybe made him feel like this thing they had was more balanced, like they were really partners, and that meant a lot to him even if she was starting all over again and right now didn’t know anymore than being with him felt right to her. He’d take that, and he was looking forward to building on it as soon as he figured out what the hell her riddle last night meant.

All of the recent changes also meant that that she was in a better place than she’d been since he’d known her. She wasn’t having nightmares. She didn’t feel like she had to constantly be on the move to stay out in front of all those things she was running from in her past. She wasn’t in constant turmoil, and that she wasn’t made him happy for her. It was better for her. Besides, that’s a big part of the reason she'd been so reckless in the past, so if that was gone, it'd offset any additional recklessness she had now when it came to testing how things felt, like being stabbed. Testing those things out would stop sooner rather than later, and then he was hoping she’d be just the right amount of reckless. A certain amount of recklessness was needed to do this job, and it was needed to survive in the world the way it was too.

What he really needed to do was to put more serious thought into changing this life expectancy discrepancy between them. It’d solve the problem of him having to worry about what would happen to her if he died. When they’d been in her head during the djinn-induced dream, it’s something he’d said he’d fix to give her a reason to want to get out of there. Maybe then, he’d been thinking that finding a way to get rid of her immortality was the way to go, because at the time, it’d seemed like that’s what she wanted to hear, but in all honesty, now that he’d had time to think about it, he knew it wasn’t the way to deal with this. Beth being immortal solved a lot of problems. She could still get hurt, and he didn’t want that to happen, but if she did get hurt, she wouldn’t die.
Yeah, the only way to go with this was to find a way to get him to live longer, not like that wacko Doctor Benton, but something. He’d figure it out . . . if he had time. He’d been serious when he told Beth that more things were bound to go wrong, because things had changed in their universe. There were a lot more monsters and Croats around than there had been since the first few weeks after the outbreak started, and instead of staying at a base and fortifying it, they were traveling around in the chaos. It made their jobs more dangerous. Well, he’d just have to make sure he survived until he found the solution. For now, he had to make it back to South Dakota to fulfill his promise of coming back to Rogue and then take it from there.

Rogue. He wondered how Beth would react to being around Rogue now. How would Rogue react to being around Beth? Rogue picked up on a lot. Maybe she’d know something was different about Beth. It’d work out. He’d make sure it did. He had to . . . his family was the most important thing to him. Always had been, but acknowledging that Beth and Rogue were not just family, but *his* family, one he’d created and was responsible for all on his own . . . hadn’t really let himself think about that in too much depth until now. He’d always just kind of lumped them in with his idea of family, which they were, but it was different.

They were his, and maybe he took that for granted, and maybe there were problems there all the time for one reason or another, but they got through them, and thinking about it now made him feel . . . protective, safe, proud, like grabbing Beth before she could walk out the door, so he could take advantage of kissing her whenever he wanted again. He’d put it on hold for far too long . . . Yeah, he was liking not having the blinders on anymore, because it made everything less intense, softer, more focused on the two of them, instead of what Beth gave him, and the fear of losing that . . . better, like he could see the whole picture instead of just part of it. Sure, they were hunters, and they made mistakes all the time. Yes, they were legends in the minds of some, villains in the minds of others, blunt instruments, soldiers or pawns in God’s games, but underneath it all, she was just a woman, and he was just a man, and they’d found one another and stayed together because it’s something they wanted for them, a little piece of normality, happiness, comfort, whatever you want to call it. Probably a good thing somebody knocked on the door and interrupted them, because he’d been getting a little too lost in the moment.

Beth gave him another smile, and he reluctantly let her go, so she could leave and deal with whoever it was, while he went to grab his things. Maybe they needed to do a better job of raising their little girl. Rogue should be here with them, but at the same time, it was too dangerous for her. They were giving her the best life they could under the circumstances. At least she was safe. She may not get as much of it as he’d like, but whatever time she got to spend with her parents was quality time, or he thought it was. At least she knew they loved her, or he hoped she did.

Thinking about family as he walked down the hall with his bags, Dean thought about Sam. His brother had gone full Grizzly Adams out there in the wild, but other than that, Sam had seemed mostly okay the last time Dean had seen him. And at least Sam was attempting to do some good. First, by trying to get rid of as many Croats as he could before they migrated, and now by trying to cure the Croats. The best part was that Sam had decided to do those things all on his own.

Didn’t mean that Dean trusted Sam, but he could appreciate the efforts Sam was making, or appearing to make. Sam didn’t know they were going to be checking up on him soon, and Dean wanted to keep it that way, so he could get an idea of what Sam was really like now when nobody but Gadreel was around.

Did Dean miss his brother? Yeah, sure he did, but losing trust in someone who meant so much to you was a funny thing. It affected both people in equally significant ways even if the ways both
parties were affected were different. You could be okay with the person who’d lost your trust, maybe even forget from time to time the thing they’d done to lose your trust, and then all of a sudden it would hit you. Every time that happened, it was like reopening the wound, and the same feelings of anger, hurt, and mistrust would find their way to the surface. Then, the more time you spent with the person, the more those feelings would recede until something reminded you what the other person had done. Maybe the time between those moments of pain got longer as more time passed, and maybe people could eventually forgive in time, but what do you do when the person you were just starting to trust again did something else to break your trust? You went through it all again.

Sam had done some pretty awful things long before the outbreak, not necessarily the thing with Rachel the way the other Deans thought, but definitely what Sam had done to Beth in that bathtub was something that should’ve been the final straw after all the lying and sneaking around with Ruby. Sam killing Jo was another one and Sam selling Beth off to Crowley was another. Even after all the things Sam had done during the outbreak and during the occupation of Vegas, Dean had let Sam back into his life. Tentatively at first and then more openly, but it was one thing after another, and Dean was well and truly spent on second, fourth, tenth chances.

Maybe the question shouldn’t be if he missed Sam, and maybe it shouldn’t be if he could forgive Sam either, because given enough time, he probably would. The question should be could he have that knife opening old wounds again, because that’s what it felt like every time Sam did something to break Dean’s trust, like Sam was stabbing him through the heart. It didn’t stop there though. Every time it happened, it was like Sam went ahead and stabbed all the old scars that’d been healed from previous attacks. Sometimes it felt a little like he was Marion Crane in the shower scene.

Imagine if she’d survived. She wouldn’t have been all that fast to jump back into a shower in the Bates Motel. Maybe eventually, she’d be able take a shower somewhere else, but if every few months Norman Bates found her and attacked her in the shower all over again, she’d eventually give up taking showers altogether . . . or get a bodyguard. Right now, Dean was in the ‘I’m never taking a shower again’ phase, but at the same time, he had a bodyguard in Beth, not because she’d take Sam out if it came to that, but because just by having her around, she made Dean feel safe.

Maybe that meant the question wasn’t whether or not he missed Sam, could forgive him, or was willing to go through the hurt of being betrayed over and over again. Because the answer to all three of those questions had already been answered repeatedly over the years. Yes, given enough time, he could do all of those things. The question was did he want to do them now? He didn’t know. She might have a whole slew of problems and always would, but as long as he had someone in his corner, who he knew without a shadow of a doubt was there for him no matter what, it meant he had a choice, one he probably wouldn’t have had if Beth wasn’t around.

A thought occurred to him. Maybe that’s what she’d meant last night when she’d said she’d been showing him for years what she needed. If she needed someone in her corner, problems and all, who would be there for her no matter what, then she had it with him. Something told him it wasn’t quite that simple, but he thought maybe he was on the right track. Now he just needed to figure out what other things she did for him and give them back to her if he wasn’t doing them already.

Glancing in the direction of the other Sam when he walked out of the bunker, Dean knew for a fact that, that Sam had conned his way onto this crew. Why, Dean wasn’t sure, but it definitely wasn’t to see how the Wisconsin camp had set up its school. Maybe he just missed his brother, but why lie about it?

Sam had always been a pretty bad liar. Bad as in he sucked at it most of the time. It wasn’t until it was something really important, like drinking demon blood or planning for the end of the world in
one way or another that Sam got good at lying. And Sam was bad when it came to lying, as in he did it or tried to do it all the time. Sam was worse about being a lying liar that lies than him, and Dean knew he was a liar most of the time, or he used to be before the outbreak.

The question was, why was this Sam lying? Maybe it was nothing, but Sam lying was hardly ever a good thing. Was it fair to paint both adult Sams with the same brush? Who knew? But it’s what he was doing, because he didn’t want to get caught by surprise by Sam Winchester again. All of that was going to go on the back burner for now though. He wasn’t going to follow this Sam around to make sure this Sam stayed on the straight and narrow. He just wasn’t going to be taken in by him. Right now his main concern was getting to the Iowa camp before dark without any mishaps along the road.
I kept the barrel of my gun handgun trained on the head of the Croat sprinting towards Sam’s back, accounted for its speed, and pulled the trigger when it was about 5 feet away. I guess you could get the Croats to attack you en-masse, just not if you killed one or two here or there. If you killed 10, 15, 20, then they were directed by whoever was controlling them to attack. It didn’t help that there were also monsters in the mix.

The Croats ignored them. The monsters more or less ignored the Croats unless it looked like the Croats were going to kill their intended prey, and then they disposed of those Croats by ripping their heads off. While killing the Croats helped us, having to kill the monsters in addition to killing the Croats wasn’t all that easy. Yes, silver brought many of them down for good, but not all of them, and because when things like this happened, we didn’t have enough time to switch between normal ammo for the Croats and silver ammo for the monsters, we were going through so much silver ammo that there’s no way that we could keep up with making enough to replace all of it we used in a general travel day.

It’d taken a few days of waiting around in the Iowa camp for us to make up what we’d used on the way to Iowa, and now that we were secretly on our way to Sam’s laboratory, we were going through it all again. We’d have to stop there, ransack any silver from pawn shops or homes nearby again and take a few days to make enough ammo to get us to Wisconsin. One might think that a simple way of getting around this mess would be to not engage with the Croats or monsters, to simply sneak from one camp to another without drawing their attention, but we were hunters, and this was our world.

If nobody took the time to kill these things when they had the opportunity to do it, then the numbers of both Croats and monsters would continue to rise with each person they found out there in the wild. Besides, the camps might be warded from their sight, which worked on the Croats, but the smell wasn’t blocked for the monsters, so the last thing we needed was for them to sniff out a camp, figure out that the reason they couldn’t see it was because it’d been warded, and then organize to figure out a way around the wards, over the walls, and into the camps. The pure-blooded monsters couldn’t do that, but the hybrids could get past the wards, and that’s why giving them enough time to figure that out and organize for the betterment of the monster race was a bad idea and why we were putting down as many things as we could along the way.

How did I feel about killing now? I didn’t have time to think about it while I was doing it. Afterwards, I thought about the Croats we killed and how Sam was trying to find a cure. If he found that cure, then all the Croats we killed along the way would end up on the other side instead of in Heaven where they couldn’t do anymore damage. I don’t think they’d become normal demons, at least not the intelligent kind that strategized, but the more animalistic demons that were a step higher than a hellhound and a step lower than the daevas would probably be about right. The gates were closed, the doors weren’t. It was a problem for another day, but that’s what I thought about killing them.
How did I feel about it? Well, I didn’t like the way it made me feel. I guess it’s what people mean when they say they feel bad about something, because I didn’t feel good when I thought about what might’ve been for those people if Sam found the cure. I remembered thinking that what I’d done with the Leviathan to cull the number of Croats meant that millions of people who could’ve potentially been cured had just become Leviathan chow, and I guess now I knew how I must’ve felt about that then.

How did I feel about killing the monsters? Well, I guess in some ways I felt bad for killing them too. We weren’t having problems with the monsters that presumably had people out there that they were holding onto as feedbags, like the vampire Dean had in me or the djinn’d had just prior to finding me in Colorado. The monsters we came across who were roaming the land were roaming the land, because they were hungry, starving, and almost crazed with hunger.

It’s not like they had any alternatives out there in the way of animals to consume unless it was a rat or feral cat or something like that, and there wasn’t much sustenance in those, so even monsters who might’ve been ‘good’ and chosen cattle over people when they had a choice, weren’t much better than rabid animals when they came across people now. I may have felt ‘bad’ about the monsters, but in a world where it was literally killed or be killed, and in a world where you had to think about saving people out there in the wild that you may not even know, and knowing that in Purgatory, monsters wouldn’t be hungry, I felt that killing the monsters was a necessary evil for now.

As the Croat I’d shot hit the ground, Sam kicked the monster he’d been struggling to kill in the stomach to get it away from him and pulled his gun to shoot it in the heart before re-holstering his gun, grasping his machete, and looked at me over his shoulder. “Are you gonna do any actual fighting or leave it all to us?”

“Well, as much as I’m enjoying watching you guys in an all out war against the forces of evil, what I’m doing up here is actually more important than me being down there with you.”

He was still annoyed with me for not helping more, but I’d given my position away, so I found myself focusing instead on the sound of sprinting feet behind me. Dipping down into a crouch and reaching over my head for hair, skin, clothing, something I could use to grab a hold of it, I found myself grabbing rotting clothing, and used that and the Croat’s momentum to help me flip it over my head before I scrambled over its torso, so I could hold it down as I aimed for the head and pulled the trigger. I didn’t even have time to get off of the Croat before having to swing my gun to the right, take aim in less than a second and get a head shot on the next nearest Croat that I’d gained the attention of in the course of my activities. Then it was one at the back of the truck, one to the back right, and as I got to my feet to kick the corpse off the cab of the truck, I got a shot on a couple more Croats to the left back and left side of the truck before I saw the reason I’d decided to stay up there coming up over the horizon to our south.

“Time to go!”

“What’d you see?”

Looking down at the Dean that’d asked just before he got ambushed by a monster to his left, I holstered my gun and hopped down to the ground, grabbed my angel blade, and waited for the right moment to strike, so I didn’t hurt that Dean. The monster’s back was to me as its attention was entirely on trying to take a chunk out of Dean, so it only took a few seconds to find my opening and bring my angel blade through its neck. As its head rolled to the ground, I ignored the annoyed look I got from that Dean for having stolen his kill and answered his question. “Reinforcements to the South. Get in the truck. I don’t care who drives.”
His eyes darted from me to the landscape over my shoulder before he gave me a nod and shouted for Sam to get in the truck. I guess that meant this was the other apocalyptic Dean. Previously, I called him the Despondent Dean, but I don’t think that fit anymore. The other apocalyptic Dean felt like it was too long to say every time you wanted to talk to him or about him. Maybe the oldest Dean would fit? I mean, my Dean was technically the oldest, because he got those extra 13 years in that do-over life, but this Dean came from a future that was 3 or more years into the future than ours currently was and 2 or more years into the future than the Vampire Dean’s was, so that made him older in that sense. I’d have to think about it when I had time.

I went to go lend a hand to the others in their mini-battles, and the oldest Dean grabbed my arm to stop me as his brother ran to the second truck after dispatching what looked like a German Shepherd, which meant it was probably a skinwalker. “If Sam’s in the other truck, one of us needs to get this one going and keep it running.”

“I know. Thought I told you to do it.”

He exhaled a laugh and tried not to smile with a slight shake of his head before leaning closer and adding, “Your eyes are doing that weird back and forth thing. I’ll get them. Get in the truck.”

“I don’t understand –“

“I don’t know how long they were freaky blue before you took that hybrid’s head, but they were and then they weren’t and now they are again. Until you get it under control, I don’t think you should be fighting anything.”

“Say something nice to me.”

He exhaled another laugh, and looked confused, but like he was starting to take the threat looming over the horizon a little more seriously and started to say, “We don’t have time for –“

“Say something nice to me, and I’ll go back to normal.”

“Uh, okay . . . I like your jacket?”

I found myself unexpectedly laughing and saying, “That’s not what I meant, but it was funny, so it’ll do. Get in the truck . . . that’s if you want to drive.“

I didn’t have time to say anything else as I dropped to the ground, grabbed my gun, kicked Dean’s legs out from under him, and took aim on the monster that’d been sprinting up behind him. A reflexive shot to the heart and then head didn’t kill it, but two quick shots to the eyes to blind it did buy me time to grab a Shinto blessed bamboo arrow from the quiver I had slung over my back as I crawled around Dean, so I could get to the okami, and stab it in the chest. Leaning back to stay out of the reach of its hands, I rested my weight on my elbow to give me enough leverage to kick it in the face a couple of times, and then when it fell to its side, I pounced on it to finish the job. This was the problem with people not getting in the trucks. It meant there was more time for more things to distract us from getting out of here.

As I finished the 7th and final plunge of my arrow, I felt something come up behind me and very easily could’ve killed whatever it was, but after aiming my gun above me under what would be it’s chin, I looked up and saw Dean. I directed my gun elsewhere, and he shook his head before reaching down to grab me under the arms and pull me to his feet. “You’re doing it again. One second they were fine, and the next they were the way they are now.”

“It’s a good thing I am doing it again. It made me fast enough not to kill you.”
I think we were at an impasse. Looking around, I saw the vampire Dean helping out my Dean, and yelled, “We need to go. We don’t have enough ammo to deal with what’s coming.”

He gave me a nod, used the extra that being a vampire gave him in the speed and strength department to finish off the monster and then Croat, much to the annoyance of my Dean and then they both started running for the trucks. That’s when the Dean, who still hadn’t let me go said, “Nice job with the okami?” and I laughed again.

“That’s not what I meant either.” I looked up at him to show him that my eyes were more than likely fine, and he let me go, so I could make my way to the nearest truck. “Somehow sentimentality and apparently humor get through . . . I don’t know why, but they do.”

“Wasn’t trying to be funny.”

“I know. That’s why it was. I don’t need compliments. I don’t know . . . Stick with humor. Seems to work.” I think it had to be something more meaningful than a compliment. Like Cas had me think about how I felt about him or my Dean or he said something like, ‘I like you Beth because . . . ‘ and whatever it was usually made me feel liked, which made the calculating mind melt away.

“Yeah well, I don’t really do meaningful.”

Looking over at Dean as I opened the door to get in the cab, I’d nearly forgotten that any of the Deans could read my mind. I’d spent so much time with my Dean, and he couldn’t do that anymore. “I thought you weren’t going to read my mind.”

“Thought we needed to get out of here.”

Yeah, we did. Next stop, Sam Winchester’s Laboratory of Doom, I guess. I think I’d been incredibly naïve in thinking we could clear out the area between all the camps with the current state of things. Whittling the monsters and Croats down out on the road was the best we could hope for right now, but as soon as Sam found a cure, then maybe we could look into creating an aerosol delivery method if that was even possible. Maybe it could only be cured intravenously, which would mean rounding all these Croats up and curing them one by one in a process that could take days, and that was if whoever was controlling them didn't just instruct them to attack. We’d end up killing more to protect ourselves than we could ever cure if that happened. The monsters were a different story. I think we could handle them. It’s just that right now, they were tied up in the Croat numbers. I guess we could ignore the Croats and let them pass by us, while we focused on the monsters, but there was no telling if or when they might be unleashed on us. We couldn’t afford to become complacent around them or let them continue on their paths to search for whatever it was that they were trying to find. Past experience said that whatever they wanted probably wasn’t a good thing.
Sam watched the ragtag group of hunters come out from the shadows. How long they’d been there, he didn’t know. Beth tipped him off first, because she blatantly walked out into the middle of the room to get a better look at what he was doing. Sam was guessing that his brother was the Dean that quickly followed her looking annoyed after she blew their cover. The others all came out after that, including the other Sam. They all looked as annoyed with Beth as his brother did, or maybe the other Sam did. The other two Deans seemed to think it was funny and were trying to hide it. He may not know how long they’d been there, but he knew why they were there, and what they’d been doing.

They were checking up on him. Making sure that he hadn’t gone off the deep end and started enjoying what he was doing in his search for the cure. Was he mad about it? He didn’t really have a right to get mad about things anymore. Did it make him feel like crap? Yeah, it did, but again, he didn’t have the right to feel bad that nobody trusted him. Why would they? They’d seen him once since he’d gone out on his own with Gabriel to try and start making things right in the world. They had no idea whether or not he’d changed or if he would change. He didn’t even know the answer to that one.

He did a poor job of hiding that he hadn’t known they’d been there. He’d ask where Gadreel was, but he’d sent Gadreel out to find more subjects a couple of hours ago. They could’ve gotten in here at any point after that and warded the walls to keep Gadreel out and from blowing their cover. He probably should’ve noticed that Gadreel hadn’t come back yet, but most of his focus was on the current subjects he was testing.

More than anything, and he hoped he portrayed it better than he had ‘not’ being caught unaware, he was grateful to have them there, because it meant he might get some help on this for a change. Gadreel was good for going out to find more Croats and bringing them back here without catching the notice of other Croats or monsters, and Gadreel was good at watching the Croats on a molecular level to see if the attempted cures were working, but as an ideas guy, Gadreel was seriously lacking. Sam had tried getting Beth’s help a few weeks back, but she’d been indisposed. He wanted to know what’d happened. He suspected it was bad, because she would’ve called him back if she could, or he thought she would. Maybe she wouldn’t if he’d just randomly called her for a chat, or if he’d called her to help him personally, but it was about helping or trying to help these Croats, so she would’ve called back for something like that.

He may have gone out of his way to give his family a wide berth since they’d come back from their mission, but he still cared about them, and if something had happened to Beth, he wanted to know about it. He considered her part of his family now. Part of having re-lived his youth with Beth meant that generally, the feelings he had about her being something of a big sister for him then had stuck. Yes, he may have tried to kill her after Jess died, and yes he may have gone down another dark path after they got back to this life, and maybe that’s what had caused he and Dean to both agree to do Chuck’s mission, but if he’d been the other Sam, the one who’d been hiding in the shadows over there behind some crates, he wouldn’t have done any of those things.

That’s pretty much where he was right now on his journey of self-acceptance and redemption. He wasn’t sure which one he was supposed to do first or if he had to do them simultaneously, but he did know that one without the other wouldn’t do any good. As far as the self-acceptance thing went, he knew he hadn’t been born evil.

Seeing the other Sam told him that much, because that guy wasn’t evil. They both had it in them to
make the same bad decisions, but the point was that guy hadn’t done those things, and he was still a decent guy. Sam was beyond the point of being a decent guy. He knew that, but if he knew that guy could become him if that guy made the same decisions Sam had made, then he also knew that if he hadn’t made those decisions, he could have been that guy, someone who was flawed and made mistakes, but someone who was at heart a good man who loved his brother and tried his best to save the world, just not at the expense of his brother. Those were the same flaws Sam had. He’d just taken them a lot farther down a truly dark path than that Sam had.

On the redemption side of things . . . well, he was trying to do that right now by finding a cure for the Croatoan virus. It wouldn’t un-do any of the things he’d done. It wouldn’t suddenly make him a good person, but somebody had to find a way to fix this mess he’d made, and since Chuck wouldn’t do it, and since Sam’s the one who made the mess, he figured it should be him. Even if he had to go through every Croat on the planet, he wasn’t stopping until he found the cure. If that meant he just saved one or two towards the end, it was still one or two more than he would’ve saved, and if he didn’t save anyone, then at least he’d tried. To not try was unacceptable.

Why all the soul searching? Well, having died and then –

“So, you found some manganese dioxide and are filtering their blood that way?”

Sam looked over at Beth as she examined where he’d put a tube in the Croat's neck. “Uh, yeah. Wasn’t sure how to set this up once I got everything, but I found some books and figured it out. The arms are falling apart on most of them, so starting an IV in those is a lost cause.” He’d spent a lot of time looking at anatomy books too to make sure he got good at finding the right veins/arteries to tap into and out of for this. The Croats having rotting flesh made it even more difficult than Sam would’ve imagined.

“And you’re just filtering it for now?” Sam nodded, and Beth said, “Any results?”

“Some. The filtering has to be a continuous thing for at least 36 hours, because Gadreel says that the machine is removing a lot of the virus from the blood, but not all of it, and if the process is stopped at all before the virus is all gone in the blood, then it goes back in and re-infects everything again. It doesn’t do anything for the tissue that’s been infected.” It’d taken him a lot more time to figure all that out than it sounded like it would.

Beth thought about it and then said, “And what happens when you get to that point? When it’s no longer in the blood, but is still in the tissue?”

“They’re less violent, but they’re nowhere near being human enough to talk anymore.”

Beth nodded solemnly while she watched the Croat and then said, “And I’m assuming that’s because the virus is in their brain rather than a physical inability to speak through their vocal cords?” Sam nodded to affirm what she’d said, and then she said, “Obviously a body in this condition wouldn’t be able to live without something supernatural keeping it going, so what you’re looking for is a Croat that can die without being shot in the head or staked through the heart.” Her gaze flicked in his direction, and he hadn’t thought about that being a way to know that the cure had worked, but he guessed she was right, so he nodded, like he thought that too, and she smiled briefly, but instead of acknowledging that he hadn’t known that, she carried on with her analysis. “If the point is to reduce the infection enough that the soul can try to fight back, how’s that going?”

“That’s where it’s falling down. I mean, Gadreel says their soul they may be a little less demon-esque, but nowhere near being human. I think it’s because there’s still so much in the tissue, that it doesn’t have an impact on their souls.”
Beth looked at the machine again and then up at Sam and said, “And what kind of medicine are you giving them to help their human sides get stronger?”

“Uh, just started with blessed saline bags, but it hasn’t done anything yet.”

“On which ones?”

“Uh, that one back there in the corner. It’s been here the longest.”

“By just started, you mean . . . “

“Uh, a couple of days ago.” Or he thought it was a couple of days ago. It could’ve been longer. He lost track of all time in here.

“And that’s the only one?”

“Yeah, the one next to it has blessed saline bags, and I added a bag of blessed blood into the mix. The one next to it just has the blood. The others aren’t that far along yet.”

“And all three treatments haven’t done anything for their souls?”

Sam shrugged while he looked at the Croats they were talking about. “The one with both seems to be doing better than the other two, but it’s still nowhere near enough to undo the damage.”

“Have you thought about finding a way to get the machine to bless the blood as it’s passing through? I mean one bag of blood would get diluted down along with the rest, especially over time. Maybe if the machine was pumping continuous amounts of sanctified blood into them, it might make more of a difference.”

He hadn’t thought about that. He’d mostly been concerned with being able to find enough blood to do more bags in the next batch of Croats to test out if more sanctified blood was the key. Was that possible? Could you get a machine to bless blood? He hated to ask, but still . . . maybe it had to be done. “Do you think you could –“

“Chuck, if you want to be useful, could you make the machines at the back of the room bless the blood as it passes through them?” Looking at Sam, Beth added, “I don’t know if that’ll work.”

“So, if the machines do that, and if that works to cure them . . . I should give them some kind of sedative, or –“

“I wouldn’t on some of them.”

What? He wasn’t expecting that. “But they’ll feel everything their bodies have been through.”

“Yeah, and it’s a fight they might need to consciously make once they get something resembling human consciousness back. Knock some out when you think they’re to that point and don’t knock others out to see if it matters.”

That sounded awful. For these things to go from being things to people who could feel their flesh rotting off their bodies without any sedatives? “What about pain medication?”

“I don’t think there’s enough pain medication in the world to keep them from feeling their bodies rotting from the inside out, but again, they might have to be somewhat lucid . . . if the pain doesn’t drive them mad, then the sight of themselves might, and that wouldn’t help with their recovery either. Maybe you have to find the right cocktail of pain medication to keep them awake, a little
unaware of what they look like, and not in so much pain that they’re only consumed by that.” She must’ve seen his discomfort at the way this was going, because she quickly added, “But we’ll be here for a few days while we stock back up on ammo, so maybe we’ll know how the machines work on the back three by then . . . Guessing you don’t think we’ll find a way to cure them using an aerosol delivery method or a concentrated dart or something, right?”

She looked a little disappointed when he nodded, and Sam looked around at the others who had retreated to the other side of the room to be further away from the row upon row of stinking, rotting Croats laid out in hospital beds all over this side of the warehouse. “You’re sure that you guys are staying?”

“Well, that was a practical consideration, but he wasn’t sure the others would agree to it. “And the others know you’re staying?”

“Well, if they were all on board, then he guessed he should think of practical things, like where to put them and how to feed them. “Then you might want to go scratch out the wards you put up to keep Gadreel out. We’re going to need him to keep an eye on them while we sleep.”

Beth smiled. “If you think we’re all sleeping at the same time with all of these in the same building as us, you’ve been away from hunters too long . . . what are you doing to keep eyes out of this place?”

“What?”

“I mean if these things are being controlled, who knows how they’re being controlled. Maybe whatever is controlling them can see through their eyes . . . Croats do attack if enough of them are killed. And reinforcements get brought in if even more of them die.”

He didn’t know that. “Uh, I’m not sure anything is powerful enough to see through the eyes of all the Croats out there . . . I don’t think anything could even do it with the Croats that are searching for something, because there are still a couple million of them doing that. I’m pretty sure that not even all the witches in New Orleans could do that if they’re behind this. And if it’s demons, I don’t think there are enough on Earth to control all these Croats, but even if there are, I know they can’t see what Croats are seeing. Maybe whatever it is notices when it loses numbers, but doesn’t care unless it’s more than a few?”

“Maybe.”

Sam thought about it a little more and added, “But if they do attack when whatever is controlling them feels a lot of them disappearing, then maybe it means we’ll have to move this operation around once they start getting cured. I don’t want to start being overrun by them . . . I wonder why we haven’t been already. If whatever is controlling them knows when they disappear and where they disappear well enough to know where to send reinforcements, then they should know all of these are here and haven’t moved in a while.”

“I’m thinking that maybe you should thank Gadreel for that . . . There aren’t any Croats within a couple miles of here.”

Really? If Gadreel was responsible for that, then he was doing it on his own. Sam hadn’t thought Croats would be a problem, so he hadn’t told Gadreel to deal with them. “No bodies?”
“Nope.”

“Can you scratch out the wards? I want to talk to him.” If Gadreel was doing that, then maybe Gadreel knew enough to take the Croats he killed far enough away that whatever was controlling them wouldn’t notice, but if Gadreel wasn’t doing that, then maybe whatever was controlling the Croats was having them steer clear of here . . . that meant whatever it was might know what he was doing . . . how could it know that? Maybe whatever it was could see through the Croats eyes. If that was the case, it made him think witch more than demon, because he knew demons couldn’t do that . . . unless demons were using spells to do it. A spell is the only thing that Sam could think of that would make something like that even possible.
“So now you think whatever is controlling the Croats is using a spell?”

Sam shared a brief look with Beth before saying, “Yeah . . . Gadreel isn’t the reason they’re steering clear of this facility. They’re doing that on their own. Why would they do that? Maybe because they already have eyes in here with the Croats that I’m trying to cure . . . and if whatever is controlling them knows to send reinforcements and where to send them, then maybe –“

“Whatever is controlling them is using them like land drones?” Sam shrugged, and Dean sat back while he thought about it. If whatever was controlling the Croats was using them as a kind of security camera system, that would make sense of some of the things they’d seen out on the road in the last few weeks. “So, they aren’t just looking for something. They’re going out to get intel on where people are . . . the troops south of the boarder are what? Enforcement if it’s needed?”

Sam and Beth shared another look that said maybe they hadn’t thought of that before Sam volunteered, “That could explain why they attack when there are large enough numbers of them killed . . . Suddenly feels more Orwellian than I thought it did.”

So, the Croats were acting as some kind of primal thought police? Dean glanced in Beth’s direction to get her take, and she slowly exhaled before saying, “I don’t know . . . maybe that’s the end game that’s being set up here, but if that’s where it’s going, you’d think whoever is controlling them would just instruct the Croats to attack as soon as they see us . . . maybe they will if we keep killing more Croats, but for now they’re more concerned with spreading out to cover the land . . . maybe they’re looking for something too. It’s hard to know their motivation right now . . . I think it’s more that the motivation can’t good that’s troubling.”

She had a point. Maybe they didn’t need to know where this was going to act on it. “And you’re thinking spell, so New Orleans?”

Sam ducked his head before saying, “Or demons that know spells . . . maybe they’re working together, or maybe it’s something else that found the right kind of spell books. I just know that demons can control Croats, but they can’t see what Croats are seeing . . . seems more like a spell to me.”

So they didn’t have a head to cut off of Operation Croat. They didn’t have a motivation of whoever was controlling Operation Croat either. They could go out there and kill the Croats indiscriminately to cut down on the numbers, or they could cure them to cut down the numbers that way, but curing these things would take time, and maybe it was time they didn’t have. Looking back into the other room with the hospital beds, Dean said, “Think maybe they could fill us in on what their masters want?”

“Well, they can’t talk right now, and if they’re cured, they’ll die.”

I know that, Sam. “Yeah, I know . . . there’s not an in between though? Like maybe we could cure
them most of the way, get what we need from them, and then finish the cure.”

When he didn’t get an answer, Dean turned back to look at Sam and saw his brother silently checking with Beth to see what she thought. When she shrugged, Sam sighed and said, “It might take a while, but I can try.”

Not on his own he wouldn’t. “Great. You work on that. The guys and me will get more food . . . We’re gonna need to stock up if we’re staying.”

“Dean, I don’t need people looking over my shoulder –”

“Who said anything about looking over your shoulder?”

“Nobody . . . It’s just –”

“Look, I want that intel as soon as we have it, and –”

“Okay, I’ll radio it to you the second I get it.”

“And in the meantime? Are we supposed to go out there and make things worse . . . put a target on our backs if whatever is controlling them figures out we’re trying to stop it? Think we’re better off –”

“Just stop killing them, and it should be fine.”

“What if we’re leading these things straight to camps that the Croats can’t see because of the wards? We’re staying put until we get this figured out.”

Sam followed him to the door and Dean said, “I’m taking them. You stay here and keep an eye on your guinea pigs.”

Stopping short, Sam glanced over his shoulder at Beth who waved at him. Leaning closer to Dean, so she couldn’t hear, Sam whispered, “What happened to Beth?”

“She’s fine.”

“She might be fine, but there’s something off about her . . . what happened?”

Dean wasn’t sure that he was ready for Sam to even know that much about Beth. What if Sam used it against her . . . there was a certain kind of naivety that Beth had that . . . well, there’d always been a certain amount of that with her, but it was more obvious now while she tried to relearn everything about the world on a feelings based model . . . and at the same time she was a little more calculating and good at using her new weakness to her advantage. It was hard to explain. Maybe she’d grow out of it, or maybe she wouldn’t, but it was something that maybe Sam could use against her. That wasn’t even getting into what Sam could do to her if he found out she was immortal. Dean had seen first hand what Sam was capable of doing in that situation, and that’s the last thing he wanted to have happen to Beth. “Nothing, Sam . . . just stay here.”

“And keep an eye on her?”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever.”

“Like a test?”

“What, you what a grade on it? Fine. If she’s still alive and not a Croat when I get back, you don’t fail.” Sam seemed to take that to heart and started heading back to the room where Beth was, and
Dean found himself slumping before he stopped and turned around. “She’s fine, Sam . . . Better than she’s been in a long time.”

“Okay.”

Sam didn’t look like he believed him, so Dean added, “See if you can get her to geek out over science.” She’d lost a lot of the things she used to like doing. It’s not that she wouldn’t like doing them if she did them. It’s just that right now, she didn’t know what she liked . . . Well, she knew what she used to like . . . she could remember thinking good things about them in the past, but they didn’t make her feel one way or the other unless she actually did them now. It was all part of the process of her rebuilding herself.

He’s the only one who knew her well enough to know that a lot was the same even though it may not seem like it . . . there were some differences though . . . like she sucked at hiding now. She had no feelings about hiding in Heaven . . . she knew on an intellectual level why she should, but any memories of being scared about being caught were non-existent, which meant she didn’t hide for long without getting bored, or that’s the way it seemed right now. Sam had already turned to head back into the office when Dean said, “Not sure how long we’re gonna be gone . . . might want to play hide and go seek with her.”

Sam laughed before turning around and seeing the awkward sincerity in Dean. Clearing his throat, Sam gave him a slight nod in response instead of drawing attention to it, and to keep it that way, Dean turned to get the other Deans and Sam, so they could leave. He didn’t know how long they were going to be here, but he suspected it would be for a while. Probably the best place for them if it meant keeping the prying eyes of the Croats away from the camps . . . the Croats were probably already stationed outside the camps, but as long as they didn’t have anything drawing their attention to them, they should be okay . . . hopefully. They had been so far. It’s just that it felt like they were running out of time on that.

Maybe what they should be focusing on is a way to pull all the Croats into one section of the country and firebomb them . . . worked outside Vegas for Sam. But then there were all those Croats just waiting at attention down south . . . might even be Croats going all the way down through Central and South America. Those could easily take the place of any Croats they killed. What if they started picking off the ranks from the Southern tail of the Croat Army . . . that was still a lot to get through, but maybe it’d pull more away from the North . . . if the tip of the Southern Hemisphere had had snow the way the tip of the Northern Hemisphere had, then maybe there were people down there who’d survived and were being overrun by Croats too.

What if they found those people, brought them North and then firebombed the Croats in the Southern Hemisphere to see what the Croat Army did in response? Guess it depended on how many people had survived down there. If there were hunters, then there could be a lot, but then the hunters in North America . . . there weren’t many left, or there didn’t seem to be many left. The ones who’d survived had survived because Dean’d had Bobby spread the word on the Croat virus . . . the chances any other hunters even knew what the Croatoan virus was probably weren’t good. The only reason Dean had known was because of Azazel testing the virus out on Sam . . . and maybe because of what Zachariah had shown him in the future.

Were the people in the camps that’d followed Dean’s lead all that was left on the entire planet? No. He refused to believe that. Look at how many people they’d found out there in the wild . . . not that many now that he thought about it. Most of the survivors had been found as prisoners in Vegas, at trading camps, or in monster corrals . . . There were more people out there though. There had to be.

Those monster/people trading rings had seemed to cover the whole country, and the hunters had
really only focused on the monster side of them . . . did that mean there were only bad people left out there in the wild? He didn’t know. Probably. He wasn’t going to stop looking for the people who were scared and hiding out in abandoned houses in the woods though . . . and what about the government? Was it totally gone, or had the higher ups gone to a bunker somewhere to wait it all out? If they were still hiding out there, then what good were they?

They were probably dead. Maybe. He didn’t know . . . just like he didn’t know how many people might be in the Southern Hemisphere, but he wasn’t going to risk their lives to test a possible solution for the Croat problem up here. That would have to wait until he was sure he’d done everything he could to find the people down there too. Time wasn’t on his side though . . . didn’t feel like it anyway. Felt more like that tsunami Beth was always talking about that was growing bigger and stronger by the second out there in the dark. Couldn’t even destroy the force controlling it, because as big of a problem as that might be, the force was also the only thing holding the tsunami back at the moment. They’d waited too long to figure all of this out, stuck in their own personal problems . . . should’ve never done that mission . . . but then if they hadn’t, then Amara would’ve been that tsunami they were trying to stop. It did give him two more of him and one more of Sam to fight back the tsunami though . . . maybe that had been part of the plan all along. It was hard to know. It’s not exactly like Chuck was transparent in his motivations.
Weaknesses Have Their Advantages

“You want me to play Hide and Go Seek? What, we didn’t play it enough when you were growing up the second time?” That’s roughly what I would’ve said to Sam if I felt like I knew him on a personal level, right?

Sam smiled briefly, like he was unsure of how to respond. I knew all three Deans, because I knew my Dean and had paid particular attention to his micro-expressions, body language, vocal changes, occasional tics, and all the rest, but Sam . . . the other Sam kept his distance for the most part, and this Sam . . . my Sam . . . I didn’t really know him. Well, I remembered the things he did, but I didn’t feel anything about them. I didn’t feel anything about any of my memories. Dean knew that, or my Dean did, because I’d told him that. Cas was learning that by picking through my brain as much as the other two Deans were . . . I didn’t know how I felt about that. I don’t think I particularly cared one way or the other. I guess I wouldn’t until something negative happened because of it. I just knew that I didn’t have a clue how I used to do block them from what I was thinking, so it was what it was. Might as well learn to live with it.

“Uh, did Dean set me up?”

Is he being genuine? … I can't tell. “Well, is he the one who told you to play Hide and Go Seek with me?” Another brief smile . . . a little different than the last one. Yeah, Dean told him to play that game, but he doesn’t want to admit it. “Is it something you want to do?” Another unsure facial expression. ‘Not really,’ would be my guess of what that meant. “Why don’t you ask me what you want to ask me, Sam?” Why’d that surprise him?

“Okay . . . all right. Why is what happened to you such a secret?”

“I don’t think they trust you with the details.”

An uncomfortable laugh, and he’s looking away to hide . . . I stepped around to see his face, and he was trying to hide what looked like . . . maybe disappointment or . . . Well now he was looking at me in confusion. “What are you doing?”

“I wanted to see why you were looking away from me. It was to hide your disappointment and maybe hurt at what I said.”

Standing taller to get some space from me, I presume, Sam waited until he got to his desk before saying, “What happened to you, Beth?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“Because if something happened to you, I should know about it . . . what’s wrong with you now . . . why are you studying me? I mean you used to study people, but this is a whole other level . . . and you’re not even trying to hide it.”

“Did I used to be able to hide it?”

He gave me another confused look and then bowed his head before nodding and then looking back up at me. “What happened?”

“A djinn . . . I guess my wish must’ve been that I’d told Michael about Raphael’s plans, because he killed me, and with me not having a whole soul at the time, I ended up in the Big Empty. Dean took some African Dream Root to see what was going on in there, and to get him out, I thought I
had to erase myself . . . become one with nothing . . . Cas got him out in the meantime. I didn’t notice. I was too busy trying to get out. I succeeded . . . and then woke up.”

“That’s it?” I nodded, so he said, “Why wouldn’t they want me to know that?”

“They think I’m gullible and a little simple now.”

His brow furrowed, like that confused him as well. “You were just talking to me in depth about finding a cure . . . that doesn’t seem simple.”

“Not simple in that way . . . simple as in easily tricked.”

“Why?”

“Because when I woke up, I didn’t know how to feel anything. It was like I’d never walked or held a gun or felt the rain or tasted sugar or interacted with people . . . I remember everything from before . . . I just don’t feel anything about it. I’m learning how to feel . . . which includes the feelings associated with trying to get a reading on people or situations. Dean, I’m getting to know pretty well . . . Sam . . . You. Not so much. The other Sam has kept his distance, and I don’t really know you . . . I mean I know the things you’ve done in the past, but . . . I don’t feel anything about them, and I have to get to know you again . . . The only way I can maybe describe it is that when you have a good grasp on something, like walking . . . you don’t really appreciate how much subconscious thought goes into it . . . how many things you ignore, like the feel of your feet supporting your weight or the force required to lift one foot and push off the other to get you going forward . . . it’s the same with knowing people. You could spend your whole life getting to know them through the minutiae and not know you’re doing it, but when you don’t have any frame of reference and have to think about it and teach yourself how to do it again, every little thing you notice is like something brand new that you’ve never seen before . . . if that makes sense.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

“You asked.” His brow furrowed again, but this time it wasn’t in confusion. “Why are you concerned?”

“Because you shouldn’t have told me.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m not going to use it to hurt you the way my brother seems to think, but if you go around telling everyone things they probably shouldn’t know, because you don’t know that you shouldn’t tell them, then that’s a problem . . . I get where Dean’s coming from on this one . . . How are you out on the road?”

“Is this something I’m supposed to say or not?”

Relaxing a little before he sat on his desk, Sam cocked his head to the side and gave me a look I wasn’t sure how to define at first. “What do you think?”

“Well, the look on your face is . . . inquisitive, but it’s not one I would say looks wiley . . . you want either you or me to learn something from your question . . . maybe both.”

He exhaled a laugh and then said, “I meant more along the lines of do you think I can be trusted?”

“I think your previous exploits would put you in a high risk category for trust. Looking back at the first three years that I knew you, there was a 0% chance of you being trustworthy, but after what
happened in the Luxor, you went days, weeks, months where you could have been considered in the low risk to re-offend category, but then you have a tendency to fall off the wagon unexpectedly . . . I’m going with being able to trust you at around 50% in the long term . . . 75% in the short term . . . 100% on this particular topic when I tell you that in no way has my fighting ability been compromised. The only thing that seems different is that now I have no control over when I tap into my soul. It happens every time I fight something . . . even if it’s just Cas in a training session.”

Sam laughed a laugh I think he wanted me to think was genuine and asked, “Are you threatening me, Beth?” *He crossed his arms over his chest. That’s typically something someone does when they’re being defensive.*

“I don’t feel that telling you is a threat to me. That’s why I can trust you with it.”

“Let me see if I’ve got this right. You can kick my ass at a moment’s notice, so you can trust me enough to tell me that you can kick my ass?”

“That’s one way to put it . . . why do you find it as threatening as you do?”

“Everything you remember about me might as well have the same emotional impact as hearing about me in stories. You’re less likely to give me a chance than you would have in the past.”

“Or . . . I’m not emotionally impacted by the negative choices you’ve made in the past, so it’s like you’ve got a blank slate with me, and I can only see you as you are from here on out.”

Standing up and uncrossing his arms, Sam went around his desk and put it between us for some reason before saying, “And it’s the same with Dean?” I gave him a slight nod, and he smiled. “You know I don’t just mean the negative, right? I mean the good things with Dean too.” I nodded again, and he looked down to divert his attention onto picking at the table while he said, “That’s something you would’ve played dumb with me about . . . Why did he tell me that you’re better than you have been in a long time?”

“You mean ‘you’ as in me, not ‘you’ as in Dean and I?” He smiled and glanced in my direction before nodding and looking back down at where his hand was on the desk. This made him feel uncomfortable for some reason, but he was forcing himself to ask, because . . . well, I wasn’t sure yet, but I’d figure it out. “I guess maybe because I don’t feel anything about what happened to me in Heaven. No nightmares. I can sleep through the night.”

“Really?”

*Why does he seem surprised by that?* “Yeah.”

“I guess that is good . . . What about Dean?”

“How is he dealing with it, or how do I feel about him now?”

“Both, now that you mention it, but I was mostly asking how you felt about him now.”

“I like him . . . a lot.”

“Care to elaborate?”


“Fascinating?”
“Well, yeah . . . there’s a lot more going on under the surface than he thinks he shows, but he does show it . . . it might be a look in his eyes or a minute twitch of a muscle in his face before he can hide it . . . It might betray that he’s worried about something or happy, but he doesn’t want to be happy, because it might be –“

“Taken from him?” I nodded, and Sam sat on his desk in a more conversational manner before saying, “What else?”

“Uh, he has a sense of humor even though he should’ve stopped being able to laugh a long time ago. He finds pleasure in the smallest of things. He likes to prank me, like he had me test out a whole spoonful of cayenne pepper, and –“

Sam started laughing. “And you went along with it?”

“Well, yeah. I didn’t remember how it tasted, so –“

“Oh, come on, Beth . . . you may not remember it, but you had to know it was a bad idea. You may not remember what hot feels like, but you knew it’d be hot.”

“True. But I might as well learn what the bad feels like right along with the good . . . besides, the feeling I got right before I did it let me know what it feels like to do something that’s not in my best interest before I do it.”

“What other things have you done to experience bad feelings?”

“I stabbed myself in the stomach with my angel blade . . . Cas was right there and fixed it.”

Sam didn’t know whether to laugh or shake his head. He ended up doing both until something caught his attention. “Wait, so you knew that was a bad idea before you did it, right?”

“Not a bad idea . . . just something I wanted to try so I could see why I never wanted to get stabbed in the past.”

“Okay, but . . . the point is that after what happened with the cayenne pepper, you know when you shouldn’t do something before you do it if it’s going to be bad for you, right?”

“That’s your point. Not mine necessarily.”

“I know it’s my point . . . Now you’re just blatantly screwing with me . . . You knew whether or not you should tell me about any of this before you did it . . . You’re not gullible or simple . . . You’re using this to your advantage and working the angles the way you always do. Why’d you really tell me all of this?”

“I’m getting to know you. This is a secret that I don’t think needs to be protected as much. If you do well on this, then we’ll see how it goes on other more important things.”

“Like what?”

*Like I can’t die.* “Ah, like the things that make me feel the way I did about the cayenne pepper and therefore don’t think I should tell you yet.”

Exhaling a deep breath, Sam waited a few seconds before saying, “So, you’re mostly the same.”

“I don’t know. It’s not as easy as being the same or being different. Some things I don’t know and have to bluff my way through, and other things I do know and have tofake that I don’t. Other
“things I’m completely in awe of and can’t hide it, so it makes me look like a crazy person.”

“Like what?”

“Like walking . . . when I was learning how to do it again with Dean, I know that’s when he was most worried. It was right after I first woke up. Or trying foods that used to be my favorites and finding out why they were my favorites or wondering why they were my favorites. Maybe seeing farm animals or petting them or feeling something soft, like a stuffed animal. Anything that’s new for me, but that everyone else takes for granted . . . sometimes my wonderment comes off as being a little crazy. And you haven’t mentioned my accent once. That’s the first thing the others noticed, and it’s definitely why the other Sam and Bobby have been a little wary of me.”

“How wary?”

“I don’t know. Sharing looks kind of wary?”

He looked like he had some thoughts on that but was going to keep them to himself for now.

“Yeah, well . . . the accent might be one of the things I noticed was different, but not at first. It was more of a ‘there’s something different, but I can’t put my finger on it,’ kind of thing. It fits with you, and it’s not that different.”

“Kind of like who I am now, right?”

Giving me what I think might’ve been his most genuine smile thus far, Sam nodded, and then got to his feet as the others came back. I guess we’d been doing the science thing for a while before he asked me to play Hide and Go Seek with him. “Rain check on Hide and Go Seek?”

“Yeah, sure . . . why not? We can use at as a training exercise, because apparently, I’ve lost the ability to hide.”

Sam glanced back at me over his shoulder as we went to see what the others had gotten on their supply run. “Seriously?”

“Yeah.”

“So, Dean wanted me to train you on how to hide?”

“I think so given that he’s the one who said I suck at hiding now. Why is that a problem?”

“No. Might’ve taken it a little more seriously if I’d known that he wanted me to do it for a reason.”

Seeing Dean, I felt an internal weight lift. I think I might’ve been worried about him being out there without me and hadn’t really realized that’s what I’d felt until it was gone. I’d say it was similar to how I felt seeing him fight monsters and Croats, but those times I was there and could do something to help him if he needed it. The other 2 Deans, Cas, and Sam seemed to have his back, but it was difficult to let them have the job when I felt like I should be the one doing it. Not that I didn’t also feel protective of them. The more of this world that I saw with my fresh pair of eyes, the more I felt like I should protect all of the people I met, but there were definitely some that I felt that way more strongly about than others . . . like all the people on this road trip were at the top of the list, but my Dean was at the very top. I’d have to think through what these particular feelings meant and how to deal with them now that I’d identified them.

At any rate, the crew coming back seemed okay, so they hadn’t needed me on this particular run, and I think I could say that I’d enjoyed my time with Sam. Walking through the main warehouse portion of the facilities, I noted how I felt about seeing the Croats tied down to the hospital beds
with IVs sticking out of their necks. I didn’t like the way seeing them made me feel at all. I didn’t like their condition. I didn’t like thinking about what it would be like to be them. I didn’t like thinking that one slip up, and I could become them, and I didn’t particularly like that if they really wanted to get free, they could probably find a way to do it, so why weren’t they? I did not like the idea of sleeping here at all, let alone for however long we were going to be here.

One of the Deans called me over to him and proudly presented me with a tin of apple pie filling. Wasn’t the Vamp if he was excited about pie. Wasn’t my Dean, because my Dean always had one eye on his brother when he was around. Must be the oldest Dean. “I heard you can make a mean pie . . . thought maybe you could do something with this. You know, when we get to the next camp.”

Smiling, I took the can from him and turned it over in my hand, while I examined it. “Yeah, sure . . . I’ve got the recipe locked away in my head. Not really sure how they’re supposed to taste anymore, but maybe I could use a pie tester to help me out along the way, so I get it right?”

When I looked up at him, he gave me a quick smile that he’d meant, but it’s not what he was really thinking about when he started to say, “That’d be awesome . . . Hey, I . . . about the other day. What you said about me listening in on what you were thinking. I –“

I don’t know what he was going to say, because in that moment all of my attention went onto a bright light emanating around the edges of a door to my right. I wasn’t the only one who’d noticed it. Might’ve had something to do with the guy who then fell rather unceremoniously out of the door. I’m guessing the duplicates and triplicates of everyone clued him in on the fact that the Sams and Deans weren’t John. Could be why he looked at Cas and Gadreel wanting to know which one of them was John Winchester.

Putting my gun away, I answered first. I guess the lack of having any feeling about this particular event may have made me somewhat more prepared to deal with it faster. “Hi Henry . . . None of them are John. The 2 coming to help you up are your grandsons. The others that look like them come from parallel universes, and those two are angels . . . Your battalion of grandchildren can explain it to you . . . in the other room. Might want to step away from the door.” Looking over my shoulder, at the oldest Dean, I asked, “Is it okay if we finish our discussion later?”

The edges of his eyes turned up slightly in the hint of a smile before he looked over my head towards the supply closet door. “You know Abaddon is right behind him, right?”

Shrugging, I turned to face the closet too. “Yeah, that’s why I told him to step away from the door.”

“You’ve got this?”

“You’d better hope so. The same part of my brain that remembers the killing exorcism, remembers that pie recipe.”

“See, saying crap like that is what gets you in trouble. I know you’re already running through that exorcism in your head.”

“Well, then why’d you ask?”

“Felt like I should. Besides, his real grandsons seem like they’ve got it under control.”

“You think we should let her go to spice this world up a little?”

“What? No. This world has enough spice as it is.”
“You sure?”

“Yeah. Pretty freaking sure.”

“So not absolutely sure?”

“I’m sure. Why would I even think that letting her go would be something we should do?”

“I don’t know. I’m thinking it.”

“No you’re not.”

“Wouldn’t have said it if I hadn’t thought it. If you’re going to go with reading my mind... better be faster with it to catch me before I do something stupid. I don’t have the filters that keep me from doing stupid things the way I used to have.”

“You’re messing with me, right?”

“Yeah, I’m messing with you. You ready? I’ll let you take the lead.”

“I don’t know the exorcism.”

“Better learn it fast. I’ve been having it run through my head on a loop for the last 30 seconds for a reason.”

“You’re still messing with me, right?”

“Yeah. Don’t worry. I won’t let big bad Abaddon get you... Definitely calls into question the whole sticks and stones vs. words argument though if we can in fact kill her with words, doesn’t it?”

“You’re getting philosophical now?”

“No. Just passing the time until she shows up. My mind has a tendency to wander.”

“I’ve noticed.” His attention went on the door as a second light flashed brightly behind it.

“So is that your segue into the conversation you wanted to have -”

“What? No. That’s not -“

I’d sowed enough confusion by that point that I was able to get the drop on Abaddon before he could do something like push me out of the way as she stepped out of the closet or anything else that might’ve gotten him hurt or brought her attention on him. Out of the 3 Deans, he was the one who had proven himself to be the most likely to step into harms way for me when it wasn’t warranted. The vampire Dean had watched all those DVDs my dad had made him, so he tended to have an over-exaggerated sense of what I could do, and my Dean knew me, so he really knew what I could and could not do. Like I said. I felt like it was my job to protect all of them... even from themselves, and part of that was knowing their weaknesses and how to counteract them.
“What is that?” Henry heard Beth’s exorcism and moved around his grandsons to get a look in the other room. “What’s she doing? That won’t—” Abaddon started to flicker, and Sam had no idea what was happening, but his attention quickly went from watching the guy who looked like his grandfather to Abaddon. Did this exorcism kill demons? He’d only seen demons flicker like that when they were dying. Sam’s focus stayed on Abaddon until it was rapidly drawn to 3 of the Croats at the back, who all started screaming in unison.

Rushing around Henry and Beth’s Dean, Evil Sam shouted for Beth to stop. Beth said a few more words from the exorcism, and the screams crescendoed. “Dean! Make her stop!”

Evil Sam looked in his brother’s direction, and his brother’s shoulders dropped before he glanced in Beth’s direction. “Beth, hold on a second! Let him—“

Nope. She glanced in her Dean’s direction, so she’d clearly heard him, but she wasn’t going to stop for him either. Instead she got a determined look on her face and turned, so her focus was no longer just on Abaddon. Now it was on her Dean and Sam as well, like she thought they would work together to make her stop. They wouldn’t—

Maybe they would. Well, her Dean was still trying to keep an eye on Henry to keep him from getting too close to Abaddon, but he was also keeping Beth’s attention on him, while the Evil Sam moved in on her left. Whether her Dean intended to be helping his brother or not, he was helping the Evil Sam close in on . . . or that’s the way it seemed until Beth’s Dean’s posture changed into . . . Sam would say that Dean’s body language said that Dean had a knife on him somewhere he was getting awfully close to throwing even though Sam couldn’t see it . . . It wasn’t Beth that Dean was going to stop. It was the Evil Sam. That’s why that Dean wanted her to wait. He didn’t want his brother to attack her, and . . . what the hell?

Beth took off running in a big circle around the Evil Sam, but she was still shouting the exorcism as she went. The Evil Sam picked up his speed, and now it looked like they were playing tag. Sam glanced in the direction of the Evil Sam’s Dean, and that Dean had relaxed. Sam’s gaze went to his own brother. His brother looked confused and amused, or he did until the sounds of Beth’s exorcism stopped, and the room was left with the sounds of the screaming Croats and an Evil Sam shouting at Beth. Now Sam’s brother looked on edge . . . Sam looked in the Evil Sam and Beth’s direction again, and the Evil Sam must’ve gotten Gadreel involved, because Gadreel was holding onto her from behind and had his hand over her mouth. She got that look on her face that unsettled Sam whenever he saw it, and that’s when Sam heard the exorcism continue from the direction of his brother. She relaxed and looked at Sam’s brother, and Sam’s brother carried on with sounding out words Sam had never heard his brother say. Whatever his brother was saying seemed to be right, because Abaddon kept flickering and the screams at the back kept getting louder.

Looking in Beth’s Dean’s direction, Sam finally yelled, “Are you going to do anything?”

“I’m doing it.”

Her Dean’s eyes flicked in the evil Sam’s direction, and Sam realized that he’d been right. That Dean thought dealing with the Evil Sam was his job.

Sam felt a presence by his shoulder and turned to see Cas. “What are you doing, Cas?”

“Keeping an eye on you.”
“Why?”

“So, you don’t get involved and complicate things further.”

“Shouldn’t you be doing that with Gadreel?”

“The Vampire has it.”

Sam’s attention went on Gadreel. It would appear that vampire Dean had snuck up on Gadreel’s back. The Evil Sam told Gadreel to knock Beth out for some reason, and the vampire Dean immediately told Gadreel that if he did, he’d be dead before he hit the ground. Guess he had an angel blade to Gadreel’s side, so he could, but Sam hadn’t necessarily thought this Gadreel was all that bad. Beth’s focus was on Sam’s brother who was still doing the exorcism. Apparently, that’s what his brother had decided was his job. Seriously, what the hell was going on here?

Leaning into his shoulder, while keeping an eye on the Evil Sam, Beth, Gadreel, and Vampire Dean, Cas explained. “The demon killing exorcism is also killing the Croats that my Sam has spent weeks getting to where they are now, but now that the exorcism has started, it can’t be stopped, or Abaddon will get away. Beth knows this. Your brother knows this. She’s telling him the exorcism. My Sam knows that’s what she’s doing, and that’s why he wants Gadreel to stop was so my Sam wouldn’t hurt her, not because he was siding with him. He also doesn’t realize that the reason Beth started running around the room, wasn’t to playfully stay out of his reach, but to save his life, because he was too angry and getting too close for our Dean’s comfort."

Oh. The Evil Sam looked like he was stuck and powerless to stop his experiments from being destroyed, so he decided to go to them in their final moments to note any changes. As soon as his back was turned, the Evil Sam’s brother took over on the exorcism. Gadreel let Beth go, and she pivoted around him and try to calm the Vampire Dean down. Sam’s attention went to Abaddon as she started flashing with greater intensity.

There was a noticeable change in the atmosphere of the room. For one, the tension between the people had dissipated with the Evil Sam’s retreat, but there was also a feeling in the air that was like a bolt of lightning was getting ready to strike. The screams got louder if that was possible, the demon flashed brighter, and the hair on Sam’s arms and the back of his neck stood on end. As Beth’s Dean finished off the exorcism and light shot out of Abaddon, the tension in the air broke when the light was at it’s brightest, and then Josie fell to her knees. Beth’s Dean let Henry past him, so Henry could tentatively walk up to her and see if she was okay, and the atmosphere went back to normal. Well, Sam guessed it was normal for a warehouse full of Croats tied to beds. This was by far the most bizarre exorcism Sam had ever seen.

Cas took a step away from Sam, like he was getting ready to go to the Evil Sam, but Sam stopped him. “Can we go back to Beth telling my brother the exorcism?”

Cas turned to look at Sam without saying anything, like he was waiting for Sam to explain, and Sam said, “Gadreel had his hand over her mouth. How was she telling him the exorcism? You mean she told him the exorcism and he was remembering it, right?”

Instead of giving Sam the answer he wanted, Cas glanced in Sam’s brother’s direction and said, “You should talk to your brother. I need to help Beth and Sam figure out what just happened to those Croats.”

Then he guessed that he would? Walking up to his brother who was watching Josie and Henry,
Sam started the conversation with, “What just happened?”

Slowly tearing his eyes away from the others, Dean answered, “We just killed Abaddon.” With a shake of his head, he added, “Can’t believe how easy that was.”

“Didn’t look easy.”

Sam’s brother shrugged before looking back at the Evil Sam. “Nah, he’s just a loose cannon none of us are sure about, but he was fine.”

“You know his brother was getting ready to kill him. That’s why Beth started running around the room.”

“I figured.”

Sam had been with all of them for a couple of weeks now, and he still wasn’t sure how to read them when they were all together. Clearly, it was a problem his brother didn’t have. “And the exorcism . . . where’d you learn it?”

“Beth.”

“So, Beth taught it to you?”

“Uh . . . yeah. I don’t know it well. Was just keeping it going until her Dean jumped in on it.”

Uh-huh. “So, then you wouldn’t mind teaching it to me, right?”

“Uh, all right . . . I’ll write it down and give it to you –“

“Now?”

“Was thinking I’d give it to you tonight.” Dean’s brow furrowed in confusion before he added, “There something you’re not saying, Sam?”

“Sure there’s something you’re not saying, Dean?”

“What? I don’t –“

He hated it when Dean lied to him. “Why’d Cas say Beth was telling you the exorcism?”

“When?”

“When you were saying it.”

“What does it matter how I knew it as long as Abaddon is dead?”

Sam looked at Josie talking to Henry and the Dean from this universe. It was good and all that she was okay and that Abaddon was dead, but . . . “Why are you hiding things from me?”

“What are you talking about, Sam? It’s not like –“

“You’re going full-on soul mate, and after you told me what that meant, you said you weren’t going to do it.”

“This was a win. I’m not seeing the problem with –“

“I wanna know why . . . why are you playing around with something you know –“
“She’s my friend. It’s my job to look after –“

“No, it’s not. It’s that guy’s job to look after her.”

“And I have his back too, the same way I’ve got the Vampire’s back and yours, and they’ve got mine. I’m not seeing the problem –“

“Yeah? Then why didn’t you tell me?”

“Tell you what, Sam?”

“That you’re reading her mind. That’s not normal even for us. As far as I know, this is the only universe where soul mates do this, and it doesn’t work out well for them.”

“She was soul mates with any Dean Winchester she met in any of the other universes, so it’s not just a thing in this universe. All it means is she wasn’t in our universe or –“

“She’s his –“

“She’s a person, Sam. She doesn’t belong to anyone . . . not sure you understand this at all.”

“Then help me understand it, Dean. At the very least, you getting distracted by this in the middle of a fight out there will get you killed. I –“

“No it won’t.”

So, this had been going on for a while then. “How long?”

“How long, what, Sam?”

“How long have you been . . . I don’t even know what the hell to call it . . . mind melding –“

“Mind melding? I’m not becoming Beth. I just know what –“

“She’s thinking. I know. You used to just feel –“

“And you think this is any different than that? That’s what she did with her guy for years, and she was still just as connected to him as –“

“That’s it . . . that’s what makes this universe different . . . it’s not just a soul mate thing. It’s a connection that happens here, right?”

Dean rolled his eyes and started to walk away, but Sam stopped him. “Dean, you can’t play around with this. It’ll get you killed.”

“It won’t.”

“Why not? It got him killed, right? He –“

“Brought her back. I’d do the same for anyone on this team.”

Maybe. His brother did have a nasty habit of sacrificing himself for others, especially if they meant something to him. “I still think it’ll lead to an unhealthy obsession with –“

“We’re friends, Sam. That’s all.”

“Then why’d you change to knowing what she’s thinking? You said that the vampire doing that
was too invasive.”

“I can’t do what I was doing as much as I was. Now, it’s too – Forget it. I’m not –“

“It’s too what?”

“Real. Before the djinn attack, I knew how she felt, but I still knew how I felt. Now if I do it, I have no idea what’s coming from her and what’s coming from me. Feels like it’s me most of the time . . . until she walks away, and then I’m . . .”

“You’re what?”

“Empty . . . don’t notice it after years of feeling that way, but when you feel something and then go back to being just you . . . “

“You don’t have to do either. You could just talk to her like a normal person.”

“Yeah, but it helps when we’re in a fight out there . . . or if you’re trying to do an exorcism you’ve never done.”

Uh huh. There was more to it than that, or Sam thought there was. “Out there, it helps to know what she’s thinking, so –“

“No, out there, I’m all in. Let’s leave it at that.”

His brother had already said more than Sam had thought he would, so Sam changed tactics somewhat to keep Dean talking. “So, it’s a new thing because of what happened to her with that djinn?”

“Maybe.”

“Wait, do you not know? It’s worse than I thought if -”

Dean finally turned to face Sam and signed in frustration. “I know, Sam, but I’m not getting into it with you.”

“Why not? Does she know? Maybe I should ask –“

“I haven’t gotten around to talking to her about it yet. It doesn’t have anything to do with you, so just leave it alone, Sam.”

“I may not have been around as much, but I’m still your brother, Dean . . . Wait. If she doesn’t know, does that mean she’s not doing the reverse? Why are you –” At that point, Dean walked away again, and Sam could’ve left it, but he didn’t. “Dean, why –“

“It’s not what you think, Sam. It’s not as bad as you think either. You’re making a big deal out of nothing.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me about it? Why don’t you want to talk about it now? If it’s –“

“You wouldn’t understand it, Sam. It’s . . . I guess it’s what saved me. I heard her in those woods, and –“

“When she was calling for her Dean.”

Dean paused before tapping his head to accentuate his point. “I heard her in here.”
Okay. Maybe Sam had kind of gotten that wrong when Dean had originally told him that. “Okay, so –”

“And then when we went back to 1958, it felt like I could breathe, but I still needed something to fill this void that Amara left, so I didn’t let go of the lifeline Beth threw me. I could feel what she felt, and I knew what she thought, and it was enough until I was okay again.”

“And that’s when you went with just keeping track of her emotions?”

Dean ducked his head before saying, “I wasn’t keeping track of anything. I just . . . as her friend, it was the best way I knew to give her what she needed. That’s what I mean. You don’t understand. From the outside, it looks like there’s something wrong with it, but when you’re on the inside, it doesn’t feel wrong, and usually I feel like everything is wrong. This doesn’t . . . And yeah, that’s all I did, except for when those vamps had us.”

“The ones that turned him.”

Sam glanced in the vampire Dean’s direction, and his brother nodded. “Yeah, when we couldn’t talk without letting them know we were there, we used it, and it worked great . . . like a 2-way radio nobody could hear but us . . . and just so you know, he’s probably listening to us right now.”

Sam smiled briefly and then said, “But he already knows all this?” His brother shrugged, because apparently the Deans all talked about important things together more than Sam would’ve ever thought his brother talked. “And now? Why are you doing it now, Dean? Are you backsliding?”

“What? No, I just . . . when we’re out there in Monster and Croat land, it helps. I know what she’s thinking, so I know what to do and when to do it. And when she’s fighting and killing or hunting or whatever you want to call it, she feels the way I do when I’m doing those things, and . . . I guess it makes me feel like it’s okay –”

“To be a killer?”

“No. Stronger maybe, like it reinforces what I’ve already got . . . right up until she taps into her soul, and then I feel less than empty. I feel nothing . . . there was a time when I would’ve been all right with that, but now . . . Anyway – “

“So, it is distracting.”

“No. It just makes everything really . . . clear? Like I know what I have to do, and there’s nothing there to hold me back from doing it . . . and then she snaps out of it, and –“

“That’s distracting?”

“Maybe. Might be why I stopped feeling what she feels when we’re in the thick of it, but I’m better when I don’t have to do that.”

“How good do you need to be? You’re already the best hunter I know . . . better than the other two of you are too from what I –“

“I’m not Sam. I –“

“You’re not a vampire. You aren’t dealing with family issues that distract you from –“

His brother laughed and said, “Have you met me? Having family issues is what makes me good, and it’s not about being better. It’s feeling like I’m part of something. I mean I was always part of
something with you, but this is different. It’s the smartest play I have to learn how to hunt with people who aren’t you and in a place where there is no time for a learning curve. And it works. I trust them. I know they have my back, and I have theirs.”

“So, that’s it... that’s the only reason you’re doing it?”

“Yeah.”

Sam wasn’t sure if he believed that, but he’d let it go for now, because if it’s something that was keeping his brother alive out there after everything Sam had seen, then Sam wasn’t going to push him not to use it. “And you’re not using it when you aren’t hunting?”

“Define hunting? Pretty much any time you step outside the gates of one of these camps, you have to go into hunter mode here.”

That was a fair point. “But you know you’re playing with fire, right? I mean –“

“I can’t believe I have to explain this to you of all people, but a man and a woman can actually be friends without it turning into something else.”

Jerk. “I know that. Just having a hard time believing you do, especially when I’ve seen how big of a soft spot you guys all seem to have for her.”

“Yeah, well... we’re the same, and we’re not, Sam, and there’s no way I’d break up a family or add another flavor of crazy into her life like that. I’m no good in relationships. I have no idea how her guy has been in one this long. Besides, you should hear half the things she thinks... when she’s not coming up with boring plans, she’s just thinking a bunch of weird stuff that has nothing to do with anything.”

“I don’t know. Seemed to work for her Dean.”

Sam’s brother hung his head and sighed. “She needs a friend. She’s got Cas, but she shares him with her Dean. She’s got Meg. Enough said there. She’s got her Sam, and she’s had to kill him once already.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t really call them friends.”

Dean’s eyebrows arched before he said, “Yeah they are... they’re supposed to go play hide and go seek later.” To prove his point, Dean tilted his head in their direction, so Sam would look. She and the Evil Sam were having a serious discussion about the Croats at the back of the room, and she must’ve said something funny, because the Evil Sam laughed, and whatever the Evil Sam said in response made her smile.

“Can you hear what she’s thinking now?”

“No, all I can hear is you talking at me... are we done here?”

Sam flashed a brief smile. “Yeah, I think I’m good.”

“Good.” As Dean walked away, Sam felt better than he had, but he was still going to keep an eye on things while he was around. He wasn’t going to do it, so he could insert himself into anything or try to see if his brother was being entirely truthful. Mostly, he just wanted to put his mind at ease and make sure that when he went back to the Kansas camp, his brother was really going to be okay.
Self-deception or Something Else?

“You really think they were cured?” I looked at Sam’s concerned face and... I guess, it made me feel bad for him. He really needed this to have meant something good, but I didn’t want to lie to him or give him false hope either.

“I don’t know. Cas couldn’t tell from where he was whether or not their souls were uninfected when they died, but he said there’s no trace of the virus in these three. That’s why they’re dead. The others Croats don’t look any different than they did, and these three have been on a continuous flow of sanctified blood for the last few hours. These three were already further along than the others. Maybe being on the continuous flow of sanctified blood pushed them a little further along, and the exorcism killed the remaining virus. Maybe that’s why they were screaming. We already knew that it’d be painful for them to be in these bodies the closer they got to being cured.”

Sam looked back down at the three dead Croats and shook his head. “Okay, so I buy that these three were the closest to being cured, and they were definitely all in pain at the end, but how do we know that what the blood was doing was actually having an impact on their souls? It could’ve just destroyed their demon-y souls the rest of the way.”

Good point. I thought about it for a few seconds and then said, “It’d be like dumping antiseptic on a wound. If it’s not too infected, then the antiseptic should be enough to get rid of any infection before it has a chance to spread. All that’d be left at the end is a clean wound, in this case, a clean soul. As soon as the last vestiges of the virus that was keeping them alive died, they died with it, and their souls did what souls do when a body dies. If the wound was full of gangrene, then pouring antiseptic on the wound wouldn’t do much of anything for it, and that’s why it didn’t do anything for the other Croats. If all it did was destroy the souls of these three, then the others should’ve died too, or I’d think they would, but Cas said none of them are soulless... How about this... how about we hook the next three up to these pumps. We’ll keep one Croat on the sanctified blood indefinitely to see if that’s enough to cure it on it’s own. We’ll take another one and do a normal exorcism, and on the third, we’ll do the killing exorcism to see if there are any differences, but I’m thinking that Abaddon showing up may have been our accidentally finding penicillin moment.”

“What do you think will happen with the one that gets a normal exorcism?” I shrugged. I had no idea. Sam rolled his eyes and then looked at the next row of Croats. They were the next cleanest Croats to these three. “Those are the only three that don’t have it in their blood anymore. I was kind of waiting to see what happened with these three before I went any further in case I found the cure first. Should I put one on just the blood, one on just the saline, and one on both again?”

“That’d add one too many variables into the mix. I’d keep each batch of 3 a separate experiment. Have Gadreel watch what’s happening with the three attached to the machines at the back when you do nothing, a normal exorcism, and the killing exorcism. It’ll give you a better idea of whether or not their souls are being cured or destroyed with the killing exorcism. Maybe it is too harsh, but a normal exorcism wouldn’t be. I don’t know. Once you know, then you can move onto the next three and hook them up to the blood, saline, or both to see if the winning exorcism works when they haven’t been hooked up to one of these machines. You have over 6 billion of these things to get through and 3 machines. If you know it’ll work with just holy saline, it’ll save you time... if it only works on the sanctified blood, then you’ll just have to use the machines.”

There wasn’t enough blood in Sam or everyone else on the planet that he could use if it required sanctified blood. There just wasn’t. That was the beauty of the machines. They used the Croats
own blood, blessed it, and then sent it right back into the Croats. Sam sighed before looking at the mass of Croats tied to beds and shook his head. “Over 6 billion . . . If this is really is what it takes to cure them . . . I’ll never get it done, will I? Definitely not with 3 machines.”

Guess his problem was the opposite of mine. He didn’t have enough time, and I had too much. “Yeah, well . . . nobody said it was going to be easy. That’s what you were looking for though, right? The hardest path to redemption.”

“Not redemption . . . a purpose, I guess . . . something I could do that was good. Looks like I found it.”

“If it helps, it probably won’t be 6 billion. We’re not going to stop killing them just so we can round them up and bring them to you. It’s too dangerous.”

That did not seem to help. He caught me watching for his reaction and said, “Yeah. I understand. I do. I just . . . should’ve never happened in the first place.”

No, it shouldn’t have. Probably wasn’t the right time to say that if we let Henry go back to 1958 the way he’d probably want to do then there was a good chance it might not happen. I’d say that’s what we should do, and I would probably help Henry do it, but if I did, then it’d mean the other universes we’d saved would all be destroyed, and 6 billion in one universe vs. 6 billion in every universe meant my universe lost out when it came to importance, I guess. Not that Henry would likely survive much longer if Fate had anything to say about it. The same probably went for Josie. That’s something I could try to stop, their deaths in the near future, but the deaths and bad things of our past seemed to be set in stone.

“Hey, are you going to talk to your grandfather?”

Sam, a little thrown my question, glanced in Henry’s direction and then looked down before shaking his head. “Hadn’t really thought about it beyond getting him away from where Abaddon was going to be.” He paused and then his gaze flicked toward me before he said, “You think I should?”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

A little shrug and then a smile. “Why would you feel like that’s something I should do?”

“Isn’t it what people do with relatives?”

His confused expression was a little different than Dean’s, but I still knew what it meant. “So, what, it’s just a convention that normal people do with their relatives, and that’s why you think it’s something I should do?” I shrugged, and he gave me an unsure smile. “Beth, you’re playing dumb . . . You have to be. You still remember your life. You know the things I’ve done. You know the issues I have, we all have, when it comes to family. You have to know that I would feel . . . awkward talking to him after the things I’ve done . . . especially when I’ve been keeping my distance from everyone since we came back from the mission.”

“Awkward; causing or feeling uneasy embarrassment . . . embarrassment; feeling of self-consciousness, shame, or awkwardness . . . shame; a painful feeling of humiliation or distress caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior . . . humiliation –”

Putting his hands on my shoulders, Sam told me to stop. “What are you doing?”

“Working through the definitions until I find one I can recognize feeling.” Again, he looked confused. I smiled briefly and said, “But it also lead me in the right direction. You know what
you’ve done is wrong, and that’s why you are keeping your distance.”

“Didn’t you already know that?”

“I did.”

“Then why’d you say that just now?”

“Because you admitted it . . . that’s always the first step in any recovery, is it not?”

“I can’t tell if you’re playing me or not. You were fine earlier.”

“Fine or perceived as fine?”

His nostrils flared briefly. "You know what I think? I think that if you’re not faking this, you’ve actually convinced yourself to believe this . . . this nonsense. There’s no way you would have these convenient gaps in your logical reasoning when it comes to interacting with people unless it was intentional, because logic wasn't affected, right? Just your emotions. Maybe you don’t even know you’re doing it, but — “

“Why would I do that?”

“Because it’s easier . . . because then you get a free pass on feeling anything about all the crappy things that have happened in your life.”

“Nah, doesn’t sound like me. Someone should go keep an eye on the perimeter now that whoever is using the Croats as spies knows you might have a cure . . . and you should speak to your grandfather. At the very least, it’s the polite thing to do.”

Walking around him, I went to the door at the back we’d used to break in here and then found a way onto the roof. Whatever was controlling the Croats hadn’t told any to come closer in the time since the three at the back had died. I wondered why. Maybe whoever it was wanted to wait until he or she had more information. Sam would have to find a way to do this without letting that happen . . . maybe he could blind the Croats and play loud music when he was curing them? Or maybe he could do that before he even brought them through the door? This place couldn’t afford to be swarmed. He may be immune, but they could still tear him apart if Gadreel wasn’t able to get him out of here in a hurry. And they’d have to bring those three machines with them, so they didn’t get destroyed . . . if they were at least partially responsible for the cure.

After a while, I think I understood the meaning behind the word dull to its full extent, so when I heard footsteps, I was grateful. They weren’t dragging, so it wasn’t a Croat. I felt the presence of an angel the way I did around Cas. Hand firmly on the hilt of my blade, I looked back and saw Gadreel. I wasn’t expecting that. “Hi Gadreel.”

“Hello, Beth. Do you mind if help you protect this place?”

Was I annoyed by it? No. I guess that meant, I didn’t mind. “You can stay if you’d like.”

We were quiet for a while, and then he said, “Sam thinks that you are pretending your predicament.”

“What do you think?”

“You could not remember a large portion of your life for a very long time even after Gabriel’s memory blocks were removed. That’s why Sam thinks you are doing this now.”
“That’s still what he thinks. What do you think?”

“The rest of them do not know what to make of you now.”

An observation, not necessarily an original thought. “I know.”

“How do you know if they have not said it to you?”

“I can sense it.”

“But if you can sense it, then how do you know what that sense means if you do not remember how to connect it to what you knew in the past?”

“On some things, like self preservation, there isn’t really time for you to make the connection . . . it just is. In fact, I’d say that’s how it is with all emotions. You have them without thinking about them or what they mean or how they are influencing your actions. I’m just identifying sensations and feelings whenever I encounter them, which gives the illusion to others that I’m not having them until that moment. That isn’t the case. They happen whether I remember what they mean or not, whether I can identify them or not. It’s only when I try to identify what a feeling means in front of others that I appear strange.”

“And you use this to your advantage?”

“Sometimes . . . A lot of times.”

“Even if it makes you appear insane?”

I smiled briefly. “Sometimes that’s the best way to get people to drop their guard around you. You can see what they really think or how they really are when they underestimate you . . . It’s what you do, is it not?”

When he didn’t answer, I glanced in his direction, and he sighed. “You mean by following orders rather than make my own decisions?”

“That and asking Cas questions about being human to the point of annoyance so he didn’t see you as a threat when he was on an anti-angel kick.”

“He is still on an anti-angel kick.”

“True.”

“That vampire would have killed me if I had carried out Sam’s orders, but by not carrying out Sam’s orders, I would have gone against doing something I have done since I was released.”

“I know.”

“And that is why you saved my life?”

“I didn’t –“

“You stopped the exorcism, so that I would not have to carry through on making you unconscious and in doing so kept the vampire from killing me.”

“You chose not to knock me out immediately . . . that was your choice to make, and it gave me time to stop, so –“
“You stopped for me. I don’t understand why when Abaddon was too big of a threat to allow into this world.”

“So, you definitely knew the right thing to do, but chose to follow orders instead?”

“I did. It lead me into a difficult predicament.” Was our Gadreel about to break his self-imposed shackles, spread his wings, and fly? “No.”

I guess it was my turn to sigh. “The new Deans don’t like you, and of the two of them, Vampire Dean likes you the least. I think it would take very little for him to do what he said he’d do if you knocked me out. That’s why I stopped, and I knew my Dean would take it from there.”

“You also saved me in Heaven.”

Now, that was really pushing it. “I did not. Dad –“

“He let me out, because you suggested it.”

“I knew you were basically good and the only one of the prisoners he could rely on in that situation. He and Cas needed more numbers on their side if they were going to walk out of there. Dad is the one who got you out of Heaven by telling you to go with Sam . . . You know with how you’re following orders now, you’re essentially imprisoning yourself without the walls and locked door.”

“Castiel has made me aware.”

“And it’s all for what?”

“I know of the vampire Dean’s troubles with his Gadreel. The other Dean had the same problems. I know that those were concerns your father and the others have had since I have been released. I want to show that I am not the angel that betrayed them or will betray them.”

“Humans may take less time to adjust to changes in their philosophy than angels, but it still takes time . . . and until then? Are you just going to keep doing everything you’re told? If you were incapable of making your own decisions, you would not have stayed with me and then tried to take some of the blame when I staged the prison break in Heaven . . . that was a good angel. Maybe that’s the angel they need to see more than one who is obedient.”

His shoulders dropped slightly. “I know that I am on a path of redemption, like Sam, so I am where I need to be. It is the hardest path to take.”

“Do you think you need to be redeemed for –“

“Allowing Lucifer into the garden.”

“I think spending hundreds of thousands of years in one of those cells more than –“

“And to redeem myself for the way that I was in other universes. Those Gadreels were me, and I may not remember hurting the new members of this team, but I did.”

“So, now you’re taking on all the guilt for the other versions of you out there?”

“It’s blame the new Deans and Sam lay at my feet anyway. To them, I am no different than either of their Gadreels . . . that is why I must show them they are wrong by being redeemed in their eyes.”
“Well, you do tend to be more of a follower in general, or I’d tell you that the hardest path of redemption you could find would be going back to Heaven and organizing the angels up there into doing what they’re supposed to do instead of what they’ve been doing for hundreds of thousands of years.”

When he looked at me that time, he seemed confused. “You are saying that’s what you think I should do?”

“Well, I think that not all paths to redemption are the same, and rarely do they involve traveling with a partner. Fixing Heaven would be the hardest path to redemption you could find for you . . . but I’m not sure you’re up for it. You seem to want someone to tell you what to do, so you don’t have to be accountable for any mistakes you make . . . I don’t just mean you. I mean the Gadreel in those other universes that you seem to want to make amends on behalf of as well. He had free will. He was duplicitous about his real identity, but he wasn’t bad until he started following orders from Metatron. He -“

“He did what I did in there. He followed orders even though he knew they were wrong?”

“Well, he also did it, so he would be allowed back into Heaven, but there’s nobody stopping you from going up there now. “

“But what about helping Sam? Somebody has to help him. He cannot do this on his own, and it is something else that needs to be done if we want to save even a fraction of the people that need to be saved.”

I smiled. “That’s true. It is something that needs to be done to save souls, and it’s something that needs to be done, because it’s the right thing to do. So, do you want to be doing it to get something out of it, like your redemption, or do you want to do it for others? Do both paths lead to the same destination? Do the souls that Sam saves need angels in Heaven to protect them? Is that the only way that the Host will be allowed to have the power they should have access to the way they used to have it?” He hung his head in thought, so I patted his hand and added, “It looks like you have a few options to mull over . . . you don’t have to make any decisions right now though. Just tell us or Sam when you do.”

“What if my mission is to keep him on the path of redemption?”

“Only he is responsible for following that path or not following that path.”

“But what if it is my mission to keep him from doing more harm than he has already done.”

I think I was beginning to see where he was going with it. “We all think it’s our responsibility to keep an eye on him.”

“I know. I am just unsure that any of you are willing to do what needs to be done.”

“I did kill him.”

“I know, but it takes more than that. If it were not for me, he would be out here entirely on his own. He rarely talks to me, but I often think that the silent companionship is enough . . . and if he did not have at least that much, I am unsure what he would do.”

“So . . . be his friend to keep him good?”

“In a word, yes.”
“Well, then if that is where you think you need to be and what your mission is, then keep doing it however you see fit, but . . . the closer you are to him, the harder it will be for you to do what needs to be done if it ever comes to that.”

“That did not happen with you.”

“No, I suppose not, but . . . he –“

“Hurt Dean . . . even if Dean was a demon . . . you let him go when he hurt the rest of the planet.”

I felt a sharp pang in my chest and decided to try and identify what it meant later. “Uh, well . . . he did hurt Dean in Las Vegas too . . . it wasn’t because he hurt him the second time –“

“It was much more horrific the second time . . . I can see it in his nightmares.”

“Honestly?” I glanced at Gadreel, and he gave me a nod to know that’s what he wanted . . . honesty. “It was because I could . . . I didn’t think Dean was there to see it.” I hesitated and then licked my bottom lip before adding, “And if Sam went to Hell or ended up in Death’s Lock up or the Big Empty in that universe, he wouldn’t be a problem for ours anymore . . . Here I am much less inclined to follow through on it if we are the ones that will have to deal with him going evil forevermore given how little we have left in this universe because of him. That’s what made it easier to do . . . as for why I did it, he’d used up his chances, or I thought he had until he was brought back again.”

“Do you think God did not agree with you killing him?”

“I don’t know. We’ll have to see. Maybe it was just God’s way of keeping his word to us that if we succeeded, we’d all come back . . . He does find evil much more amusing than I do though . . . almost like he can see a place for it, and all I see is how it is winning the fight . . . not by small amounts either. Almost everything is dark if not evil . . . even us, I guess.”

“You do not find evil amusing, but you would have to remember that from the time before the djinn to say it in the way you did.”

“I remember everything, Gadreel . . . that means that when I think about a specific incident, I feel something about it . . . whether or not it’s what I felt the first time around, I don’t know, because the new feeling takes the place of the one I erased . . . maybe it is the same feeling, and I am not as different as others think, but identifying how I feel is what comes across as making me different. That’s what I was trying to explain when you first sat down. Of course, maybe I’m feeling things differently as well . . . less painful or sad . . . it's hard to say.”

“You said that we’re dark too if not evil. Do you think you are dark?”

“Don’t you? We’re talking about when I killed someone else . . . I am a serial killer, you know.”

“A serial killer or warrior? There is a difference.”

I suppose he had a point. I guess it’s something else I could try to figure out at a later date.
We're in this Together

Chapter Notes

This is from the POV of Vampire Dean.

Dean hated this place. The sights, the sounds, the overwhelming smell of rotting flesh that permeated the air. This place was disgusting. He couldn't wait to get out of here.

“What'd I miss?”

Dean glanced at the Dean walking towards him and rolled his eyes. “So, when I give up the information on my own, it's creepy. You wanna know, and it's fine for me to eavesdrop on everyone?”

“Something like that. So, what'd I miss?”

Looking at the cots at back of the room with dead Croats strapped to them, Dean sighed. “Evil Sam and Beth think they might've found a cure.” Shifting his focus to Henry and Josie, he started to add, “Henry wants -”

“Wait. What? A cure for the Croatoan virus?”

“No, a cure for Ebola. Yeah, a cure for the Croatoan virus.”

The other Dean looked over his shoulder at the Croats that were still alive and kicking on the other hospital cots and said, “How long's it take?”

“Few days to clean it out of their blood, strap them to the machines at the back for a few hours, and then do an exorcism . . . probably the killing exorcism . . . they're trying to narrow down what works and what doesn't, so they can speed it up.”

“No amount of speeding it up is gonna get these things cured on 3 machines . . . So, we're still killing them whenever we come across them, right?”

Dean looked at the Evil Sam. That guy had a lot to do. No way was he gonna get it all done. This was something Dean was probably gonna have to finish long after that Sam was dead and gone. It's not like Beth could do it if it meant she might get infected, and as a vampire, he probably couldn't get infected anymore . . . still wasn't sure about that. The last thing he needed was to be a . . . Croapire? Croapire? Vampoan? The last thing he needed was to become a Vampoan . . . he'd work on what to call himself if that ever happened. Hopefully, he never had to find out if it was actually possible. “Yeah, Beth told him that's what we were gonna do. It's not safe for you guys to spend time trying to catch 'em if it means you might get infected. I'm thinking that's where having an angel that can go grab them for him comes in handy.”

The other Dean nodded in thought before turning his attention back on Dean. “What were you gonna say about Henry?”

“He wants to go back to the 1950s . . . same way he did when we met him. The other 'us' is trying to convince him to go meet the John Winchester in Wisconsin, 'cause that John grew up without a
Dad too. Cas said if that's not good enough for Henry, he'll take Henry to Heaven to see his real son . . . Now Henry is arguing that if he goes to Heaven as a human, he'll just die, and Cas is saying that's the way it might be in some universes, but not here . . . The other 'us' said it doesn't make any sense for it to be that way if you can waltz into Hell alive and come back out . . . same should true for Heaven . . . just have to find the right way to go to get there, and Gabriel set it up, so Henry will be fine.”

Taking in their surroundings, the other Dean muttered, “If they let Henry go back, doesn't that mean all this goes away?”

“Yeah.”

“And he's fighting that because . . . “

“Come on, you know why.”

“Rogue?”

“What else would it be? Well, that and I'd say he's not sure that if Henry went back, Beth would still find her way out of Heaven . . . guess in that one universe with the nerdy 'us', that guy still got sent to Hell, so maybe she'd still hear about the Righteous Man being there . . . probably still make her deal with Chuck to get down here . . . maybe. Depends on if Rachel was still hanging around with him. Even if that happened, Rogue probably wouldn't happen since it took an Apocalypse to make her. And without the Apocalypse, I'm guessing those tablets wouldn't have been saved . . . them coming to our universes wouldn't have happened either. Hate to say it, but it's gotta stay this way here, as shitty as it is, if we want to save the most people across all the universes.”

“Keep you from becoming a vampire.”

“I know it'd keep me from becoming a damn vampire. I'd still end up where you did out in the woods with Amara hot on my trail after she killed off the rest of the planet only I wouldn't have anyone there to help me out of it. Neither would you . . . I'll stick with where I am . . . You've gotta stop letting your brother think that you've got a Beth transistor radio in your head. It doesn't work like that. You can't actually hear what she's thinking.”

“I did once.”

“Yeah, well that only happens when one of us is screwed and needs a life line, like when Beth was in that closet at Stanford or Mary was roughing her up . . . when he was stuck in her Heaven torture -”

“You have a point, or are you going all fanboy again?”

Dean rolled his eyes and sighed. Dealing with a walking talking other him was a pain in the ass sometimes. “The last thing you want is Sam thinking that she's a distraction that's gonna get you killed. Keep letting him think you can hear her voice in your head and hiding her eyes changing every five minutes from him is gonna be the least of your worries.”

“Does a gut feeling of what she's thinking explain knowing an exorcism I've never heard word for word?”

“That's what happened, right?”

The other Dean's shoulder's dropped before he shook his head. “I don't even know how to . . . this is messed up. And anyway, it's not just me that's doing it.”
“Yeah, well, I don't have a brother here who is gonna want to get involved if he thinks it's a danger to me. Let him keep thinking he's in the loop. That's what makes him happy, but downplay it more. . . and don't tell him that you can pick up what I'm thinking through her either.”

“Wasn't planning on it . . . And I'm not the only one who does that either.”

He may not be planning on telling his brother, but that Dean was definitely gearing up to telling Beth, and it's one more thing she didn't need to worry about right now. “Can't help it. She's looking for her guy whether she knows she's doing it or not . . . Maybe she's filtering it out, 'cause I know she's not thinking about what we're thinking, but I can't . . . not yet. Besides, it helps me know where everyone is when we're out there, so I can keep an eye on her guy. Not that he needs it . . . I thought we were good, but he's on a whole other level. Starting to get why the kids back at camp think just saying his name is enough to scare off monsters.”

“Yeah, well . . . we've got a few years on -”

“Speak for yourself. I'm only like a year and a half older than -”

"You're 2 1/2 years older, or did you forget about Purgatory? He was only there for a couple of months, right?"

Things like age and time were all blurring together and had been for a while now. "Yeah, well, I'm a monster, but he's still better . . . a lot better. I don't -"

“He's got more to lose.”

Maybe. Sort of felt like every day that Dean was around these people, he had more to lose. He'd lost the only things that had ever mattered to him when he met them, and that'd been his decision, but it wasn't really his decision to care about them the way he did. It just happened. “It's not like we have nothing to lose. I still don't know -”

“Who cares? When has who is better ever mattered?”

“It's my job.”

“What's your job? To be better than the rest of us, or -”

“You look after your brother. I look after everyone.”

“Says who? Think we're in it together. Just because you're a monster now doesn't mean it's your job to -”

“It's been that way since before I was a vamp. Who watched Rogue and Gabriel when we were separated for months from the rest of them? Who watched Rogue and Beth when we found out her guy wasn't coming back? Who -”

“You think that matters? Whose job was it to have your back when those vamps took you? Who got you back? Look, I get it . . . this is about what happened to Beth with those djinn. You should've been there. You weren't, but she's fine now. You can keep going in circles on whose fault these things are and whose responsibility it is to look out for all of us, but the truth is it's all of us . . . Sometimes I'm gonna fuck up, and I'm gonna need you to pull my ass out of the fire. Sometimes you will. Sometimes he will. Sometimes it'll be Beth or Sam . . . whoever. We're in this together. And I get not being used to that, cause in the past it was always just you and Sam, and if you fucked up people died or he would or whatever, but it's different now . . . there's more of us as a safety net to catch one of us if you drop the ball . . . and you're part of that safety net when one of
us drops it.”

That might've been something he'd needed to hear . . . maybe. Felt like it. Dean's expression still changed to one of mild disinterest before he responded. “You done Dr. Phil, or you got anything else you wanna say before we get the ball rolling on us getting the hell out of here.”

“Shut up. What's with you today? You've been a bitch ever since we -”

“I'm starving.”

It slipped out before Dean really thought about what he was going to say. Instead of laughing the other Dean looked back over his shoulder at the Croats in disgust. “Being around those things makes you hungry?”

“What? No. It's disgusting. Smells like Hell did times 100 . . . Just ran out of my stocks before we left Iowa.”

“You talk to Beth?”

The stocks she'd given him before they left the camp in South Dakota hadn't covered all the time they'd been in Kansas waiting for her to recover; plus all the time they were spending on the road fighting, and now that those stocks were gone, he didn't really want to go back to her for more. He didn't like using her as his personal well of never ending blood. “No. Doesn't feel right. I don't want.”

Turning to face him, the other Dean put his hand on Dean's shoulder before leaning in and whispering. “No, what you don't want is to start killing innocent people out there or attacking us and getting put down. Talk to Beth.”

“I didn't really mean I'm starving. It's not that bad. I -”

“Talk to Beth.”

“I hate this.”

“I know. If there was a way to reverse it, I'd find a way to do it, but -”

“What if there was?”

“What?”

Dean had been thinking about this for a while. Him being a vamp might be what helped him find Beth after she got attacked, but him being a vamp and getting sidetracked by blood and sleep after too much sun was also the reason she'd been alone when she got attacked. Him being a monster was a liability now. “I don't think there's a way to cure me, but maybe there might be a way to make me mostly human again. When they met those dog soldiers, they were human with just the right hint of monster as long as they wore those collars, and the Evil Sam found out how to make those collars from one of the tablets. Just have to get our hands on the bloodsucker tablet, and -”

"You're gonna wear a collar?"

"I'll wear whatever it takes to make me . . . me again."

"You're still you." Dean opened his mouth to respond, and the other Dean stopped him by adding, "Okay, so what do we have to do to get one those tablets. Guessing you know. I didn't get to see
that in the show."

"That's the thing. Beth put them back. They're in one of those places she went invisible to get the tablets."

"Does she still have that key chain? We'll go get it. Beats sticking around this living mausoleum."

"Uh . . . yeah, she probably does, but, uh . . . the reason it worked for her is she didn't have a whole soul, so I'm gonna have to get rid of part of mine first . . . I think."

The other Dean took a step back. "Is that even possible?"

"They did it to her."

"Yeah, but she's . . . don't think it quite works the same on us as it did on her."

"Why? Because she was born a nephilim? I'm a monster now, so my soul can probably take it."

"Probably? You're willing to take a chance like that on probably?"

"Willing to do whatever it takes to -"

"Make you, you . . . I got it, but . . . what if it makes you worse? What if you lose one of the parts that's helping you keep that vamp under control." He hadn't thought of that. He could actually become more of a monster than he already was? The other Dean sensed his hesitation and said, "I'll do it."

"Thought you just said it worked for her, because she's different."

"Yeah, well . . . I'm different, aren't I?"

"Because of the Mark you had?"

"Because of the Mark, I probably still have . . . I mean, she had her mark for a long time just on her soul, and it caused all kinds of problems for her, so whether she had a scar on her arm or not, it -"

"She did."

"What?"

"She still has it . . . it's not very big, but she's had it all long. Can't think of your Mark like hers. It's different. And they tore her soul in half when she was still a nephilim. It's what held her together."

"Whoa, who said anything about tearing my soul in half? Thought we were going for a piece of it. And they tore more out of it after they took her grace. And did I hear Cas right the other day when he was talking to my brother? She gave him part of her soul too for a while."

"Nah, I'm not gonna let you do this for -"

"Why not? I'm probably not going anywhere when I die except for maybe Death's lock up, so even if there is some kind of contract or something on my soul from the Mark of Cain that we can't see anymore, it won't change where I'm goin'."

That's not what he'd been thinking either. "You really think you're still changed from that?"

"I don't know . . . Feel different . . . probably about as different as you do from how you used to be,
except I don't have fangs to go with it."

Oh. "Doesn't feel right to -"

"Well, I'll do it without you knowing, and then you can't feel guilty about it."

"Why would you do this for me?"

"It's like I said. We're in this together."

"What are you gonna do with the part of your soul you lose? Has to go somewhere, right?"

The other Dean looked like he hadn't expected that question and shrugged. "You want it? Maybe it'll make you more human without needing one of those collars."

"You know it's probably not a collar . . . probably just some runes I have to wear on me, like a tattoo or -"

"You really think it'll be that easy?"

"When is anything ever that easy? And I don't want part of your soul. Bad things happen when you get part of a soul that isn't yours."

"Like what?"

"Like you didn't see what happened after Cas got part of her soul. He started hitting on Beth every chance he got, because the part of her soul he had wanted to go back to being with her."

The other Dean laughed until he caught what that would mean and then looked awkward. "All right, so we'll come up with some way of containing it until we get the tablet, and then I can get it back."

If that guy wasn't gonna give up part of his soul permanently for him, then maybe Dean might be okay with it. "That might work as long as it's not contained for too long. Don't want it going demon-y the way you said Abaddon made demons in your universe."

"Probably your universe too now that you're not there to stop her." Dean rolled his eyes, and the other Dean changed the subject. "Any ideas how we go about doing this?"

"Uh, a couple."

"So, like have Beth ask Chuck?"

"Yeah, but there a lot of ways that can go wrong."

The other Dean thought about it and seemed to agree with that. "What's the other idea?"

They really weren't gonna like it, but it was the only other option. "We ask the angels we know to do it."
"You want me to do what?" Sam rolled his eyes before looking in Beth's direction. What were those two up to? Whatever it was, it probably wasn't good. Sure enough, the two Deans standing in front of her acted like they wanted her to shut up and she said, "Well, why don't we ask your brother what he thinks?" One of the Dean's looked over his shoulder at the other Sam who was also listening as Beth added, "Did you run it by my Dean . . . if you want someone to . . ."

The two Deans started to shuffle Beth towards the door, so they could talk to her in private, and she smirked before looking in Sam's direction and giving him a wink. Well, she was never usually this open with her scheming, not that she hadn't hidden that look from the two Dean's standing right next to her, but she didn't normally include other people in on her scheming. He kind of liked that she'd included him in on it, like she thought he was on her team. He took a step in their direction and noticed that the other Sam was also following them, and that the third Dean was also following them after telling Cas to stay with Henry and Josie. Sam could stop and go back to work if she had the back up of his brother and the other Sam, but . . . well, he's the only one she'd winked at, so it seemed like maybe that'd been her way of giving him permission to get involved in this too. And again, he liked the feeling of being a part of something. He hadn't felt that way in way too long, so he carried on with the others in their mission to follow the other three out the door.

"What's goin' on?"

Beth looked from one Dean to the other before looking at her Dean and answering. "They want to go get the Bloodsucker tablet, so they can do something about him being a vampire."

Interesting. Not necessarily a bad idea. There was just one problem with that, and Sam's brother brought it up. "You can't have a whole soul, and all of us have one now, so -"

One of the Deans in front of Beth sighed before turning to face the others. "We know. We were thinking . . ."

"That Beth would do it? No way. There's no way for her to rebuild hers now that we're -"

"Actually, I'm guessing that's what she wants, and that's why she brought you three into this, but no . . . I'm gonna do it. Just wanted her to talk to one of the angels around here and get them on board with helping us."

Sam found himself automatically praying to Gadreel to tell him he was not to be a part of this. Whatever it was that the angels had done to Beth when she was a baby wasn't the right way to go about doing this if it was going to be done, so he said the only viable option he could think. "Why don't you just ask Chuck? They might be on the rebellious side, but I don't think Cas or Gabriel will have anything to do with this, and Gadreel wouldn't know how. The safest -"

Sam's-not-so-evil-twin cut him off with a look. "What are you kidding me? I don't see you volunteering your brother up for this. He's not -"
Sam shrugged. "I'll do it."

One of the Deans gave Beth a dirty look over his shoulder, and she smiled. He sighed before looking at Sam and saying, "I'm thinking that . . . well, see the vamp was gonna do it, but what if the part that helps him not be a monster gets taken, and it makes him a monster?"

Oh. Sam took a step back as the realization of what that Dean had meant hit him. It kind of hit him two fold. They didn't want Sam to do it if it meant he might go full-monster again, but at the same time, despite how they all acted around him, they must still think there was something there that was good that was keeping him from going full-monster. It might be one of the best . . . no. He didn't believe, couldn't believe that there was anything good still there, but . . . He glanced at Beth. She'd known how this would go. She'd wanted him to hear it. That's why she'd brought him into this. While the rest of them argued the merits of the plan and whether or not it would work, Sam struggled with not going over to her and giving her a hug. To hell with it. Life was too short. Might as well get the hugs in while you could, so he sidestepped the rest, who'd forgotten he was there, so he could give her one. "Thank you."

"You smell like Death. When was the last time you took a shower?"

He laughed in spite of himself, but didn't let her go. "The last time I was in South Dakota?"

"Oh, that's dreadful, Sam! Get off of me, you smelly weirdo."

Taking a step back, he breathed out another laugh before looking at the others. "Why'd they ask you for your help?"

One of the Deans heard him and said, "Because we thought if anyone could get Cas and Gabriel on board, it'd be her."

"What about my brother? He would've kept it quiet, and he can get them to do just about anything too."

"Cuz we thought he'd want in on it too . . . the way he does. We already decided on -"

"Think the other Sam might have a problem with that. Just have Beth ask Chuck. I'm telling you it's the safest way to get it done. Yeah, there might be some unintended side effects if he's bored and trying to be funny, but it'll be painless and -"

"Painless? You mean it'll hurt the other way?"

"Probably more than you've ever had anything hurt . . . ever," Beth answered for Sam.

"You were a baby. How would you -"

"Well, I have been fractured my whole life for a reason . . . maybe it's from that. Maybe it's from the other stuff that happened up there. Who can tell? I do know that in order to do it, my grace had to be intact to help hold me together until they could siphon it off, so -"

"Yeah, but you didn't have any grace when Cas got the power upgrade with your soul."

"Nope, but then Chuck is the one who did that, and my soul was already broken, so breaking off a piece would've been easier than going in and cutting a piece out. I have another idea and nobody needs to lose part of their soul for any length of time."

The others looked at her expectantly, and Beth glanced at Sam. She wanted him to say it. How
could she get around . . . "The time spell . . . somebody could go back and switch the tablet out with another one we don't need anymore, so the you in the past will never know the difference."

She smiled and said, "Pretty much what I was thinking . . . I didn't leave those things out of my sight at any point between Kansas and Nova Scotia, but there may have been a few moments during that month while we were camped out and planning what to do when I was a little preoccupied. Just have to get around Meg, Abbey, Cameron, and Kevin noticing too, but yeah."

Flicking her gaze from Sam to the two Deans who were mulling it over, she added, "You guys can still to do that while we take Henry to John in Wisconsin . . . if you were looking for a way to get some space for a while."

"Wait, how'd you know about taking Henry to Wisconsin?"

Beth looked at Sam's brother and held her breath for a few seconds before saying, "Just did . . . makes sense. He's going to want to see a John Winchester somewhere to put his mind at ease and make him less of a flight risk. And he's going to need all the protection he can get, because I'm pretty sure his fate is to die in the next couple of days . . . Same goes for Josie if her meatsuit would've died when Henry used the devil's trap bullet on Abaddon, so I think it's best if we stick with him and Josie, while the others go to Nova Scotia, and we should maybe head out soon. Sam's going to need to come up with some plans on how to keep this place or the next place he goes secret from whoever is controlling the Croats, but I think he's got this just fine."

Sam's brother seemed okay with that. The other two Deans seemed okay with that. The other Sam . . . Sam didn't care whether or not the other Sam was okay with that. All Sam really cared about was finding this cure, and he was so close. Hopefully, he could get it figured out in the next few days and start getting somewhere with it. The absolute last thing he thought he'd hear was the other Sam saying, "Think I might stay here for a while. I'm immune too, so I can help with this, and I was going to get some ideas for the school from the one in Wisconsin, but I think what I'm looking for might be more in line with what he's done in the past."

The others all looked like they'd expected that about as much as Sam had. He glanced at his brother out of habit and was a little surprised to get the Dean Winchester, 'Keep an eye on him,' look. Maybe things weren't as bad with his brother or the others as he'd thought. It didn't mean that there was anything to build on there necessarily, but if his brother wanted Sam to be careful around the other Sam, then maybe his brother still cared, which was a hell of a lot more than Sam thought was there before they all got here today. "Uh, yeah sure. I hadn't thought about it, but I think I know what Beth means about needing to move and keeping the next place secret. I could use the help, and we can ask Gadreel to take you back to Kansas when you're ready."

One of the Deans who wasn't Sam's brother nudged the other one, and that one said, "Great . . . Awesome team talk . . . Beth, you mind going over some provisions with me, uh . . . outside?"

With that, the little family huddle they'd had going for a few minutes broke up, and Sam started walking back to the Croats at the back, so he could get back to freeing up the beds from the ones who'd died.

"Uh, Sam?" Sam turned to see his brother walking towards him. "You, uh . . . be on extra good behavior with him around. You understand?"

Yeah, don't go evil. "All I want to do is start setting up a system to get as many of these souls untwisted as fast as possible."

"Uh, yeah . . . 'bout that. It's good what you're doing here. I'm guessing it's gonna get a whole lot messier too. Just -"
"He's me, and if I were me, I'd want to take me out if I thought I was going to be a threat to anyone else?"

"Something like that."

"Yeah, I know . . . Whatever happens, happens. I just want to clean up as much of my mess as possible while I still can . . . I can call Beth if I run into any problems or when it starts working to let her know, right?"

Glancing in Sam's direction, Dean bit his bottom lip briefly before saying, "You can call me too, Sam . . . if wherever you're taking them gets attacked, I wanna know . . . wouldn't mind knowing when it starts working either." Sam nodded, and Dean clapped Sam on the shoulder before heading in direction of Henry, Cas, and Josie. It wasn't much, but it was enough . . . more than enough. More than Sam deserved anyway.
Cas waited for the other Dean to get done talking with his brother. Mostly, that Dean was reminding Kansas Sam to keep an eye on who they called the 'Evil Sam' and telling him to make sure the Croats couldn't find the next place the Croat-curing operation was moved. That Dean came up with the good plan of having Gadreel fly that Sam to Kansas when he was ready to go back. One, it'd keep that Sam safe from having to travel from here to Kansas alone out on the road. Two, it'd keep the next base secret from the prying eyes of the unknown enemy's-Croats who would be searching for any sign of the next place this operation was moved. That Dean seemed to understand that the so-called 'Evil Sam' was on the cusp of something great . . . he was emphasizing it.

Maybe that Dean suspected that his brother was planning on killing Cas's Sam, something they all suspected. That didn't seem entirely fair. Cas's Sam had made some pretty hefty mistakes over the years. The state of this universe was a testament to that, but at the same time, their Sam wasn't hurting anyone doing what he was doing right now. He was actually trying to do something good, but anyone who had someone watching their every mood was liable to make a mistake, and it all just seemed a little like the Kansas Sam was setting Cas's Sam up to fail. That didn't seem right. That's also why Cas was only going to refer to that Sam as Kansas Sam, not Good Sam, because there were no 'good' Sams or Deans. Calling them 'good' implied that person was perfect, and nobody was perfect. Everyone made mistakes. It also seemed like you were playing favorites by calling one good and one evil. That would only breed resentment. As long as Kansas Sam and his brother were the only two calling them 'Evil Sam' and Sam, it hopefully wouldn't grow into a problem.

He'd talk about it with Beth and his Dean, but they already left with Henry and Josie. He was going with the other two Deans, because his Dean didn't think the other two Deans were ready to have the training wheels come off yet. Cas thought they'd be fine, but then they had come up with that idea to tear pieces out of one of their souls to help the other one out, so maybe they weren't quite ready. Plus, he didn't think either one of them had used the time spell, and there were all manner of things they could screw up if they did something like go back in time and decide to stay there or interfere in things that shouldn't or couldn't be changed. Maybe they did need a babysitter.

As of right now, he wasn't babysitting anything. He was ready to go. He'd been ready since Dean and Beth left. "We should get going." They needed to find another vehicle before it got dark. Beth and Dean had taken the only other mode of transportation with them, and Cas sure wasn't planning on flying these two Deans wherever they wanted to go, because he needed to conserve his energy in case anyone needed healed, which meant they needed another vehicle. They'd brought another truck with them from Kansas, so Kansas Sam could use it when he was ready to go back . . . but Kansas Sam was just going to fly back now. Why leave an extra truck that wasn't needed here when they needed a truck to get around out there? They'd use the Kansas truck. Well, that was settled . . . in Cas's mind at least. He needed the other two to agree to it now. Cas went to follow the Deans out the door, but paused before looking at Kansas Sam. "If anything happens to my Sam, then you will no longer be teaching in Kansas. Your job will be to pick up where he leaves off . . . here . . . curing the Croats."

The Deans and Kansas Sam hadn't expected him to say that. Perhaps that was a good thing. Maybe it would have more weight, because he'd meant it. They all seemed to know he'd meant it too. He glanced in his Sam's direction and got a subtle nod of appreciation from his Sam. He hadn't really done it for that Sam. He wasn't entirely sure where he stood when it came to that Sam. He left without saying anything to him and ended up walking out the door ahead of the Deans.
As they started their journey, the non-vampire Dean felt the need to say, "You don't think you were being a little harsh on him? He's not your -"

"I know he's not my Sam. I also know he only came with us and decided to stay there, because he sees it as his job to kill my Sam. If killing someone is what you want to do, and all you need to do it is a reason, you will always find that reason. Nobody is perfect."

"Yeah, well, my brother's not a murderer."

"And he wouldn't see it as murder. He doesn't see my Sam as human. He'd see it as the right thing to do, and the road to Hell is paved with good intentions."

"The last time your Sam came into the camp in South Dakota, you held a gun on him."

"I didn't say it for my Sam. I still don't trust him."

"Then why'd you -"

"Because it was the right thing to say. People may not think they are accountable for their actions in this universe, and that allows them to do all kinds of bad things they wouldn't normally do, but they are still accountable. It's not harsh to remind them of that."

"So, what if the Croats rip your Sam apart? You still gonna make my brother cure all the Croats?"

He hadn't thought of that. "Somebody has to do it . . . and maybe instead of letting the Croats rip my Sam apart, your brother should be doing all he can to keep that from happening. If he's staying here, then he needs to have my Sam's back the same way he would have yours, not spend all his time looking for the right time to stab him in the back."

They walked on in silence for a couple of minutes until they saw Cas pull open the door to the Kansas truck. Neither objected, so Cas assumed it was okay with them if they took the truck . . . and if he drove. He'd felt the need to drive for a while now. Neither Dean looked as okay with his second assumption, but neither said anything until after he'd started the truck, and the vampire said, "Cas, I've been meaning to ask you . . . any idea what happened to the Purgatory Cas?"

That gave Cas a moment of pause. It was hard to remember that these two Deans were essentially his Dean. As an angel, he was able to see their souls, and that made it easier for him to tell them apart now . . . The Kansas Sam's brother and Cas's Dean's souls looked almost identical, except Cas's Dean's soul had been through a second round of Hell torture, so there were more scars. Vampire Dean's soul was the most different, but if you looked past the slight discoloration that being a monster made it, then you could see it was essentially the same soul . . . just that maybe it was a little less scarred than the other two's souls, because the other two had been broken more times in their lives. Vampire Dean may have been broken, but not to the extent of the other two. If Vampire Dean was like his Dean in all the ways that mattered, then Vampire Dean must feel guilty for seemingly abandoning Purgatory Cas just so he could leave his life behind by tricking Purgatory Dean into telling him how to join the team.

"If he were still around and invisible, Gabriel would have seen him, and every other time we jumped, no matter where we were, we all went on to the next universe together until we were separated to go on different missions, so I think we left him in your universe. And I think that was by Chuck's design, or it wouldn't have happened. For some reason, he wanted two Castiels in your universe . . . maybe because you weren't there. I know that Purgatory Castiel would have told your brother what happened to you, and I think he and your Castiel would have worked together to help your Sam with Metatron and Abaddon . . . Your Castiel had just stolen another angel's grace, and
eventually that would run out, which would mean that your Castiel would die without another angel's grace to keep him going until he got his own back. I would assume that if he got Purgatory Castiel's grace, it would be identical to your Castiel's grace, so it would last forever. Maybe that's how they worked together . . . Maybe Purgatory Castiel gave his grace to your Castiel . . . I thought I was making progress on why he should become human. If he didn't do that, then maybe Purgatory Castiel helped your Castiel find his own grace, so the two of them together might be strong enough to defeat a Metatron tapping into the power of the angel tablet."

"So, you think my brother knows where I am?"

"I think your brother knows what you did, but where you are? No. There are too many universes for him to be able to find you . . . unless you put a provision in on your joining the team, like that you'd join, but only if your brother could find you." Cas looked at Vampire Dean to see if he'd done that, and it would appear not, so Cas said, "Then no . . . for all intents and purposes, you are dead to your brother, and I don't see a way for him to find you again . . . unless it's something Chuck wants."

"Good."

The other Dean looked confused. "Good?"

"Well, yeah . . . I've pretty much been thinking of me as dead since I left, and if he knows what happened and thinks I'm dead, then he'll -"

The other Dean laughed. "What? Give up and live that apple pie life? Not a chance. My brother was pissed at me for months because of what happened with Kevin and Gadreel, and he was right to be, but, uh . . . as soon as I was dead, he was looking to make deals with Crowley to bring me back . . . He killed our universe to get that damn mark off my arm. You wanna know what I think happened to this Purgatory Cas? I think he told Sam what you did, and your brother trapped him, tortured him to find out as much as he could . . . maybe with your Cas's help, and then when he was done, he probably cut out Purgatory Cas's grace and gave it to your Cas to keep your Cas alive . . . Purgatory Cas is gone same as the rest of that crew and your brother is out there somewhere lookin' for you whether he thinks of you as being dead or not."

Well, that was just as likely. Vampire Dean averted his eyes and shook his head. "Nah, I don't want -"

"You think it matters what you want him to do? It doesn't . . . That's what he's done while you've been gone, and looking for you is what he's going to do until the day he dies, but at least he won't have to deal with the Darkness."

Cas shrugged before saying, "Well, he'll still have to deal with the darkness within."

"There you go with that 'the Sams are all the same' crap again."

"I didn't say all the Sams are the same, but I find it interesting that you think that's what I said."

"Now you sound like Gabriel . . . or Beth. Sure don't sound like my Cas."

That Dean had said that more than once . . . well, not that exactly. The 'sure don't sound like my Cas,' he'd said many times when Cas was in that Dean's universe trying to save him from the Darkness. It hadn't ended well . . . That Dean had already lost his brother in Chicago and his Cas sometime before that, so he'd gone with Cas and the Purgatory Sam and Dean when they showed up there . . . You could say it'd been against his will. Purgatory Sam had distracted him by making
him think that he was his brother while Purgatory Dean knocked him out . . . It was the only way to get him to not harm himself at first, and then the more he got to know them, the more responsible for them he'd felt he'd had to be. Purgatory Sam and Dean dying a couple of months later had hit that Dean hard, but when he'd seen that Cas was infected a couple of weeks later, it had broken that Dean almost beyond repair. He'd begged Cas not to leave him. As a result, Cas tried to hold out as long as he could, but the longer that Dean refused Amara what she wanted, the darker Cas's thoughts had gotten with her infection pumping through his veins, and he was not only harming himself, but that Dean too, so he'd left that Dean and was wondering in the woods when the MoC Dean killed him. That Dean had only been in those woods where Beth and the others found him, because he'd been looking for Cas. He may not sound like that Dean's Cas, but that Dean still saw him as his friend in his own right.

"It's really something Beth would say. She'd expect you to come to it on your own and give you a way out of admitting that's what you thought. Gabriel would just tell you what you were thinking."

The post-Amara Dean shook his head with a sad laugh. "Wasn't really thinking it until you said what you said back there. You really think my brother is only here to kill the Evil Sam?" Cas shrugged, because to him it seemed obvious, and that Dean added, "You think the Evil Sam knows that?"

"If he didn't before his brother told him to keep an eye on your brother, he did after that."

"His brother knows what my brother's thinking?"

"His brother knows how dark Sam Winchester's nature can be and has come to expect it."

"And he left him there knowing that my brother might kill his brother?"

"He also knows his brother can look after himself."

"I don't get it. My brother . . . he's not that guy. I know he's not. I mean, he had the demon blood burnt out of him when he was doing those trials, so -"

"It's never been about the demon blood. The demon blood was . . . I suppose it was just what made Sam more prone to his addiction, but that was never what his addiction was."

"Then what was it?"

Vampire Dean answered that one. "Power . . . He said it was power. When he almost killed his brother in -"

"When Beth had to kill him?"

"No . . . before that. We jumped into some state park or something in the middle of nowhere . . . His brother was drunk. He'd been on a bender with Purgatory Sam and this Cas, and he wanted to hold Rogue, but he was scaring her, so Sam wouldn't hand her over. They got in a fight, and Sam's eyes went black on their own. He got this demon voice . . . like straight out of a movie . . . almost beat his brother to death until Beth tackled him and put a bullet in his shoulder. You could tell after he realized what he'd done, he felt bad about it, but he was still being a dick . . . saying all this shit about how he likes killing because it gives him power over what lives and what dies and he likes torturing, because he likes making people beg him to kill them, and then when he does, they thank him for it . . . said something about how if his brother changed after his beat down, that it was because of him . . . And he hadn't had any demon blood in years. Think it permanently changed him, but the whole underlying reason he got addicted to it in the first place is that power, I think . . .
. I mean, you know how it was when we were kids. He never felt like he had control over anything with Dad and us always telling what to do. Figure he found a way to get power himself after we went to Hell . . . even if it meant turning himself into a monster, and that is the same problem your brother and my brother both have too."

The post-Amara Dean looked back over his shoulder and muttered, "Awesome . . . Now I'm thinking I shouldn't have left my brother with him. I mean, I already didn't want to leave him alone with him, but . . ."

Cas shook his head. "They need to work it out, so they can find a way of living in the same universe together . . . And they're not alone. Gadreel is there."

Both Deans laughed. "That doesn't help, Cas."

Gadreel wasn't intrinsically bad. He had the potential to fall pretty far, but he also had it in him to sacrifice himself for the greater good and redeem himself. "It should. Gadreel has taken it upon himself to be my Sam's keeper . . . It may be the first decision of any merit that he's really made for himself in a very long time. I don't know how long he'll continue to do it, but he's taking it seriously. He'll be Sam's friend first, because as he sees it, that's what Sam may need to stay on his path of redemption, but if Sam strays from that path . . ."

"Thought Beth was supposed to be in charge of Sam's redemption."

Cas looked at Vampire Dean and sighed. "She was . . . She saw it through to the end of it's conclusion, and Chuck brought him back anyway, so her role in that is finished. It's Chuck or Sam or Gadreel's problem now."

"Plus, she lost her mind."

Cas rolled his eyes before looking over at the post-Amara Dean. If that Dean truly thought she had lost her mind, he wouldn't spend so much time looking through it to see what she thought. There was something else these two Deans were up to that he wasn't entirely sure he understood yet. He wasn't even sure if they were doing it on purpose, it was happening naturally, or if Chuck was making it happen. It was probably Chuck. Chuck was the biggest assbutt in the universe . . . in any universe, all of them combined including the ones where Amara had been released. "She didn't lose her mind. I've seen when that happens. That's not what this is."

"Then explain the eyes thing to me. They're always going blue, like she has no control over it."

She didn't necessarily have control over it right now, but she'd eventually learn how to control it. How could he explain this to them so they would understand? He knew Beth's Dean understood. These two were another story even though they were trying to be understanding and were showing outward support - there was still that niggling doubt they both possessed in a world where doubting your teammates could get someone killed. "Beth . . . Beth is like a broken window . . . at first there were big pieces missing, but those have been replaced, and now she's all one piece, but the cracks are still there. Some of the cracks in the oldest parts of the window have been there for a very long time. To survive, she's lived her life on one side of those cracks and her emotions were mostly kept on another side. She knew the other side existed, and it influenced her, the way emotions do for most people, but there was a divide, and that part of her largely lived independent of her . . . sometimes, when things on that side became too great, they jumped the divide, and she cut herself off from that side completely, allowing her to tap into her soul. Over time, she learned how to use that in a fight . . . Now . . . Now, she's living on that side of the divide, so it's like she's relearning emotions and sensory feelings, because in a way she is, and it takes very little for her to tap into her soul, because that is how she's learned to deal with feeling things when confronted with them in the
"So, she wiped herself out in that djinn-dream world and made a bridge?"

"Well, she made a bridge, but she didn't wipe that other side out, or she wouldn't remember her life . . . she just doesn't feel anything about it, and that's probably a good thing . . . for now. She won't be whole until she gets rid of the divide altogether, but I don't know what she'll have to endure for that to happen, or if it will. It's a step in the right direction though it may not seem like it now."

"Hey, is that why when I feel what she's feeling, it feels like I'm feeling it? Before, I knew what was her and what was me."

Cas sighed before glancing at that Dean. "Probably. You should probably stop doing that."

"Not sure I can control it. Not even sure I know when it's happening unless her eyes go blue and then I feel nothing . . . Don't get me wrong. It makes me better out here when we're in the thick of it . . . Just not sure it's a good idea for there to be a switch to turn me to be a cold blooded killer, like that."

Before Cas could respond, Vampire Dean did. "What are you talking about? You're already a -"

"Not like this, I'm not . . . I mean I don't feel bad about killing what we kill if it means saving people, because it's the right thing to do, and I thought I could always shut down how I felt about the kills and do what needs to be done . . . maybe I might enjoy it more than I want to admit sometimes . . . and I might look like a cold-blooded killer sometimes . . . I see it with the other me . . . no mercy . . . just a cold -"

"I don't look like that."

"I was talking about the guy we saw on TV, but I'm betting you do too . . . I mean, I remember some of those kills, and it might've looked like I was wearing the mask of a robo-executioner, who didn't feel anything . . . but I know how I was feeling, and it was whole lot of hate . . . this is different. I feel nothing . . . I just know what I have to do to kill whatever is in front of me, and then it shuts off, and I can feel all the things I couldn't feel before that. Actually reminds me of . . . You know what? Nevermind."

Cas figured out where he'd been going with that. "When you had the mark?"

That Dean ducked his head. "Maybe . . . I mean when I killed when I had it, I got this high from it after the kill, and I don't get that now, but when I was killing . . . the not feeling anything and knowing what I had to do kill whatever was in front of me . . . yeah, it's a lot like that."

Vampire Dean looked at Cas. "You think that's how she does it?"

"No. It's because of what I said."

"Yeah, but you said she learned how to tap into her soul to deal with whatever . . . Maybe that's how she learned to do it without knowing that's what she was doing."

"The Mark of Cain was tied to Amara, so it was meant to bring about destruction. Beth's Mark ties her to Chuck, and he is associated with creation."

"Maybe . . . but then the Old Testament Chuck was all about death and destruction too."

"I don't think that tapping into her soul is something the Mark -"
"I'm not saying that the Mark gives her access to her soul . . . I'm thinking her being a broken window or whatever is what makes that happen, or the guy sitting next to me would be tapping into his soul every time she does it, but shutting down how she feels like that isn't something a person can usually do . . . maybe she uses the Mark to short circuit her system, and the already broken system is what makes her tap into her soul."

Vampire Dean seemed quite pleased with himself for having come up with that. Cas still wasn't sure. It was possible. Beth had lived a complicated life. She certainly hadn't made it any easier on herself. Now that everything she'd done to get out of Heaven was coming to light, he supposed that some things about her were easier to explain. Desperate. That's what she had to have been when she finally had her chance to meet with Chuck, and she'd still taken the time to ask for Cas to be in command of the angels that went for Dean in Hell. Now, Cas knew that he always would have been in charge of that, because it was his fate to be the one who pulled Dean from Hell, but she'd had no way of knowing that then. Neither had he. Still, he was grateful she had.

He wouldn't have found his true family if she hadn't, and it wasn't until he met them that he really began to live. He supposed it was a family that was growing. These two Deans may not be his Dean, but then he wasn't their Cas, and at least he had his Dean. Their Castiels were lost to them. He hadn't really thought of it until now, but it seemed like he had not just his own shoes to fill, but the missing Castiels' shoes as well. Well, he couldn't be their Castiels. All he could be was himself, and that would have to be enough.
Time

Chapter Notes

This is from the POV of the Dean we've been following since the start of the series.

"No, she didn't. She got another 15 years after that." Beth looked at Dean to have him back her up. Should've never told Henry who her Dad was. They'd been talking about 'nephilim this' and 'nephilim that' for most of the drive.

"Yeah, her Mom didn't die until she was 15, and it was from a werewolf attack. Wasn't when she was born."

Henry and Josie exchanged a look, and Henry said, "Then she wasn't born in a conventional sense. The birth of a nephil is almost always fatal to the mother, and I would think that the birth of an archangel's child would be even more devastating to the mother."

Henry then looked at Beth to see if he was right, and she responded with exasperation, "How the hell would I know? It was the day I was born. Do you remember the day you were born?"

Henry sat back and scratched his forehead before saying, "Well, then you aren't a nephil. You should -"

"That's what I've been telling you. The other half of my soul kept the grace . . . I'm human."

"They must have taken your part of the soul from hers when you were still in utero, and it was the reduction of soul-power that allowed your mother to survive."

Before Henry could respond, Dean explained, "That's the way Cas has always described her . . . as the original, as in she's who she would have been with or without the part of her soul that Rachel had."

"The human half . . . I understand."

"Not really. I mean, Rachel still had part of Beth's soul, but she was unstable. That's what made her a monster . . . she couldn't live without Beth's part of their soul, so she tried to suck it out of other people, and she used the seven deadly sins to do it."

That seemed to be good enough for Henry . . . for now. Probably come back with something else when he finished scribbling in his damn notebook. Beth leaned around Josie and Henry to look at Dean again. "None of this explains Saoirse. Her Mom abused her when she was a kid, which means her Mom was alive to do it, and Saoirse had her grace until she made her deal. She also had a whole soul as far as I know."

Hadn't thought of that. "Maybe she wasn't really her Mom. Maybe she was a wicked step-mother, or maybe Saoirse was lying . . . She lied a lot."
"That's true. Or maybe her Mom had a way to stay alive, like she was a witch or -"

"You're Mom's not a witch."

"I don't know that. I never met the woman. Dad really didn't like her, so whether or not she was actually a witch or just a bitch, it doesn't change that she wasn't a nice person and probably did find some kind of unscrupulous way to stay alive until the werewolf killed her . . . If she was actually a witch, I'm guessing that she wouldn't have let that happen, and I know she's dead, because I saw her when the witness seal broke."

Beth's Mom was a total mystery. Whatever happened there, Gabriel was the only one who could answer any questions they might have, and he wasn't talking . . . On the other hand, Chuck must have the answers too, and he'd probably tell them whatever they wanted to know, but maybe it was better not to know.

While Dean and Beth pondered that one on opposite sides of the truck, Josie decided to change the subject to one that was actually important for what they were doing. "So, this John Winchester we're going to meet now . . . He's from another universe?" Dean and Beth nodded in unison, and Josie continued. "But his father disappeared too?"

"Yeah. When I brought it up to him in his universe, he attacked me."

Dean laughed. "Yeah, but that was after you used a time spell to take him into the future without warning and showed him what the planet looked like after an Apocalypse."

"He still kept his cool for the most part until I brought up his Dad . . . I knew it'd be a hot button issue for him, and I wanted it him to lash out when I was expecting it instead of when I wasn't . . . should've just waited for the demons to show up. That seemed to have changed his mind about killing me."

Henry stopped scribbling, but maintained his focus on the notepad sitting in his lap. It was one of Beth's that she hadn't written in yet, so she'd offered to give it to him. Seemed to have been the right thing to give him, because filling it was keeping him occupied for now. "And my son . . . your father. He's dead?" Exhaling a deep breath, Dean nodded, so Henry asked, "And his feelings on the subject would be much like the John Winchester we're going to meet?"

Good question. Dean weighed it up in his mind. "Worse. My Dad lost his wife. The John we're going to meet still has his."

"And she is a version of your own mother."

"As far as I can tell."

"So, I have a great-grandchild?"

Dean paused. "Uh, yeah . . . the only Henry Winchester who can claim that as far as I know."

"And she is where we're going?"

"No. She's back at our camp in South Dakota."

"How old is she?"

Good question. None of them knew anymore. "Uh, she'll have her second birthday just before Christmas, but she's a little older than that because of the mission we did. It's complicated."
"Her name?"

"Rogue."

Dean waited for it, and to Dean's surprise, Henry didn't get all judgmental about it. Instead Henry shook his head and exhaled a laugh. "Rogue Winchester? I've been described as that in my time. John certainly went his own way if he became a hunter, and then there's you and your brother . . . well, it seems fitting. I'd like to meet her."

"You can - after we introduce you to John . . . or my Dad if you don't get the answers you want from him."

"Because of whatever Gabriel did to allow his daughter to enter Heaven?" And round and round they went. This is what started the whole nephilim conversation.

"Yep."

"And this Pamela that would allow me to speak to him without going to Heaven is a psychic?"

"She's more hunter than psychic these days, but it helps her find more survivors out here, so she's a bit of both. She can talk to people for us up in Heaven though . . . if they're answering. Chuck sealed them off, or we think that's what he did to keep them safe from the daevas during the civil war up there."

"Daevas? Zoroastrian demons? I've read about them. You've seen them in person?" And now Henry was back to scribbling everything Beth told him about daevas and the abyss in his notebook. As long as it kept him from trying to go back in time and screw everything up, Dean could live with it, even if it was annoying.

While Henry's attention was on filling in his notes, Josie's focus remained on the terrain outside the cab. "These things we keep passing . . . They were human?"

"Uh, there's some monsters mixed in there with the Croats, but yeah, a lot of them were human until they got infected."

"With a demon virus?"

"Yeah - The Croatoan Virus."

"Croatoan . . . How do I know - The lost colony, Roanoke. It was carved into a gate post. They think that's what happened there?"

"Well, that's what my Dad thought, and Sam and I were in a town once where demons were running an experiment with it. Everyone in the town who got infected just disappeared after the experiment was over."

Josie's eyes remained glued to the Croats outside the windows of the truck and said, "And yet these remain."

"Well, the demons were using them as attack dogs, and I don't know who would have been in charge of making them disappear. Crowley maybe? But he never did that, and when they all went south in the snow, I'm guessing he put them to use doing something else we never found out about . . . maybe this. Maybe he wanted to use them to keep the witches in check. I don't know. Can't ask him, cause he's dead. So is the demon that created the virus . . . Croatoan."
"They migrated south for the winter?"

"Well, it was a long winter. Lasted a few years. That's why we're taking these liquid nitrogen tanks and the fire extinguishers around to the camps. Guess the liquid nitrogen would work on killing them . . . anything that gets flash frozen like that would die if it's shattered, and the fire extinguishers aren't as cold, but they should still work to drive them back or at least slow them down."

Josie nodded in thoughtful consideration before saying, "And their natural inclination to avoid cold may make the others reconsider attacking." Dean shrugged, and she added, "We should do something about these."

Ya think? "What'd you have in mind?" Time to put that Men of Letters training to good use.

"Well, there are there are traps that could be used for them."

"Devil's traps won't work."

"These are like devil's traps, but they're for humans. We could put them down all across the land and trap them to keep them out of the settled areas."

While that wasn't necessarily a bad idea, it did make him wonder why the hell the Men of Letters would need traps for humans. Maybe they shouldn't use it around the camps, because it would give whoever was controlling the Croats an idea of where the camps were even if the camps couldn't be seen anymore thanks to Gabriel's warding, but if they put a bunch of traps between all the camps, somewhere like Nebraska, it might pull more Croats to the center to investigate and away from the camps. Any Croats stuck there, Gadreel could get for Sam and reset the traps when he left, so he'd have an almost endless supply of Croats to go to for the cure, and it'd be far enough away from the next place Sam set up a base that his base would stay hidden for longer. "What if they're not human enough for it to work?"

"We'll have to test it out."

Yeah, he supposed they could do that. "And if these traps are for humans . . . what happens if an actual human gets caught by one? He'd be stuck there, and with all these monsters and Croats around, it'd be a death sentence." He glanced in Josie's direction when she didn't say anything, and it seemed like she was going to think about it, so he added, "I'm not saying we won't use it, but we might need someone keeping an eye on the traps to keep that from happening, so the traps can't be spread out all across the country. We don't have the manpower for that. Maybe they could be in one central location. Might help to pull them away from the camps too if they get sent there to investigate. If they think the traps are everywhere, might make them slow down some too if they have to check every step they take before they take it. We could have Cas or Gadreel check any random traps we set up a couple times a day to make sure we don't trap any people in them and keep up the illusion that the traps are everywhere that way."

Josie glanced in Henry's direction, and he tore a piece of paper from his notebook to hand to her. She in turn gave it to Dean. They were definitely partners who had gotten to know one another out in the field. Interesting. "Here's the trap. We can try it out when we get to the camp and make a decision from there."

Dean glanced down at the drawing in his hand. It wasn't all that different from a devil's trap. Just a few changes here and there. Again, he found himself wondering why the Men of Letters would need something like this, so he asked, and Josie answered. "Well, as you know witches are human, and there are some who would use these traps as a form of security. We never used them in that
capacity here, but some of the older chapter houses in Europe have a rather archaic view of the world and their place in it. They are the ones who developed it after all."

"So, there are other Men of Letters out there."

"Yes, or there were. I would think some of them managed to survive all of this."

"You think they were able to save people in their countries the way we've doing it here?"

Josie's lips pursed before she carefully answered, "The chapter houses most likely to survive would have set up a society that is less than ideal. I have yet to see how your camps are run, so I'll withhold judgment until then. Although if they're anything like where we landed, -"

"What? No. That wasn't a camp. Sam is trying to find a cure for the Croat virus. We think he found it while we were there."

Josie's attention snapped back toward Dean. "That's what he was doing?" Dean shrugged. "You think the ones that died were actually cured?"

Dean's gaze flicked in the direction of a Croat they passed. "Look at 'em. Half their flesh is rotting off. No way they'd be able to survive if it weren't for the virus."

That'd drawn Henry's attention back onto Dean as well. "So, by curing them, you really mean killing them."

"You can kill them with a shot to the head. It's just that the virus twists their souls, so when they die that way, it sends them to Hell. The cure should stop that from happening even if we can't save their lives."

"And there's no other way?"

"Well, there were around 7 billion people on the planet when the virus broke out, so -"

"7 billion?!"

"Yeah."

"So, there are close to 7 billion of these things now?"

"Yeah."

"And all of this would go away if I went back?"

Damn. Beth glanced at Dean before answering for him. "We don't know what would happen if you went back. We might end up here again but worse off than we are now, and even if we didn't, the likelihood of Amara getting out in this universe would be greater. She would definitely get out in other universes and could then hop to other universes if she were so inclined, and in every one she visited, she'd destroy not only the living, but the souls of the dead, and if she ever had the chance to really kill Chuck, then every universe he's ever created would be destroyed. 7 billion is a lot, but compared to the destruction of everything ever created . . . it's a rather small percentage. Our main concern is just to keep you two alive right now."

"Why?"

"Because you're both fated to die not long after you show up in the future. We want to keep that from happening."
Henry looked a little taken aback by that. "I understand how being a parent can remove all logic when it comes to protecting your child. I suspect it would be easier for you if we were dead. Why would you -"

Every day Henry stayed in this world, he was more likely to want to go back to try and stop any of this from happening, so Dean would be lying if he said that saving Rogue wouldn't be a whole lot easier if Henry didn't last more than a few days, but Beth responded for him. "Because it's the right thing to do. And we could use your help. There is a rather substantial witch problem in New Orleans. We think maybe the witches are responsible for controlling these Croats and using them to see what's beyond the gates of their walls. Maybe they're not, but as of a few years ago, it's probable that every witch in North America was there. If we could destroy the city, we could destroy almost every witch . . . with the exception of any that have been kicked out of New Orleans by this point. We also have a computer at the bunker in Kansas that tells us where the monsters are in North America. It may take a while, but we could potentially put an end to them as well . . . at least the ones that are actively hunting and killing people. A world without bad monsters would be an entirely new beginning for the human race going forward if we could pull it off, and you could help us with that."

Josie seemed inclined to buy into that. Henry was less sure, but then if Dean remembered right, Josie didn't have a family to get back to in her time. What Dean got from Henry more than anything was a 'we'll see,' kind of vibe. Dealing with Henry was going to require more finesse than Dean thought he possessed. The trick was getting Henry to want to stay and help without making the world seem so bad that Henry's only option was to go back and keep it from becoming like this. Maybe Henry had already made up his mind and was biding his time until he could get away and use a time spell to go back . . . maybe even the same time spell that Beth was always using, the one that Henry knew the other Deans were going to use to switch out the tablets. Dean wondered briefly if she still had any of the ingredients on her or if she'd given it all to them, but then he remembered that she always had at least a little of all the ingredients on her.

The cab had gone quiet, which meant he was left with nothing but his thoughts. Maybe part of him wondered if letting Henry try to go back was the right thing to do. If Chuck or Fate or whoever didn't want it to happen, it wouldn't happen. Maybe it'd be better if things were changed, and this universe was never destroyed, or maybe it was just the easier option. Besides, there's no way he'd sacrifice his daughter in exchange for a blank slate. If it was just him and if Sam had a choice in it, he knew without a shadow of a doubt what they'd both choose, because they'd both chosen to try and convince their Mom not to have them when they went back in the past to stop Anna from killing her, but now? Now, he had Rogue, and if he made that kind of a decision, he'd be making it for her. Sam had been old enough to make his choice. He'd been old enough to make his choice. Beth was old enough to make her own choice too, but Rogue . . . she was so young and so small with no real understanding of what it would mean. What kind of a father would he be if he let her be erased, or worse, chose to have her erased? And it's not like he'd have her again. He knew that.

Gabriel had said she was one of a kind, and in all the other universes where they'd been, none of the other versions of him'd had a kid, not even the version of him that grew up a Men of Letters had a kid. The world for his one and only shot at a kid, and that wasn't even getting into the Amara problem, because as long as Amara getting out in any universe was a threat to Chuck, then letting Henry go back and losing Rogue would all be for nothing. Everything would be destroyed anyway. No, he wouldn't kill Henry, but he couldn't let him go back either. He had to convince Henry that hard work and time were the only way forward.

The monster population might have exploded while the human one dropped to almost nil, but once they got rid of the Croats and then the monsters that were a threat, this hemisphere would be safe for future generations. That wasn't something that could happen if Henry went back. Thinking
about all the things that needed to be done made Dean feel like a countdown had begun. It was like he needed to get those things done and make the world not seem so bad before his daughter was old enough to understand what Henry going back would mean, because he was sure that if the world was still a cesspit by then, she'd make the same decision her parents would if it were them or world, and Henry would probably oblige if it meant getting to go back and raise his son. Henry would look older by then, so when he went back, it'd be a shock to the system for Millie and Kid John to see him age overnight, but he'd explain, and they'd listen, and then the world would be set onto a different path, one where Rogue was never born.

It made Dean want to see her. What he was doing leaving her behind? It might be more dangerous, but she should be here with him. Every moment he spent away from her was another moment she got older, and maybe he was taking that for granted in a general sense, but when he knew he only had a limited time left with her until she got old enough to understand what sacrifice and time travel and all the rest of it was, it made the time seem that much shorter. He should pray to Gabriel and have him bring her to the camp in Wisconsin, and then he'd take it from there - make sure that she was safe out on the road the way he always did, but keep her with him from here on in. That's what he'd do, so he could spend as much time with her as possible.
Accountability

Chapter Notes

This is from the POV of the Dean that Beth found in the woods after Amara got out in his universe.

They were only making a quick stop here at the camp to pick up the tablets, some supplies, and Kevin before heading back out again. They'd decided along the way that since Kevin was the only one who knew which tablets were which on sight that they might need him to make sure they got the right tablet. No point in doing any of this if the bloodsucker tablet still got locked up in an invisible supernatural lock box, while they were left holding the wrong tablets. Dean wasn't even sure what the other two tablets were to be honest. Sure, they could go back even further in time to fix any mistakes they made, but there were really only a couple of times when the tablets hadn't been hidden in the bunker or in Kevin, Beth, or the Dean from this universe's possession and surrounded by a camp of survivors. Getting it while the tablets were out on the road with 3 people and 2 monsters instead of thousands sounded like the better option.

Walking back to the truck with a duffel full of ammo slung over his shoulder, Dean glanced in Cas's direction. "You're not driving this time, Cas." It took so much longer for them to get here with Cas driving than it should have, and it's not because Cas drove slow. He actually sped up quite a bit in short bursts just so he could ram cars or trucks that'd been abandoned in the road, swerving into them when he didn't have to do it. He'd done the same thing when Dean went with him on that trip to finish clearing Madison with the MoC Dean, but then there'd still been a couple of inches of snow all over everything, so Dean had thought that maybe it was down to that for some reason, but no. Cas just apparently liked to play bumper cars with real cars.

There's no way in Hell his Cas would be into doing something like that, especially if it meant potentially totaling the truck, not that that'd happened. Cas seemed to have perfected his technique well enough that he could hit the cars and trucks in just the right spot to make them go shooting off the road without damaging the truck, but sometimes when he swerved too far off to the side, he got stuck in the mud, because this entire universe was covered in mud with all the years worth of snow melting into it . . . and it was flooded too from all the snow melting into the creeks and rivers . . . It was just a muddy, watery mess right now even before it rained, and getting stuck with potential flash floods or in areas where you couldn't see the side of the road through all the water . . . well, it sucked trying to get a massive truck out of that, and none of that was getting into all the potholes Cas seemed to find on the roads that were starting to fall apart. If ramming vehicles off the road didn't fuck up their truck, that would. That's what the vampire was doing right now, making sure she was still road ready by the time they left. Couldn't afford to go out and search for a new truck when the world was a disaster beyond the camps. And they needed a truck that was this size.

It helped with hauling supplies around, but more than that, it added some extra protection from the masses of monsters and Croats out there. It helped them be able to mow down the Croats too when the Croats wondered into the road, something else that could fuck things up with the truck if they did it too often, so a few here or there were probably fine, but sometimes they had to get out and kill off the Croats if there were too many, and then that brought more Croats who started fighting back along with monsters who heard the gunshots and sounds of fighting and wanted food. They needed to keep this truck in good working order. It was a lifeline out there, and they couldn't afford
to be reckless with it or take the time to go out and find another one that ran after a few years of not being used under a blanket of snow and that would also be big enough to haul supplies back to the camps when they found them. Besides, this wasn't this camp's truck. It was the Kansas camp's truck they had on loan right now.

He may not be his Cas, but Dean recognized that look straight away, eyebrows knitted together, mouth pursed . . . Cas was annoyed. "Oh come on, you had to see that coming, Cas! There's no way -"

The vampire climbed out from under the truck to weigh in on Cas's driving, but stopped after a glance behind Dean and Cas. Apparently, whoever was back there decided that was their cue, because Dean heard a voice say, "Where do you think you're going?"

Looking over his shoulder, Dean found not one or two kids standing there, but what looked like all of them. "We're, uh, we're heading back out. Got something we need to do."

One of the kids in the front, replied, "And this time you're taking Kevin?"

Her voice sounded different. Must be a different kid than the one that'd asked where they were going. They were all united on what they wanted to say anyway. "Uh, yeah."

"Who's going to teach our math and science with Beth and Kevin both gone?"

Cas sighed. "Gabriel can do it. He taught Beth everything she knows about Science and Math."

A few of the kids shared looks that would make you think they hadn't known that, and another kid picked up the slack in questioning by looking at Dean's vampire doppleganger, who was getting off the ground. "You're not living up to your end of our agreement. I think it's time for an evaluation."

The vampire breathed out a laugh until he saw the kid was being serious. "Evaluation . . . Do you even know what -"

"It's what a test tells us. It lets our teachers know what areas we need to improve . . . You need a job evaluation."

What job? Dean heard the vampire mutter, "Thanks for that, Beth," before his voice got louder to address the kid. "Look, Adrian, now's not really a good time. We can do it when we get back from -"

"No, we'll do it now."

Dean realized that he hadn't been here long enough to recognize that kid's name was Adrian and that if it was Adrian, it must be the same kid that Dean and Beth had picked up out in the middle of nowhere on that show he'd watched, but the kid was quite a bit older now. Maybe that's why he hadn't recognized him until now. He knew some of the older kids, but he hadn't really stayed here long enough to get to know them well, and he definitely didn't recognize any of the younger kids, probably because they were older than when they'd been shown on that TV show too, a show that he only got to see up to when Beth took Sam down in Las Vegas.

The vampire seemed unsure of where this was going, but his shoulder's dropped before he gave in on it. "All right. Where do you want to -"

"Here's fine."
"In front of everyone."

"Well, you're responsible for everyone, so I think we all have something to say, not just me."

Dean leaned into the vampire Dean's shoulder and whispered, "Why are they focusing on you?"

One of the nosey kids answered for him. "When he got here, Adrian said that he could train the smaller kids. He isn't doing that. He's -"

Vampire Dean took a step forward and put his hand up to stop the kid, "Whoa . . . I did say that there were times I was gonna have to leave, so -"

"And what did I say?" Adrian asked.

Vampire Dean struggled to remember before trying, "You wanted me to rotate . . . if Beth and Dean are out, you want me here, but that was before -"

"You got turned? I know. But everyone around here has told us over and over again that you're safe, and you're supposed to be taking the teens out fishing too. You agreed to do that after you were turned, and that means you're responsible for them too, but you haven't done that either."

"This is the first time I've left the camp, since I was turned. I was here all last month, and none of you wanted anything to do with me, not that I don't get it. I do. That's what I'm trying to fix."

"How?"

Dean knew the kid that'd asked that. Ben. So far the oldest kids were keeping quiet and letting the younger ones air their grievances, not that Ben was all that much younger than them. "I, uh . . . We're going to go back in time and switch these two tablets with two of the tablets that Beth put back in Nova Scotia without her, or -"

One of the girls laughed, "Meg, Abbey, and . . . Cameron was alive then . . . You really expect to do that without any of them knowing?"

The boy standing next her said, "Yeah, well why do you think they need Kevin? He was there too. He'll know the right time to do it." Uh, hadn't thought of that, but it was actually a pretty good idea.

Ben ignored both of them and focused on Vampire Dean. "Why do you want to change the tablets?"

"We need the one for vampires. I was thinking that maybe there's something in there that would work like the collars for the werewolves . . . make me more like me again."

Ty finally spoke up then. "Why? What happened?"

Dean was quick to defend his twin. "Nothing. He didn't attack anyone or anything. He's just tired of being able to hear a heartbeat 2 blocks away and thinking about blood all the time."

"Blood he's getting from Beth?"

"Yeah, he doesn't want to do that for forever either."

Ty looked from Dean to Cas. "Cas? Is that true? That's really why they want to do this now? Where are Dean and Beth?"

Awesome. There was suspicious dripping from Ty's tone. This was going downhill fast. "Dean's
grandfather was being chased by the demon Abaddon in 1958. He was trying to keep the key to the
bunker safe, the key that Gabriel stole without his knowledge just before Henry did a blood spell to
get away from her. That's how we were able to get into the bunker in Kansas, and that is why
Henry appeared at Sam's new facility a few days ago with Abaddon following him. Abaddon is
dead, but Henry is here, and Dean and Beth are taking him and the woman Abaddon was
possessing to Wisconsin to meet the John Winchester there."

The kids all took that in stride, although you could see some of them mentally trying to work
through it all. One of those kids, with a mild look of confusion said, "But he's not our Dean's
Grandfather's son, right?"

Both Dean's laughed before Cas answered, "No, but it's easier than taking him to see his own son."

"Is that why Gabriel took Rogue away from here the day before yesterday?"

Dean was quick to ask the kids if Gabriel was still here, because Jody was good for protection and
all, and the adults in the kitchen probably were too, but these kids needed more than that, and if
Gabriel was gone, then all they had was Chuck, and Chuck wouldn't do squat for them if they were
under attack. From what Dean understood from the stories he'd heard about this place, Chuck had
been here when those daevas attacked, and he hadn't done a damn thing about it when people were
dying. "Yeah, he came back, just without Rogue. If Dean and Beth are both alive, then I'm
guessing he left her with them, so she can meet Dean's grandfather."

"I guess so? Haven't had a chance to talk to them since we left."

Ty, who seemed to pick up on the smallest of things, asked, "What new facility does Sam have,
Cas?"

"He may have found a cure for the virus. He's in the testing phase right now."

A teenage girl asked Cas if they'd seen it, and Cas told her that's where they'd been when Henry
showed up in the present. "And it's all above board?"

"That's why we were there - to make sure it was, and it is. Gadreel is keeping an eye on things and
will let me know at the first sign of trouble if there is any."

"A cure? Does that mean that we'll get our families back?"

Fuck. Not really. Dean let Cas answer that one too. "Not in this life, but now it means you will be
able to in the next."

Quite a few of the kids seemed happy enough with that, but one picked up on something else that
Cas had said without saying it. "Does Gadreel have a phone?"

"No."

"Then how can he tell you if Sam is causing trouble?"

Cas sighed. "I'm an angel again." Some of the kids clapped. One little blonde girl jumped up and
down, while she clapped, saying her angel was back, and others seemed to know Cas well enough
to know that it isn't something he wanted.

One of them was Ben, and he was quick to say, "Seriously, what happened? You wouldn't have
gone back to being an angel for anything less than saving Dean or Beth. Now he wants to suddenly
not be a vampire -"
"Hey, I never wanted to be a vampire."

These kids were smart. They also weren't getting the answers they wanted from Vampire Dean or Cas, so they looked at Dean, the one they apparently didn't know, and he didn't realize it until now, but he was also the one they trusted the least too. "Being a vamp makes him stronger in some ways, but it makes him weaker in others. It's bad out there. You can't afford to get distracted, or you or people who are relying on you can get hurt."

"Who got hurt?"

"Nobody. They just -"

Vampire Dean shook his head at him and said, "Beth. I was supposed to have her back, but I fell asleep in the truck, and she got attacked by a djinn and a couple of shifters that were working together near the Colorado camp. I killed them and found her, but she'd been dosed. Her Dean took some African Dream root to try and help her wake up, 'cause it wasn't a djinn like any of us have ever seen, and he started . . . I don't know . . . having seizures, so Cas took his grace back to bring him out of it before he could die."

"Did she die? If he was having a seizure, it was happening to her too, right? That's what happens with African Dream Root if -"

"No, she's not dead."

The kids started panicking, like they didn't believe that. Some of the ones at the front tried to get them to calm down, and then Vampire Dean yelled so all of them could hear him, "She can't die!" And they all stopped. "God's sister did it to punish her. She'll never get any older, and she can't die. That's the only reason I'm still here."

The girl standing next to Ty, put her hand up the way Beth did to get the other kids to be quiet when they all started talking again and then she looked at the Vampire Dean. "What do you mean that's the only reason you're still here?"

Vampire Dean shrugged, "If I had my way, I would've had him take my head as soon as I got turned, but she talked me out of it."

"So, she won't be alone when all of us are gone?"

These kids had a knack for picking up on the negative and morbid pretty fast. Nobody at their age should think living forever would be a bad thing. "Uh, yeah, but she has Cas now . . . and her Dad."

"And she can give you all the blood you want for forever?" Vampire Dean shrugged with a slight nod, and the girl asked, "What about our Dean?"

"He, uh . . . he's the same as he always was, except I guess they don't have that connection anymore. God's sister took that too."

The kid's all looked at one another. Ty looked especially disheartened by that and sounded more like a kid than Dean had heard him ever sound when the next words out of his mouth were, "But that's saved them more than it's put them in danger, and they need one another . . . You could always turn him too."

Vampire Dean waited a beat, a brief jovial look flashed across his face, but he got it under control because of how genuine Ty had been. "Take it from me. This is the last thing he wants."
The kids all subconsciously looked in Dean's direction to see if he agreed. "Uh, yeah, I was a vamp for a few days awhile back, and I wouldn't want to live like that for forever. When I go out, I want to still be me."

Ben nodded, like he understood before saying, "Our Dean got turned too right after they started the Wisconsin camp. If he didn't want it then, he probably wouldn't want it now. Is that why you're helping Vampire Dean switch the tablets, so Kevin can try to find a way for him to go back to mostly being human again?"

He hadn't really thought about it, but he supposed that was one of the reasons why. He indicated that and then thought about how the guy standing next him didn't really feel like him and did at the same time. That guy was his own person and had his own thoughts the way Dean did . . . unless they some how got connected to one another's thoughts through Beth, but even then, they were thinking their own things when they were fighting different monsters out there. That's how he knew the thoughts sometimes weren't coming from him, but were coming from the vampire. It's what let him know when that guy need help, and probably vice versa. That guy might be a vampire, but he was a vampire that got him, and he got that guy. Just like they both got the Dean from this universe without needing to know what he thought. They really were kind of like triplets separated at birth and raised in the exact same way.

Dean guessed that concluded the kids' evaluation of the vampire, because they all looked to Adrian to see what he'd say. "Beth's really okay? She may not be able to die, but she woke up?"

"Uh, yeah . . . She's a little different, but Cas says it means she's better than she has been in a long time."

"But you feel responsible for what happened to her, and that's why you want to find a way to make it so it doesn't happen again now instead of later?"

Vampire Dean hesitated. "Yeah, how'd you -"

"If you really are our Dean with just a few differences, then . . . You took on Beth as your responsibility, and that means that you made a commitment to her to do everything you could to keep something bad from happening to her even if she can't die, but you being a vampire means you couldn't for some reason, and until you fix it, so that it doesn't happen again, it'll eat away at you until you do." Seemed like these kids didn't need to read minds or be a version of Dean Winchester to really understand him. Vampire Dean's shoulder's dropped a little before he gave a silent nod, probably because he was at a slight loss of words on being called out like that, and Adrian smiled. "Take however long you need to fix it then, but when you come back, you need to take the teens fishing, and then you need to start helping train the smaller kids."

"You know you're not really my boss, right?"

Adrian laughed. "If you're one of our leaders, then you answer to us."

Smart kid. Some were smarter than others, but they were all smart kids from what Dean could tell. "Yeah? Who taught you that?"

"Sam . . . In one of his history classes." That'd explain it. "Take it as a compliment. We want you around." Then Adrien looked at Dean and added, "See what you can do about convincing him to stick around more too. You can decide what his job will be. I think he's a little lost with his brother in Kansas, and that's why he goes out so much." Adrien glanced at Ty, and Ty gave a signal that must've meant that the kids could go, because they all started heading off in different directions.
"What the hell just happened?" Dean found the words leaving his lips before he realized what he was going to say.

"I don't know. Think they just want more attention. I mean Jody does the best can, and I'm sure she's some of these kids' favorite, so they don't notice much of a difference when the rest of us are gone . . . same goes for the other adults who are here full-time, but there are a lot of kids here, and I'd say Beth and their Dean are the ones most of them connect with the most, so when they're gone the kids are pretty much raising themselves . . . and it's not like you're foot isn't back out the door the second you get back from being out there."

"Wait, so you agree with him."

"Maybe. Could use your help on this fishing thing, and before I got turned, I was thinking about coming back and maybe making these kids some of the food we had in the Wisconsin camp . . . every once in a while. Think there are some kids who are learning to cook instead of just prepping all the food, but I don't know . . . I was thinking about making it real class where they could have fun if the guy from this universe is teaching them auto repair. Can't do that now."

"So now you want me to do it?"

"Not if you don't want to . . . It'd suck for them to have someone here who doesn't want to be here. Not sure if you noticed, but they pick up on a lot. Couldn't hurt if you were thinking about sticking around here a little more than you have been though."

It's not that he didn't want to stick around here more. "Yeah, but what about all the stuff that still needs to be done out there?"

"Guess that stuff will always be there, and I don't even know what we're doing out there half the time. I guess we figured out what the Croats are doing, and we're making sure the other camps are all right. And maybe we're killing what we can to cut down the numbers of what's out there when we have a chance to do it, but it's nothing like hunting. It's all killing. I think since we've been here we've only found like 7 people to save, and I wasn't even there for that, but the kids in this camp need saving every day. I don't know about you, but saving people is what always got me through when things were bad."

Dean gave a non-committal nod, but that sounded about right, so the vamp said, "And I'm not saying we have to stick around here all the time . . . could spend a few weeks here and then try to finish off searching Minnesota . . . mark another state off Beth's map."

Yeah, one state out of the lower 48 was kind of sad, and that didn't include Canada or Mexico, the rest of the world, really. Maybe that Adrian kid had been right when he said that Dean was a little lost without Sam, and that's why he was filling all his time by going out on the road, but everything else out there that needed to be done seemed impossible to finish at the rate they were going. "I'll think about it."

"Figured you might. Come on, we should get going before it gets dark. Kevin's packed and loaded, truck should get us there."

Yeah, and he bet Kevin picked the good seat by the door. That meant there was going to be another fight over who drove. Dean turned, contemplating his moves on how to win out on that one against the vamp, because he was not sitting in the middle, but it appeared to be in vain as he saw Cas sitting behind the steering wheel with a look that almost dared Dean to do something about it, and Dean couldn't help but laugh. "It's gonna be a long drive."
Vampire Dean sighed. "Looks like it . . . I swear if he keeps hitting those potholes the way he has been, I'm gonna banish him though. He can find us when we get there. Guessing Kevin knows where to go."

"Will Vamp blood even work for that?"

"Shut up. I'll just use yours."

"Wouldn't mind donating it for the cause."
I dialed the number and waited for someone to pick up. "Hello?"

"Hey, is this my Sam, or the other Sam?"

"Uh, your Sam is busy."

"Is he tied up?"

"No."

"Dead?"

"No. What do you need, Beth, we -" I heard something of a struggle in the background, some annoyed shouts, of "Give it to me," and a grunt, like someone had been hit in the stomach before my Sam must have eventually won out, because he came on the line a little breathless. "Hey, Beth."

"Is the other Sam knocked out?"

"No."

"Giving you a bitchface?"

He laughed and said, "Yeah, what'd you need?"

"Did you get -"

"More machines for the cure?"

"Yeah. There should be a dozen now."

"Uh, we got a dozen on top of what we had, so now there are 15."

That was even better. "And you're already set up in your new place?"

"Yeah."

"Good. Uh, we found a trap that works for Croats. It works like a devil's trap, and usually, I guess the Men of Letters use it on people for some reason, but since Croats are people with a demon virus, it works on them too. We're going to set up maybe 50 or so in Nebraska to see what we catch. We'll give you the coordinates, so Gadreel can get more Croats for you without tipping the others off on where he's taking them. He'll need to keep a close watch on the place to make sure no normal human survivors get caught in them."

"Wow. Really? Why Nebraska?"

"Dean was thinking that it might pull other Croats away from the camps if they're trying to figure out what's trapping the others for whatever is controlling them."

"Okay . . . You could do more than 50 if you want."

"You figured out the cure?"
"Yeah, it'll still take a few days from start to finish, but I think I found a way to speed it up, and now with more machines, we could get through more faster. I just need to find more beds for the new ones he brings from the traps."

"Any ideas what you're going to do with the bodies once they've been cured?"

I heard him exhale briefly before saying, "Uh, well we have to burn them, but the problem is the smoke would give away where we are, so we were thinking that there are a few crematoriums in the area that we could rotate between and maybe some a little further out to throw them off our scent. We couldn't drive to the crematoriums, or the Croats would be able to see where we are, so I'm going to need Gadreel for that too, and I think he's just about down to the bare minimum as far as angels go. He can fly, but that's just about it."

"Could you have him put the bodies in a big truck somewhere nearby that you could drive to the crematoriums, and then when it's empty, he could pick you up and take you back?"

"How long do you think the Croats will let me drive with a load of dead Croats in the back before they start attacking me on sight? I heard you guys had a problem with them swarming on the way here."

That only happened when you killed more than a handful, but he had a point. If whoever was controlling them could compel them to attack when necessary, they'd definitely do it with the person taking away their Croats by curing them. "Uh, how opposed are you to moving again?"

"Why?"

"Well, if you have a big enough place, you could find something to use to block the smell and store the bodies there until there's either no more room. Keep it ventilated to keep the methane from building up until the last day or so, and then you have a natural combustable gas that you could use to torch the place after you find somewhere else to go."

"Uh . . . maybe. Do you have any idea how bad that's going to smell?"

"Yeah, you're probably right, and I'm thinking that it's probably pretty dangerous . . . maybe, uh . . . I'm sure you guys will come up with something."

There was a bit of silence, and then, "And you guys are all okay?"

"So far. John meeting Henry was interesting. Henry meeting Mary was even more interesting. Henry gets along much better with Rogue."

It sounded like he smiled as he said, "Rogue's there?"

"Yeah, Dean wants her with him. He feels like the clock is ticking on her being a kid, so he wants to spend as much time with her while he can."

"What happened?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why is he worried about the time he has with her now?"

Good question. There were probably a lot of reasons for it. "Uh, well . . . If you think about it, there were only a few weeks here and there that he spent away from her from the time she was born until we went on that training mission. He spent 13 years away from her then even if it only felt
like a couple of weeks to her, and then when he came back, he didn't remember her, so the first
time he got to see her was on the mission, but we were on a mission, so he didn't get to spend as
much time with her, and then he became a demon, and when he wasn't a demon, he was locked up
in the the MoC Dean's subconscious or whatever, but I didn't know that. I told her he was dead, and
"
"You what?"
"I thought he was. I didn't have the heart to tell her Cas was too, or -"
"So, it was just you, Gabriel, and Rogue at the end?"

Had none of us really talked to him enough to fill him in on any of this after we got back? "In the
last universe . . . but before that we were all split up without warning 3 or 4 universes after you . . . 
"
"Died?"
"Yeah. Gabriel and Rogue were with the Dean that's a vampire now. I was with the MoC Dean,
and the Purgatory Sam and Dean were with Cas. We jumped to a new universe when we got Mary
and John to agree to come with us, and the first place we jumped was the Sam-next-to-you's
universe. He'd been dead for several months. Their Cas had been dead for several months.
Purgatory Dean and Sam had been dead for a couple weeks, and Cas was infected with Amara's-
black-vein plague - whatever that was. Anyway, the MoC Dean killed Cas, and we saved the
brother of the Sam-next-to-you, and he made it possible for us to save his brother and they decided
to come with us . . . I knew then that Cas was dead. I had no idea where Dean was. I went back and
forth on thinking he was the MoC Dean, and that he just couldn't remember anything, but then I
decided he wasn't and the demon had had our Dean killed, so he could join the team . . . I was
away from Rogue for probably 4 or more months, and when she asked me if her Dad was going to
be back, I told her 'no' . . . Then the next universe was home, and he was here for her when he got
back. He spent a lot of time with just her for the whole first month after that."

"Anything else?"
"What do you mean?"
"That I should know?"

Ugh, should I tell him I could live forever? I didn't know. Would it hurt anything if he knew? Is
this what mistrust felt like? The others thought he could use it against me if he was so inclined, and
I guess based on what I saw him do to Demon Dean, they were right. I don't think I'd particularly
like to experience those feelings if I didn't like the feel of being stabbed in the stomach, but on the
other hand, if he knew I couldn't die, did that mean it was checkmate in this little game we'd been
playing for as long as I'd known him? Not necessarily. As Cas reminded me, there were things
worse than death, like being chopped up into little pieces and spread all over the country, but being
consciously aware of all of it. Maybe he might see it as more of a challenge. I didn't think that was
a good thing either. "Nope."

"Okay, well . . . I'll let you get back to getting reacquainted with your daughter. Just one more thing
. . . This plague Amara released. It killed how many people?"

"Between that, the natural disasters, and her raw power wiping people, angels, and demons out with
a thought, everyone on the planet except for the Dean in that universe."
I heard him exhale. "Okay, thanks, Beth. Let me know when you set those traps. We'll be getting this place ready until you do."

"Okay. Bye Sam."

I hung up and looked at the phone. Briefly, I wondered why he'd wanted to know that, but maybe it was so he could know more about the Sam next to him. Then I wondered how he'd known that I'd been having to reacquaint myself with Rogue. I thought he thought I was, not necessarily faking it, but felt more than I either consciously or subconsciously knew. Maybe that was just when he was face to face with me and annoyed by something. I really was mostly me and becoming more and more like my old self with each passing day, or I thought maybe I was. I just had to start over again on feeling things, and there were an awful lot things to feel, sensations, and all the rest.

I think the thing that my daughter disliked the most was maybe my accent. At first I think she thought it was funny, but now when I say something that's not quite the way I would have said it in the past, her eyebrows get a little stern, and she says, "No," but she doesn't say, "No, Mom," like I'm not her Mom the way she did Dean when he didn't remember her. She just tells me no, and then points at me, like she wants me to try it again. If Dean's not there, I will, and she'll turn it into a game where she hangs on every syllable to make sure it's right before clapping once I've done it to her satisfaction. If he is there, he usually tells her to try it again and that I can say it any way I want. I don't know. It was a little strange how she'd chosen to address the issue of me not being quite the same as she remembered, but I guess it was something that she thought she could fix, and just like her Dad, if there was something wrong, that's what she wanted to do, fix it. Other than that, I noticed that she seemed to watch me a lot more, like she was still trying to put her finger on what it was exactly that wasn't quite right. I wish I knew, so I could tell her what it was, but I didn't. The longer we stayed here, the more time she had to investigate me, and I think maybe that's why I was looking forward to getting out of here and going to set these traps in Nebraska. I think I preferred the action of being on the road to being here in a settled camp anyway.

Now what to do about Henry and Josie. Hm. Josie's expiration date and time was probably past. From what I remember on that TV show my Dad had me watch years and years ago now, I think I remember Dean stabbing Abaddon shortly after she came through the portal. That probably would have been enough to kill her, but if it wasn't then I think Henry shooting Abaddon in the head to trap her definitly would have, and if that hadn't done it, then Abaddon being dismembered would have. None of those things had happened. Of course, that didn't mean that Fate couldn't throw a nasty curve ball at us when we least expected it, in fact, Fate probably would, because in this universe, the timing of things seemed to be off, but Josie would probably be okay if she wanted to go with us to set the traps and then have us drop her off at the Kansas camp. She knew the bunker and the lore, and maybe she could give Bobby a hand on the Men of Letters side of things. I wondered what she'd think of the updated technology.

Right now, in the Wisconsin camp, we were at an absolutely medieval technology level with the exception of the generator and some of the medical equipment I used when I had open hours, which she watched me do to see if there was anything she could think of to use as a cure for the various ailments. I guess not everything had to come from science. Magic had its practical uses sometimes, and she knew that recipe that my Dad and MoL Dean had used to heal injuries. Maybe there would come a time that the camps wouldn't need a doctor. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. I think maybe . . . conflicted. Conflicted - having or showing confused and mutually inconsistent feelings. I think that was a good way to describe it.

I was glad to have help if she could offer it, because the burden of doing it alone would, I think, become untenable if I was also going to be going out and fighting monsters on a regular basis. On
the other hand, relying too much on magic wasn't a good thing, because despite my sometimes use of magic and living in a supernatural world, I was primarily science-based, and what did that mean for the Colorado camp if Josie could come up with cures for things. The entire premise for their camp was to make medicine. It would be a while before they were up and running, but still. What about the kids in my camp who were starting to think more about getting jobs in the Colorado camp when they finally graduated and decided to leave us? What about the kids who were doing at least preliminary studies on medicine? If they could just as easily hand anyone who had a problem a magic cure all without needing to know what was wrong with the person to fix it, what was the point in all of those studies other than general curiosity and wanting the hows and whys of physiology.

Josie assured me that magic couldn't cure everything and that there would be a need for both medicine and doctors, but who knew how that would work out? I guess it didn't hurt to give people the option. I know if I was dying, I'd probably take a drink that could keep me from dying in a matter of seconds over surgery to do the same thing, but we'd lose our understanding of how the body works and doesn't work, genetics and all the rest of it in a few generations if everyone went the magic route, because it was the easier option and supply and demand dictate eventual job markets. Is this how Dr. Thomas felt about Cas healing everyone? I guess I never thought about it, but when he was in tip-top shape as an angel, he could heal anything on anyone, and so could my Dad. It hadn't really put Dr. Thomas's job in jeopardy. Maybe it would be the same with this? Maybe there was room for both? I guess we'd have to see. No point in worrying about the future of the Colorado camp for now when they hadn't even started on production yet.

Then there was Henry. Was he going to stay here or go? I think he'd gotten a pretty good idea how his son felt about him from this John. Their first encounter hadn't exactly lacked hostility on John's part, especially since he wasn't entirely expecting it. The camps in the area knew we were coming, but we hadn't exactly said who we were bringing with us. I'm not sure how that conversation would have gone down over the radios, really. "...Oh, yeah, and we're bringing Henry Winchester, Dean's grandfather who jumped here from 1958 with us. Tell John Winchester in the farm camp to be on standby. His not-Father would like to meet him." It was just easier to show up with him and have them meet rather than get into a lengthy conversation on the radio and then have to repeat it all again when we got there.

It'd gone even worse when Henry found out that Mary's name was Campbell. He'd been familiar with a few hunting Campbells in his time, and his first response had been, "My son married a Campbell?" in not necessarily the most flattering of ways. The savior of that particular first meeting? Kid Dean. He'd been hiding and listening and pieced together enough to know that this man was supposed to be some kind of a grandfather to him even if it was really my Dean's grandfather, and he'd come running out of his hiding place, so he could wrap his arms around Henry's legs when it looked like his Dad was going to kick Henry and us out. John and Mary had just watched their son welcoming the 'newest member of their family,' and Henry had knelt down to Dean's height to get a better look before looking up at my Dean.

My Dean had nodded to let him know that the kid was him as a kid, just with a different life. Henry'd asked if the kid Dean understood what was happening, and Dean had looked a little unsure. He didn't know the Kid Dean at all really, so he'd looked to me for my opinion. Based on my memories, I had to say that Kid Dean did and didn't understand. In his kid's mind, he thought the grown up Deans were all brothers, and he thought that he was on a different planet instead of in a different universe. That's how he made sense of it. Henry had looked back at Kid Dean and smiled, said something about him being pretty smart for a kid his age, and then he'd explained that he hadn't seen his own son since he was about Dean's age. Kid Dean had asked if he meant his Dad, and Henry had said his son was like John's brother. Kid Dean had understood immediately what he'd meant, and then he'd asked if Henry was like his Dad's Dad's brother. Henry'd smiled
again and said that was right. Now that they were on the same page, Kid Dean asked if Henry wanted to meet his real brother before taking Henry's hand and dragging him off to see Sam. Real brother. The kid definitely knew more about what was going on than you would think, but then I guess Rogue did too in her own way, and if she could, then Kid Dean definitely should too even if his parents were trying to shelter him from it as much as possible.

It'd been kind of awkward for us to be left with them after that while Henry went to meet his 'not-grandson, Sam,' because we were responsible for dropping this on their doorstep, but Josie was there to save the day and make some small talk. After we'd left their cabin, Henry had dropped a little of the gentlemanly facade he'd had since we met him. He'd just looked a bit overwhelmed and slumped somewhat under the burden . . . that is until he met Rogue after we left the farm camp to go stay in the fishing camp. At first I wasn't sure if it was the fact that the archangel Gabriel was delivering her to us that was what appealed to him more, but as soon as he got a good look at Rogue in Dean's arms, his attention had been drawn to her.

He could see the similarities between she and her Dad straight away and commented on them. Meeting her seemed to . . . I'm not sure what you'd call it. Lift his spirits, maybe? He'd tried to tell her that he was her grandpa, and she'd shaken her head before pointing at Gabriel and saying, "Grand - pa," so Henry had said, he was her great-grandpa, and she'd slowly sounded out Great before adding the grandpa part. He'd smiled and said that's right and then flicked her wrist before saying Great - pa. I'm not sure what my Dad thought about being outdone by Great as opposed to Grand, because he said something about us needing to talk when we were done doing our family reunion and left. I think possibly he wanted to talk about what was wrong with me. Maybe you could see it on my soul? I didn't know. Maybe he just knew me as well as the rest of my family did and could pick up on these things?

Anyway, Henry and Rogue it hit off, and Kid Dean, who considered himself her uncle, along with Baby Sam had quite a bit of fun together over the next few days. Henry was making slow but steady progress with the Winchesters in Wisconsin. It helped that he was focusing a lot of his attention on the kids. The question was, did we leave him here to continue bonding with them, or did we bring him with us to go to Nebraska and then Kansas, where he could join in on helping Bobby with running the bunker? Technically, the family in Wisconsin wasn't his, but if he wanted to do a good thing, he could give the John there, some peace, since his path had been more than likely identical to that of that John's father. None of us knew how long he had now either. Maybe he'd have another day, maybe he'd have more, but if he wanted to make amends with his own son, maybe we should get in touch with Pamela, have her meet us in Kansas, and then have him talk to his real son, find out what John wanted him to do? That is if we could keep him alive that long. For Rogue's sake, and maybe for Dean, who seemed to be warming somewhat to Henry, I hoped that we could.
This is from our Sam's POV.

Sam looked at the phone as the call ended before stuffing it in his pocket, so the other him couldn’t get it before him again. He may have gone for weeks without talking to them and had tried not to think about them in all that time, but this phone was his lifeline to something other than boring Gadreel, disease, and death. It was also the only way they had to contact him if they needed help, not that he thought they’d ask for it, and he guessed that maybe they could pray to Gadreel if they really needed to get through to him, but that meant putting his faith in Gadreel to actually tell him that someone had prayed to him. Gadreel was just as likely to hold off on it if you told him something, like 'I'm going to sleep. Wake me up in 4 hours.' No messages would get through to him in that time, and by then it might be too late, just like it’d been too late to do anything about the daevas by the time Gadreel told him something was wrong in Heaven . . . Not that he expected them to call him for help. It's just that -

Sam sighed. He could come up with practical reasons for why he wanted the phone, but really it was just because he wanted the only link to his family with him, not the impostor wearing his face. They were his family. Even Beth was his family. That guy didn't know her. He didn't get to sound familiar or annoyed with her or want to speed the conversation along with her, so he could get her off the line if she was being a nuisance. That guy didn't know anything about any of them. Just because that guy got to watch a TV show about their lives didn't mean he knew anything about anything in this universe. That guy had been here for less than a week before he decided to switch camps and then had stayed in that camp until a week or two ago - however long it took now to get from Kansas to Iowa and then to Sam's first Croat curing operation. This little trip was the first time that guy had a taste of what it was really like here, and all he did was bitch and moan about it. Tough luck.

That guy could have stayed in his universe where he got to drive roads without massive cracks in the pavement without having to stop for Croat crossings, and that guy could have stayed somewhere that had diners and cafes and motels you could actually use, but did that guy do that? No. That guy, for all his talk about taking a step back from his brother and yadda yadda yadda, had done the exact opposite of that by coming here, and all he did was bitch about it. Why? Sam didn't know. That guy had holed up in the most comfortable place in the world by staying in the bunker, hardly something Sam would consider roughing it.

Out of spite, Sam seriously considered Beth's idea of keeping the bodies stored here. He could ignore the smell until it made him green just to see that guy be uncomfortable for real for once. Maybe it might even make that guy leave early. Sam thought that guy was supposed to be working on getting the school in Kansas going. What was he doing here again? Doing a tour of the camps to see how they ran their schools? Yeah, right.

If the others had come here to check in and make sure Sam was running his cure center on the up and up, then that guy had joined them, just so he could kill Sam. That's what Sam was getting from not only what his brother had said, but also what Cas had said. They'd still left the guy here, so Sam guessed that they must have just thought it was a possibility rather than a definite, but then
why had this guy chosen to stay here? He wasn't really helping all that much. All he was doing was 'observing,' and Sam understood that. On the one hand, that guy hadn't created the problem with the Croats, so it wasn't his job to cure them, but on the other hand, why stay here if you're not going to do anything? It had to just be so he could find a way to end Sam for the smallest infraction, and Sam wouldn't really mind, except he had a lot of work to do here, and from what he'd seen, he doubted that guy would pick up where Sam left off after Sam was dead, despite what Cas had said before he left.

That meant that someone else would have to pick up this guy's slack, someone like Sam's brother or Beth. That's the last thing Sam wanted to happen. He didn't want them to get turned. This was pretty dangerous work. He'd already been bitten too many times to count. All it took was a momentary lapse in concentration and getting too close to their heads or not tightening their straps tight enough to hold them without ripping more of their flesh off, which would just allow them to get free anyway. It didn't even necessarily have to be a bite that might get one of them either. All it'd take was the jab of a contaminated needle if you weren't paying attention, and the blood borne virus would infect you - if you didn't have a natural immunity.

Or an angel, Sam guessed. Cas or Gadreel might be able to carry on with this after Sam was dead, but Cas had other things to do out there in the world if any of those problems were going to be fixed, and Gadreel . . . well, the idea of leaving Gadreel here alone to run things by himself didn't exactly instill confidence in Sam. There were a few things wrong with it. One, was Gadreel's lack of decision-making prowess. Gadreel was getting better about it and seemed to make at least one new decision for himself every day, but that wasn't the same as living your entire life according to your own code and making all of your own decisions, and this work was too important to leave to someone who was indecisive. Two, Sam wasn't entirely sure he even wanted Gadreel to be left alone to burn all the bodies after they'd been cured. It's not that Sam didn't think Gadreel could do it, but there was something unsettling about the thought of having an angel burning millions upon millions of human bodies. That's what they were after they were cured, just human bodies that needed to be discarded. It didn't seem like having an angel becoming desensitized to discarding human bodies was all that good of an idea. Three, Gadreel was already running on empty. Between helping move the bodies, having enough of a spark left to blind Croats with short burst of smiting power - not enough to kill them or make them deaf since the killing exorcism didn't work on deaf Croats - and picking up new Croats for the programme, Gadreel was struggling. To be doing all that and then have to hook up the Croats to the machines, monitor them for the signs that they were ready to move onto the next stage in the process at the earliest time possible, and then hook them up to other machines before being able to do the killing exorcism . . . Gadreel wouldn't be able to keep up for very long even if he didn't need to sleep, and that wasn't fair. It wasn't Gadreel's job to do this. It was Sam's, and the work was too important to trust to the Diva Sam, the only other human that was immune.

That's not to say that it wasn't a good idea to have the Diva Sam here to observe how this was done. It served as a good back up in case something did happen to Sam down the road. The work could continue, and it'd have to continue now that they knew there was a cure. The Diva Sam's dreams of working in the school at the Kansas camp would have to be put on hold indefinitely. It's just that it would be better if that happened later rather than sooner, and Sam certainly didn't want to go out at the hands of that guy.

Who was that guy to judge him anyway? Yeah, Sam knew that guy was him and probably expected more from Sam than he'd been shown or had heard about him, but that didn't change that the Diva Sam had done the exact same thing. If you were looking at percentages, the Diva Sam had actually caused more destruction by releasing Amara, because she'd not only wiped out all the angels and demons, but everyone on the planet except for Dean, and there were still at least 10,000 confirmed people alive in this universe. Sam hadn't had any part of wiping out the angels here.
They'd done that to themselves with the help of the demons in the abyss, and the number of
demons here had dramatically dropped, but there were still plenty of them down in Hell. It's just
that they had a harder time getting out now with the gates all closed. In comparison to the Diva
Sam's universe, this one was still relatively in tact. It just had a nasty monster problem they
couldn't seem to do anything about.

Damn monsters kept reproducing somehow, which meant there had to be more people out there for
them to find. That's what the Dean that'd been turned into a vampire should be doing. Sam would
suggest it when Beth called him to tell him where the Croat traps had been set. It'd take Kevin a
while to decipher the vampire tablet, and in the meantime, the Vampire Dean could be out there
sniffing out survivors. He'd be just as good at finding them as Pamela was with her psychic
abilities. It wasn't just to save the people, although that was a bonus. It was more to stop the spread
of monsters, so they could finally start to do some real damage to their numbers, not that Sam
would be a part of that. His job was to cut down the number of Croats who were intermingled with
the monsters out there. They were more dangerous to the people who were left than the monsters
were, or they were to Sam's thinking.

Just like any other disease, all it took was one infected person getting into a camp, and then it'd
spread, and that'd be it for that camp. It's not like it used to be. There were Croats everywhere now.
You couldn't avoid them. Sure, they mostly left you alone unless you killed a large enough group
of them, but with more of them around, it meant more of their blood being around, and what if
someone got it on their clothes and then the blood got into a cut on their fingers, while they were
washing their clothes? That'd be enough to infect someone. They wouldn't even know about it until
they were just different and no longer themselves. That raised the question of newly infected
people.

Would the killing exorcism be enough to get rid of the infection before it had a chance to take
hold, or would it require a full round of treatment, because the virus worked so fast? Sam glanced
at the machines at the back. Maybe he should keep one that was meant for new cases of the Croat
virus just in case. He'd have to make sure it was always in perfect working order with a large
supply of sterile tubes for each new patient so that cross-contamination didn't happen between
patients and make someone worse, or worse still - what if someone wasn't infected, diagnosed with
having the virus, and then sent here for the cure? Everyone knew the signs of infection, so that
wouldn't be a problem, would it? Sam doubted it. Maybe the killing exorcism would work, and
none of that would be necessary. Maybe he should use all of the machines for Croats that were too
far gone. There were hardly any cases of new Croats these days. It seemed like a waste to not use
all of the machines at their disposal to do something about the Croats that were Croats today
instead of holding one machine back for scenarios that might never happen in the future.

Sam's train of thought kept him going with the sometimes days of silence he had with Gadreel. It
kept him from thinking too much about his past, what he missed, what he didn't, and what mistakes
he never wanted to make again. It also kept him from thinking about what Gabriel had made him
see on their mission when he'd been in time out. It wasn't a whole lot different from what he'd
experienced after Beth killed him. He hadn't gone anywhere good anyway. He didn't want to think
about it. He just wanted to get this Croat thing under control now that they were a problem again.

His attention was drawn to the Diva Sam when he heard his voice. It stood out from the groaning
and snarling that surrounded them in the midst of all these Croats. He hadn't heard what he said,
but he'd heard something, so he looked blankly at the Diva Sam until the Diva Sam repeated
himself. "What'd she want?"

"She has a name, you know."
"Okay, what'd Beth want?"

"She wanted to know if we got the machines." She may be messed up, but it would appear that Chuck was still listening. Sam wondered how many times she'd asked Chuck for things since they'd been back and before her accident with the djinn. She'd seemed pretty intent on not talking to Chuck again when they got back from their mission, but he wondered if given how much of her life had been wrapped up with Chuck, she'd been able to stick to it, or if she'd caved the first time she needed help. She could just ask her Dad to do most of the things Chuck did for her. Her Dad may not be with her out on the road, but he'd drop anything to come help her, and if Michael had the kind of power to cover half the planet in snow and still fight a civil war in Heaven, then Gabriel could probably pull off some pretty impressive things himself. Gabriel certainly seemed pretty good at going between universes and altering reality. He could probably do more than that, and he was at least trustworthy. Chuck wasn't.

He wondered if Beth had reconciled with Chuck, or if she had just used Chuck for these machines, because it's what needed to be done, and she couldn't remember how she felt about Chuck before the djinn incident, so she'd been more open to going to him for help. He hoped that's all it was, because he didn't think it was good for her to put her trust in Chuck at all. They'd all made that mistake, but she had more than anyone else, so for her own good, she should stay as far away from Chuck as possible. Whatever Chuck had done that set her off when they got back, Sam didn't think it was because Chuck had brought him back to life. It was something else, probably something bad. He'd ask the diva, but that guy hadn't been around them anymore than Sam had, so he didn't know much of anything. Speaking of the diva, Sam heard his voice, but missed what he'd said again.

"Yeah, I just said, uh - You were on the phone for a while if that's all she said."

What did that have to do with anything? That guy didn't need to know everything about everything. "It was a private conversation." Sam got some slight satisfaction at the bitch face the diva threw his way before adding, "Josie and Henry must have taught them a Croat trap. It works like a devil's trap, but it's for people, so they're going to set up a minefield of traps in Nebraska. Gadreel can go there to pick up more Croats. Should make it even harder for whoever is controlling the Croats to find us here."

"If it works on people, how do they know it'll work on Croats?"

Sam shrugged. "They must have tested it out. They wouldn't do it if they didn't know it would work."

Sam gave him a look that basically wanted to know if that was all, and the other Sam stayed quiet, so Sam turned to go ask Gadreel if he could get them some more hospital beds. They had a lot of work to do before those traps were set. He stopped with a heavy sigh when he heard the diva say, "And Rogue is with them? Do you think it's a good idea to have her out here and away from the camp."

"She's at the the camp in Wisconsin."

"But they'll be taking her with them when they go set these traps, right?"

Sam thought about it. If Dean was feeling like a protective father, then yeah, especially if he wasn't sure what Henry would do. There was a time when Sam was tempted by the idea himself, not of erasing her, but going back and fixing things he'd done in the past, and then as soon as he'd seen her again, he'd felt even more ashamed of himself for even entertaining the notion. Maybe that was part of why Dean had her there too. Maybe he wanted Henry to get to know her to make it harder
for him to want to make her disappear. There's no way Dean would leave Henry in Wisconsin if there was even the slightest possibility that Henry might go back in time. He'd want to keep an eye on Henry at all times, and if Henry getting to know Rogue was something Henry needed to do to motivate him to stick around, Dean would make sure Henry saw more of her. "Probably."

"Have you seen what's out there?"

Sam looked around the room of Croats strapped to beds to make his point as he muttered, "Yeah, I have pretty good idea of what's out there."

"And you're okay with Rogue being out there? It's not just Croats. It's the monsters and -"

"If she's with her Mom and Dad, she'll be fine, and they're her parents, not me and certainly not you. You've spent zero time with her, so it's not like you know her. What do you care?"

"I don't know. I guess I had higher hopes for my brother if he was ever a dad . . . that he'd be better -"

"He is better than our Dad. You might think you know him, and maybe you do when it comes to everything else, but you have no idea what he's like as a father. See, I know what you're thinking. He was really more our Dad than our Dad was, so you think you know, but this is different. I can't explain it. It just is. He doesn't have to be her brother too. He's just her Dad, and you've never seen him walk the floor with his daughter in his arms night after night when she can't sleep. You've never seen him read to her. You've never seen him play games with her or stop in the middle of what he's doing, no matter how important it is, to give her all of his attention if she has something to say to him. You've never seen him put Led Zeppelin records on and dance with her for hours or teach her how to hit her toy drum or teach her right from wrong or give her advice in a way she understands. You haven't seen him feel bad for days for telling her 'no' because she thinks she's disappointed him and always starts crying. You've never seen her fall down and him pick her back up or him fill in as her Mom and her Dad when Beth's gone for one reason or another. You've never seen him learn how to play a song on the guitar to -"

"You almost had me, but there's no way he knows how to -"

"He learned the basics a long time ago, so he's not very good at it, and he didn't know I knew what he was doing, but yeah he does. Ask your brother. Bet he knows how to do it too. The guitar is hidden back at Bobby's. My brother's probably forgotten about it now. There's been so much stuff that's happened since, but it calmed her down and made her happy, so he did it for her, and that's why he probably wouldn't have stopped even if he did know I could hear him. And that's just one of so many things he does when he's with her. Yeah, he has to go to work, and she knows what that means, but there's nothing he wouldn't do for her, and there's nothing he wouldn't do to protect her, but it's not just him. Beth's there too. I think she's safer with them than she is Gabriel, just because he can be banished by anyone who knows how to do it."

He was ready with more examples when the diva opened his mouth, but the words that came out weren't what he was expecting. "You ever think my brother will have that?"

It took a couple of seconds for Sam's mental gears to change direction before he finally said, "Uh . . . No."

Seeming to take offense, the diva scowled briefly before asking, "Why not? My brother made it work with Lisa. If he could do that -"

"No he didn't." Sam suddenly felt mildly better as he remembered the show he watched what felt
like several lifetimes ago now. "He lived with Lisa. That's not the same as making it work. He tried the best he could, but he was basically in a holding pattern until he could find a way to get you back from the cage. He was miserable, and she knew that."

"How would you know?"

"I saw a show about the main timeline once . . . There might've been some subtle change that made what you lived into a different universe to the one I watched, but it was close enough that I'd say the difference was negligible." Sam tried to contain his smirk before continuing. "Anyway, if he'd really made it work with her, he would've never left when you came back."

The diva, still half-thinking about the fact that Sam had seen his life on a TV screen responded, "We couldn't very well bring she and Ben out on the road with us."

"Why not?"

"She had a job. Ben had school. It's a dangerous life. Something could have happened -"

"Something did happen though, right? Crowley had some demons go after her?"

"Uh, I don't know. I don't think -"

"Well, then that's the difference. You were part of the main timeline until that happened."

The diva considered it and then said, "It doesn't change what we're talking about. He could've had a relationship with her if he hadn't gone to her when he was a vampire. That's -"

"And that's the problem."

"What? That this is a dangerous occupation made even more dangerous now that we're in this godforsaken universe?"

"No, it's more than that. It's a lot of things. He'll never put someone else in danger, so leaving Lisa behind to live her life in relative safety was a possibility, but what if she was a magnet for trouble? I'm not talking about the kind where demons try to use her to get at Dean, because he'd still find a way to leave after he's put the proper protections in place to keep her safe. It's more the kind of trouble she'd go looking for without him there."

"Think just about everyone left in this universe is a potential candidate if that's what we're using as a test."

"But she'd have to be able to handle herself at the same time, and she'd have to be hard to kill. He said that one time when he was sick, that I just needed to find someone that was hard to kill the way he had."

"Everyone here is still alive, so they must -"

"No. Everyone else here is just surviving. Beth is an active force for change, and she's still alive despite everything she's been up against, but she had to work hard to get to that point. When I met her, I don't think she'd even held a gun. She didn't know how to defend herself. She was pretty good at hiding, running, and using tactics in a bad situation to buy her time until she could find a way out of it, but she didn't know how to do anything more than that. And Dean tried pawning her off on Bobby at first, because he wanted her somewhere safe. He made up this schedule for her to follow, so she could learn how to defend herself, even if I think it was to keep her occupied and out of trouble. She did the schedule every day, rain or shine, and when she thought she was ready, she
went on a hunt with Bobby. That's the last thing Dean wanted, but if she was going to hunt, then Dean decided she was going to do it with him." Sam laughed briefly when he thought about those early hunts. "And she ran circles around us . . . not figuratively, literally. She still didn't really know what she was doing, but we'd leave her one place, and she'd pop up in another . . . sometimes she did run circles around us the way she did here the other day, so she could distract the monsters by having them chase her, or just watch her do something they didn't expect, so their focus was off of us." Sam wondered briefly if that's why she'd done it the other day. Who was the monster? Him or someone else? Had she done it to distract the others from shooting him when he came on too aggressive? It made a warmth spread through his chest as he realized she was probably protecting him. It felt really good to know she still would even after everything.

The diva was watching him, so Sam snapped out of it. "Anyway, it's not just Beth and her ability to find trouble or make it for herself. It's not just that she can look after herself, and that even if she couldn't, she could find a way out of it using that brain of hers. It's that she's his best friend. And -"

"My brother can find a new person to be his best friend."

Sam sighed. "There are best friends, like Cas, and then there are best friends like you . . . Cas means almost everything to him. You mean everything to him. It'll never work with someone else if you're dead and gone, because he'll be miserable, and it'll never work with someone else as long as he still has you. You take up too much of his time and attention."

"We hardly see each other."

"I know. It's not enough. My brother met Beth at just the right time. I don't mean when we were kids, and he told Dad that she was either coming with us or he was staying with her. I think that was because of them being soul mates more than anything. I'm talking about when he came back from Hell. He needed someone to talk to who knew what was happening. It wasn't me. I was too busy with Ruby. I've spent a lot of time thinking about it, and I'm not entirely sure when I lost him. I have theories on it, but it probably wasn't just one thing, and I know that she was there to . . . take my place isn't the right way to say it, because that makes it seem like I'm jealous, and I'm not, or at least I'm not anymore. Anyway, she was there for him, and I wasn't, and I just found one way after another to keep making it so she was the one he turned to until she became the only one he could turn to for anything. And even with all of that and all of the history they have together, he's still halfway out the door anytime he thinks she'd be better off without him, but she keeps taking him back. Your brother would have to find someone who is willing to do that too, but on the plus side, I don't think that's a soul mate thing either. I'm not entirely sure that the soul mate thing on her isn't broken. I think everything you see with her when it comes to Dean is just her."

"It's gone."

"What?"

"My brother said Amara took that too."

So, it wasn't just their connection that Amara took? "Well, they seemed okay when they were here, so I'm guessing it doesn't change a whole lot . . . Still bet it took Dean a while to know that it wouldn't, and that he was thinking about walking away again until he did."

Sam had said that more to himself than the guy who looked like him, but the diva still said, "So, it's not impossible?"

For what? Sam forgot what they'd been talking about. "Your brother having his own family the way mine does?"
"Yeah, I guess."

"Not impossible, but not likely, and I'm sure he's okay with that. Seeing my brother with Rogue and Beth is probably enough for him. You should probably worry about yourself more than him. You're more or less settled now, right?"

Something flashed across the diva's face before Sam could decipher it, which was a little strange, but then the other Sam said, "I will be. I'm just focused on helping you with all of this right now. There's time for that later." And then Sam understood. Despite the heart-to-heart, the other Sam still intended to kill him if he saw him do anything he didn't like.

"Right . . . I guess it doesn't hurt to train you in on all of this. You're the one who'll have to take over on this if anything happens to me."

"Because of what Cas said?"

"No. Because it's true. Nobody else is immune to the virus, so it's not safe for them to do, and you have your own penance to do anyway. I heard that plague Amara made was pretty bad. And didn't she wipe out every, man, woman, child, demon, angel, and monster . . . with the exception of your brother?"

He turned to hide his smirk at the look he got for that one, and continued to head for the door, so he could find Gadreel, before adding, "And there's been a change of plans. We're storing the bodies here."

"What? You're kidding, right?"

"No. Beth made some good points on why we should. I'll tell you about them later after I find Gadreel. We'll torch this place when it gets too full, and start over somewhere else." Just because it wasn't a bad idea to have a back up plan in place, didn't mean Sam wanted a twin intent on killing him staying here longer than necessary, and if a couple hundred rotting corpses helped speed the diva along his way back to the Kansas camp, Sam was all for that no matter what the cost to him.
Dean was painfully aware of the plastic bag pressed up against his chest in the inside lining of his jacket. He could smell it. He could feel it every time he moved, and he wanted nothing more than to rip it open and drain what was the left of it's contents, feel it soothe the burning at the back of his throat, the throbbing in his head, and let it relieve this almost unbearable hunger he felt for something he did not want. He didn't want it to make him feel better. He didn't want to become accustomed to the taste, like it, or crave it. He never wanted to get to the point where it gave him the almost orgasmic experience the perfect steak, burger, pie, whatever used to make him feel. And so, he stayed away from it as much as he could even though it was right there in his pocket.

His one saving grace at this point was that Beth had decided from the very beginning that the sterile approach was best. If he got used to the feeling of sinking his fangs into her or anyone else's necks, he was done, or he thought he would be. There was no coming back from that, or he didn't think there was. He never wanted to be like that. Well, he didn't want to be like he was at all, but he certainly didn't want to be a killer... a killer of innocent humans. He was already a killer. Had been most his life. But the kind of killer he could be... like the monsters they kept having to kill whenever they drove between camps. He did not want to become a mindless animal, driven by the need for blood. And because he was so used to getting this thing he hated and needed at the same time from a bag, he was rarely if ever tempted by people themselves. He'd trained that out of himself, but if he was starving, who knew what he'd do?

And that was part of the problem. He was starving, literally. Beth had given him as much as she could to hold him over until he saw her again, but she only had so much to give. She would've given more. She probably would've given him every drop she had if he'd let her, but he hadn't - just the bare minimum that he'd thought he'd need, because he knew it slowed her down, and out here, she couldn't afford to let that happen. Neither could anyone who was with her... the bare minimum might've been a mistake.

He'd been so hungry when she gave it to him, that he'd gone through the first bag almost straight away. As punishment for his lack of willpower, he'd held off on eating again until just before they got to the South Dakota camp. He couldn't go into that camp starving, so he'd found a way to finish his second bag without the other Dean or Cas knowing before they got there. The pay off had been worth it. He'd been clear headed when the kids gave him a hard time about leaving again. There'd been some suspicion about why he needed to find a way to minimize this monster problem, but for the most part, they wanted him there. They wanted him to help raise them, and it is something he'd been serious about before this awful, horrible thing happened, but he'd backed away from it, and they'd backed away from him, or he'd thought they had until that confrontation. Now, he guessed he was supposed to go fishing with them.

With 2 bags of blood down, he'd been left with one, the extra bag that Beth had insisted he have as a compromise to her wanting to give him more. Now that bag was almost empty. He was trying to ration it. The small amounts just about got him through, but it was only ever enough to take the edge off, never enough to really satisfy him. And that's why he was painfully aware of the plastic
bag and what was left of it, and it's why he felt the panic set in every time he thought about it, because there's no way that what he had would last until he saw Beth again, not with the way it was taking forever to drive these roads blocked with cars and trucks that they had to try and go around. What was he supposed to do? Not panic, because that made the hunger worse, but here he was panicking and then an idea hit him as they drove past another medium-sized town.

They had that time spell stuff, right? That town looked big enough to have a hospital. Why not just go back even further, back to before the virus was released, and get some blood from then? Maybe they could even drive the rest of the way to Nova Scotia in that past, and use the time spell to go to when they needed to intercept Beth when they got there. It'd speed up their travel time if they weren't dogging around rusting and broken down vehicles every few feet in some parts of the country. Then they could just use the time spell to come back to this time. They'd been sure to get the date from Jody before they left. Everything should be fine. The amount he'd have from the blood bank in the hospital should be enough to last him until he got more from Beth if they did it this way.

He saw the next exit he could take and felt himself relax now that he had a plan. Taking the road off their desired route, drew the attention of the other Dean. "I don't think the roads in town are gonna be an better than they are out here."

"Need to make a pit stop."

"Yeah, I guess it's been 24 hours. You gonna be long?"

A sip once a day is what he'd limited himself to since they'd left the South Dakota camp, and he hated that the other him obviously knew when he was eating even though he'd thought he was keeping it fairly secret. Driving until he saw the first blue sign with an H on it and taking a left to follow where it told him to go, Dean shook his head. "Not that kind of a pit stop. Well, it is that kind of a pit stop, but I need to pick up some more . . . Need Cas to give me that time spell stuff, so I can."

The other Dean noticed Dean take a right at the next blue sign and must've had a lightbulb moment, because he made face, like he thought that wasn't a bad idea before nodding. "Not bad. We go in wherever they have blood, do the spell there, and we're in and out without anyone knowing."

"Yeah, that's one way to do it, but I was kinda thinking that maybe we could stay in that time long enough to drive from here to where we're going without having to drive around all these cars."

Cas, who'd been sulking since they unanimously fired him from driving for the rest of the trip finally said something. "This hospital is fairly new, which means the furthest we can go back here is 18 months before the outbreak. We shouldn't do it here, and I don't think it's a good idea to stay longer than we need. The longer we're there the more things we might change."

"I'm not talking about doing anything other than driving from here to Nova Scotia. I don't see what the problem is."

"What if we get in an accident, or what if we do something to change the course of someone's life, and they die or get turned into a Croat after the outbreak when they shouldn't? What if we do something that leads to someone who shouldn't survive the outbreak living, and they kill far more people or create more mutiny inside the camps than we've already had?"

"I don't think that's gonna happen, Cas. I mean, you guys go back all the time."
"To the 70s. We've yet to see any drastic changes from that. The one time Dean and Sam went back to just before the outbreak, things were changed and catastrophic changes almost happened."

"You mean because your Sam decided it'd be a good idea to kill Beth in the past?" Cas nodded in response, and Dean forgot that the other Dean probably hadn't known about that until he caught his mild look of confusion, but chose to ignore it.

"We won't do anything like that, right?"

He looked at the other Dean for back up, and the other Dean stowed his confusion to agree. "Not going back to kill anyone. Not even your Evil-ass Sam . . . just going back to get some blood, and make the drive a little easier."

Dean quickly added, "And we won't know where any of the rest of you guys were 18 months before the outbreak, so we aren't gonna run into any of you let alone save anyone. One of you guys would remember us showing up if we were going to do that, right - some kind of a time loop that has to happen if we do?"

The other Dean went back to looking confused, while he worked through that, like he was remembering something and trying to figure out how it applied here, so Dean, who was losing patience with the other guy's stupid face said, "I'll explain it to you later."

The other Dean rolled his eyes. "I know what a time loop is. Just don't know what -" "I'll tell you about it after I've had some food." He was starving, and that's probably why he didn't have the patience to explain what he was talking about to the other Dean. It's also probably why he was pushing so hard to go to this hospital they were pulling up to instead of driving somewhere else to find one that was older.

"It was on the rest of that show you got to watch, wasn't it?"

Got to watch? Somebody's finally jealous about that, huh? Dean smiled. As much as the rest of the other two Deans made fun of him for watching it and talking about it all the time, it definitely gave him the upper-hand when it came to talking to the people in this universe about their past and knowing in general what was going on in any given second. "Anyway," Dean said turning back to Cas, "How would you know that you guys going back to even the 70s hasn't caused some changes? If a change happens would you remember the way it was before it happened?"

Cas's eyebrows knitted together. "I think I would. The others wouldn't necessarily know, but an angel's awareness goes beyond time."

"Then why are there all these universes out there that you didn't know about?"

"I said an angel's awareness goes beyond time, not time and space into other universes."

Dean sighed in resignation, as he put the truck in park, and said, "Fine. We'll come straight back to this time and drive the rest of the way there in these shitty conditions, but we're going to this hospital, 'cause I'm not driving all over trying to find another one . . . So, what date are we going to go for here? 16-17 months? That way you can recharge your batteries if we go back to when you weren't cut off from Heaven."

"I don't want my batteries recharged."

"Yeah, but don't you need them to recharge, or you're basically human?"
"If it weren't for needing blood, wouldn't you basically be human? You don't want to have that anymore than I want my grace."

Just had to go there with the blood. Looked like he wasn't the only one in a bad mood. "You're just pissed, because we won't let you drive."

"No, I'm angry because you both think you have the right to tell me what to do, and you think I'll take it just like your Castiels did, but I'm not them. This is my universe, not yours."

Dean relaxed a little. This may not be his Cas, but he was enough like him to know that what he was saying wasn't like him either. Kevin and the other Dean climbed out to go investigate the hospital, but Dean stayed behind despite his hunger. He already knew there was nothing waiting to ambush them in there, or at least he didn't hear anything, not even a heartbeat. "This about something else?"

Cas crossed his arms over his chest and looked out the side window. "No."

"You have a problem with your Dean that you're taking out on us?"

"No."

"If you want to get rid of your grace again, you can. There's nothing saying that you have to keep it."

"I decided after I removed it that if I ever got it back, that would be it. I failed."

"Nah, you are what you are, Cas. I'm not seein' how you being what you are means you failed."

"You are a vampire. That doesn't change that you hate what you are enough to try and weaken it using anything Kevin finds in that tablet."

Maybe he'd underestimated how much this Cas hated being an angel. "You don't have to stay -"

"I do. Beth needs me."

"Did she say that?"

"No."

"Well, then why -"

"Because I don't want to age, die, and leave her alone. As I said, this is my universe."

So, it was about driving, Cas's grace, and . . . did Cas not want him muscling in on his turf? "You still have a thing for -"

"Not anymore. She is my charge as much as Dean is."

"What do you mean by charge?"

"They are my responsibility."

"Think they can look after themselves."

"No, it's more than that. They're more than friends. They're family, but it's more than that too, because Gabriel is my older brother, and it is the way it should be with family with him. Dean is
my brother, but he is also my brother-in-arms, and there is no bond greater than the bond shared by brothers-in-arms. Beth is my sister and my sister-in-arms, and on top of that, they are my charges - it is a sacred responsibility to take on someone as your charge, and I have two, but whenever something happens that might threaten them both, she always tells me that Dean is my charge, and I am to help him no matter what. I don't know how, but she always convinces me that she's right. It's time I was there for her. I wasn't for too long when she needed me the most. And that is the main difference."

"Main difference?"

"Between your Castiel and I."

"I would've thought it was, you know - the planet looking the way it does now."

"I blame Sam, Raphael, Crowley, and Chuck for that, but what was done to her in Heaven by other angels has had a big impact on me. It has made me hate what I am even if I don't hate who I am, because who I am helped her find the strength to save herself. I feel the need to protect her more than I do Dean. Maybe it's because I didn't when she needed me to do it . . . and she is the opposite of me, but that's what makes us the same. She spent a number of years, as a human surrounded by angels, while I have spent a number of years an angel surrounded by humans, and we both speak the same language."

"Enochian?"

"Yes - or can't you hear it in her accent now?"

Yeah, Dean knew that the way she talked was a little different after what happened with the djinn. "Kinda sounds like maybe you -"

"I can assure you that I do not. That disappeared when the piece of her soul that I had did."

Right. Maybe. He still wasn't sure about this Cas. He didn't think he was bad or anything. He kinda liked how moody he was. It's just that he had a hard time reading him after knowing a different Cas for so long. He guessed that this Cas had taken his grace back without a second thought to help his Dean despite hating his grace as much as he apparently did, and without question, that's something his own Cas would've done. Dean supposed that it was equally possible for Cas to want to keep his grace, so he could help Beth as long as possible, because she was family, and that's all it was. It was kind of comforting actually - that underneath it all, the two Cas's weren't all that different. The Sams seemed different. Neither one of them really felt like his brother. They'd both seen too much and done too much.

His own brother had his fair share of fuck ups, but those fuck ups kind of paled in comparison to what the other two world-ending Sams had done, because at least his brother had fixed the thing with Lucifer by going in the cage. Maybe the Sam that wasn't from this universe had done that too, but a few years later, he was letting out an even bigger and badder threat to the universe. Luckily, nothing like that would ever happen to his own brother now that he was gone. He knew the other Dean thought that Dean's brother was destroying Dean's old universe trying to find him. Dean hoped not. He didn't know for sure, but he knew that as long as he didn't see it, he could imagine that his brother had stayed pissed at him, not really noticing that he was gone until the Pugatory Cas showed up, told him what happened, and then Sam would know that he could move on. There was no coming back from the decision Dean had made the way you could sometimes come back from being dead.

Well, now that he thought about it, there was a loophole that the MoC Dean had been able to find,
so he could go back, but finding a loophole Dean wasn't something Dean wanted to find for himself. He couldn't go back to his brother like this. That on top of what happened with Kevin... Kevin. The kid that'd been sleeping in the back until they got here didn't really seem like his Kevin either. There were some similarities, and obviously, they looked the same, but overall, this Kevin was... less skittish. Nothing really phased him. This Kevin had seen a lot and had been through more, but he had also seemed to make peace with being a prophet. This Kevin seemed okay with his place in the camp. This Kevin could be a prophet AND find a way to do his Master's degree or whatever it was he was talking about on the way here.

That's not something Dean's Kevin would've ever been able to do, because Dean hadn't been able to figure out a way to give the kid something that resembled a normal life outside of being a prophet. He hadn't even tried. This Kevin may have been able to find peace with his place in the world, but he was still tough. Tougher than Dean's Kevin had been. If Gadreel walked up to this Kevin and put his hands on this Kevin's head to smite him - this Kevin wouldn't have let that happen. He would've been able to pick up on things being wrong with Sam, pieced them together, especially with the way that Dean had been acting... asking for spells to talk to to an angel's vessel... he would've been prepared. This Kevin had the look of a... not a hunter, more like a war survivor in that he was always alert and on the look out for something that could unexpectedly kill him. Dean supposed everyone here did. It'd stood out more when they were in the real world, his world, one that wasn't like this, but here it was just natural. Even Rogue was learning to always be alert, always checking to make sure guys who looked like her Dad could touch silver, always told when she was out on the road that she needed to keep her eyes open and listen for anything out of the ordinary. Of course, right now, all she did to say that's what she was supposed to do was point at her eyes and ears, but it was clear what it meant.

Anyway, this Kevin probably would have survived. Probably would've exorcised Gadreel back to Heaven or used some other cool thing they'd had to learn here to survive. And it all made Dean feel even worse about his Kevin. He should have put more effort into training him. He should've known better than to trust an any angel that wasn't Cas, and even trusting Cas had bit him in the ass at least once if not more. His Kevin had been just as important as this Kevin... It made him think about just how important all of the duplicates were, even his. That's probably why he was friends with them even though he shouldn't be. He could see through their bullshit. They could see through his. They should hate one another, or at the very least get on one another's nerves, but they didn't for the most part unless they were annoyed with something else, and then they took it out on one another, but the others understood that... unless they were fighting over seats in the truck.

"If you and the other Deans are at your core, the same, and I am at my core the same as the Cas you knew... I would think that the Kevins are the same at their core and the Sams are the same... even your brother. Wasn't the MoC Dean's brother imprisoning witches to try and find him?"

So, now Cas was saying that Dean's brother was probably going off the rails without him? Dean sat back, and his eyes narrowed. "You reading my mind, Cas?" The corners of the angel's mouth turned up in a 'blink and you'll miss it,' smile, and Dean sighed. "Stop doing that... or at least don't let me know you're doing it."

"Normally, I ignore what everyone is thinking, but you were just sitting there not saying anything, and I thought you were hungry."

"Thought you didn't want to be an angel, and now you're using your angel crap to be a dick." Dean instantly felt bad, and then quickly added, "You're right. I am hungry. I didn't mean -"

"I should not have said what I said. There is a fine line between humor and cruelty." Cas then pulled a piece of paper out of thin air and extended it casually between two fingers toward Dean.
"As long as you wear this rune, I cannot hear your thoughts. Finish what's left in the bag Beth gave you, and I'll meet you inside. You'll need the ingredients for the spell, and I'm the only one that has them." With that Cas gone, and Dean sighed before fishing the bag out of his jacket. Bottoms up, he guessed. He drained every drop he could, hating himself and feeling physically better at the same time.

Getting out of the truck, he unfolded the piece of paper. His Cas never made things materialize out of thin air, or at least Dean didn't remember him doing it. He studied the design. *Does the other me know about this rune?* Dean thought about it. *He must.* Didn't the Evil Sam use a rune to hide what he was thinking from Cas when he was planning to destroy the world? Dean vaguely remembered something about it being on that TV show. Dean was good with symbols. If he saw one once, he'd never forget it. This one had elements that were similar to the one Gabriel had put into that show, enough that the essence was the same, which meant both could probably be used for the same thing. Sort of the way that the angel banishing sigil had changed over the years. The same went for devil's traps. They'd both been stripped down to the basics to make them faster to draw, but still maintained the important elements that made them work . . . The archangel really hadn't altered anything from the way that it'd actually happened.

Dean exhaled as he immediately felt a few things at once. Annoyance that Gabriel had hidden something useful in plain sight. Foolish that he hadn't thought to use it after that. Appreciation that Gabriel had trusted them enough to do that. Trust. Everything he'd been shown was 100% accurate. Apprehension, like this was a test from Cas. Disappointment. He didn't want to be like the Evil Sam and use this to hide things from Cas. Hope. Look at what the world was reduced to now, and Cas was apparently confident enough in Dean to think he would never do something like what the Evil Sam had done, despite Dean being a vampire. Guilt. Right before Cas had given it to him, Dean had been a dick to him . . . made a point of making him feel like shit for using something that Cas hated about himself to poke fun at Dean the way he poked fun at his own Dean . . . fun or cruelty. Cas had said their was a fine line between them. Maybe he was right. They'd both stepped over that line, and he guessed that Cas was probably in the hospital somewhere hating himself for using his abilities as an angel to do it, questioning his existence even, and it was all because Dean had called him out for it. Yeah, he definitely felt guilt.

Then Dean thought about the last thing Cas had said. He'd made a point of saying he was the one who had the ingredients. Maybe Cas's mood was as much about that as any of the other things Cas had said. None of them had even thought to ask Cas for the ingredients. They other two had gone with it, because it's something they probably knew Dean needed to have done, and he hadn't asked Cas about it. He'd just told him what they were going to do. This Cas was used to making his own decisions all the time, not that Dean's Cas didn't. Both Cas's had made their mistakes, but his Cas was just more . . . naive about it? And his Cas still had a big soft spot for angels that made him more likely to fall for what other angels tried to sell him. This Cas wasn't like that, and why was that? Just like Cas said . . . he hated angels because of what other angels had done to Beth. Maybe this Cas was right. Maybe that was the only difference, but it was a difference that meant that his human family meant more to this Cas. Dean knew that he'd meant a lot to his Cas. They'd been best friends, but maybe that bond was stronger between this Cas and the Dean from this universe. And despite being annoyed by this Cas reading his mind, the Dean from this universe never used this rune even though he probably knew it. He never cut himself off from Cas that way. Dean supposed he wouldn't either, but if he didn't, he'd have to learn how to roll with this Cas's weird sense of humor.

Opening the doors to the hospital, Dean paused to take in his surroundings. His hearing had gotten better over time, or maybe he just paid more attention now. It's how he'd known which Beth was the real one and which one was the shifter. Must've gotten to know how Beth's heartbeat sounded without knowing it. Hadn't been too hard to figure out which one to kill after he realized that . . .
didn't mean that his breathing hadn't caught in his throat, the first time he saw her after she woke up with a new accent though. After that he'd used every sense at his disposal to make sure he hadn't killed the wrong one. Same heartbeat, but that could be because the shifter had had enough time to change it's heartbeat to sound like hers. Same smell, but maybe the shifter had gotten that the same over time too. To be honest, he hadn't been sure until she stabbed herself when she was sparring with Cas. When her blood was flowing freely, it'd smelled like Beth's blood, and since he was surviving on Beth's blood, he knew it intimately. Might've gone over later after everyone went back inside to make sure. Tasted the same. He'd made the right choice.

Listening now, he knew where Kevin and the other Dean were in the building. He didn't know where Cas was, but if Cas was in what used to be the blood bank on the second floor, then they weren't too far away based on their heartbeats. How'd they find it? Probably used a map or something on one of the walls. How did Dean know where it was? Because he could smell it from here. There was nothing appetizing about it. It wasn't metallic, salty, or sweet. It was rancid. Didn't smell much different than the putrefied blood in the veins of Croats to be honest. Guess that's another one to add to the long list of problems with having the electricity go out for years. Probably hadn't been a problem as long as places like this were frozen under feet of snow, but now? Now, the whole world reeked of death. All the bodies decaying slowly in their homes, the Croats, hospital blood banks without refrigeration . . . this world smelled the way it looked. Rotten.
Dean exhaled a slow breath to try and exude confidence and calm to his daughter even as he tightened his hold on her when the elevator doors closed. Couldn't just be happy with the suggestion of talking to Pamela in Kansas or wait around another week for her when they dropped Josie off there. No, Henry just had to see his actual son... the one in Heaven, and it had to be as soon as possible. Dean couldn't stay down on Earth with Rogue, because they were his parents they were going to try and see. Beth couldn't stay down there with Rogue, because she was their guide. Gabriel couldn't come get Rogue, because there was a good chance that both Dean's Mom and Dad would tell Henry to go back and change all this shit, since that's what the other Mary and then John had done just before Henry left Wisconsin. Beth had accidentally, or not really accidentally, let slip that Sam and Dean were born and both alive in that one universe Henry never left, which meant that Henry could go back, it wouldn't impact on their births, and at least one of them would still carry on the good fight. She hadn't thought that it would be a problem, but it had been, and after that fiasco Dean thought maybe it was time for his parents to meet their granddaughter too if Henry was going to see them. At this point, he wanted her with him, because he was her Dad, but at the same time, she felt a little like a prop he kept shoving in people's faces, so they wouldn't take her away from him.

Dean kept his eyes on Henry, who still didn't necessarily believe they could make it to Heaven without dying until he saw Dean, Beth, and Rogue pile into the elevator with him. As far as Dean could tell, Henry's 'time' had come and gone without anything happening to Henry other than the one time a Croat almost gave him a heart attack after they stopped somewhere for a bathroom break. Dean had handled it. The guy was still here. Looked like Death still really couldn't give a shit about the natural order... probably still trying to work out what exactly that natural order was after Sam fucked it up by killing, but not really killing, most of the planet by turning them into zombies. Maybe now that Sam was fixing that little mistake, Death could focus on sending his reapers to take those souls where they were supposed to go and get things back on track. Not that Dean wanted anything to happen to Henry. He'd kind of liked getting to know the guy despite everything. Maybe that's what happened when you spent almost 24/7 watching a guy without letting it look like you were watching a guy. Or maybe Dean was just exhausted.

When the elevator doors opened, Henry exhaled in surprise, maybe it was nervousness, after Beth stepped out into the pristine white hallway, or it used be pristine, Dean thought, as he followed her and saw that Heaven had changed a lot from how he remembered it. It was a lot dimmer up here now, and the walls and floors even in this part of Heaven looked to be marred with the smudges of black in the shape of angel wings. Wow. They'd really fucked things up up here.

Dean and Beth turned to wait almost impatiently for Henry to exit the elevator. If Beth hadn't told him to keep his mouth shut, keep his eyes on her, do whatever she told him to do, and stay alert in case there were angels that'd decided to go back home, Dean thought that maybe Henry would
have taken his notebook out and started taking notes. He knew the first thing Henry would ask as
soon as they got back to Earth. 'What did your Dad do to make this possible?' And he already knew
how Beth would respond. 'I don't know. Ask him.'

Instead of going right out of the elevator after Henry exited it, Beth took them left. She started
winding them through a maze of halls that looked similar to the ones that they would've gone down
if they'd turned right, but they were definitely heading to a different part of Heaven. Didn't look a
whole lot different. It was still dim and there were angel's wings burnt into the walls, floor . . .
Dean looked up and wondered how the hell they'd gotten on the ceiling. In some places it looked
like the halls from top to bottom had never been white, just black. Did they pile up on this side of
Heaven and die at the top to get their wings up there, or were they flying, and something killed
them from below? He wondered what the chapel looked like now. Maybe if they didn't run into
any angels while they were up here, they could stop by on their way out. Kinda wanted Rogue to
see it.

She was being quiet, looking at everything they passed. Tense, like she knew this was dangerous.
This was the way she got quiet when there were too many Croats around their truck or when he and
Beth had to go out and take care of the Croats blocking the roads, leaving Rogue and Henry safe
inside the truck. She never cried through any of it. Henry said that she only said one word the first
time Dean and Beth left the cab together. "Work?" Henry hadn't known what she meant, so she'd
pointed at Dean as he swung his machete, and just before it'd pierced through the skull of the
Croat, Henry realized what she was seeing and covered her eyes with his hand.

She'd pushed his hand away roughly, given him a look that dared him to try that again, and then
went back to watching between her Mom and Dad. She didn't say a word until Dean and Beth both
got back in the truck, and she never said a word any of the times it happened after that. Just kept
her eyes glued to her Mom and Dad and maybe clapped a little when she saw one of them make a
move she liked if Henry wasn't fast enough to block her from seeing the results. Kind of funny at
night to watch her practicing those moves in whatever place they decided to stop; throwing
punches or kicks, rolling around on the floor, using a stick as her machete or Beth's angel blade
against invisible attackers. She had it in her to be a great hunter some day. Dean just hoped they
could get enough of the world cleaned up that she wouldn't have to be . . . And that she didn't
become a serial killer.

He tried harder now that she was seeing some of these things to teach her right from wrong and
explain why he and Beth did what they did, not that he wasn't doing that before this trip. It's just
that in the past, they'd always had somewhere safe to leave her with someone they trusted to protect
her, and she never had to see the killing except for the one time with the changelings, and Dean
doubted that she remembered that. Teaching her the difference between what was good and evil
and why was really difficult, but maybe learning it at an early age would help it stick, and . . . He
didn't know what he was doing to be honest. He just didn't want her scarred for life. She seemed to
handle fear okay. She didn't seem bothered by the blood or violence, and maybe that's what
worried him?

He knew he'd told her to hit people to protect people, and maybe she thought that's what they were
doing? They were, but did she really understand all of that, or was she turning into a little
sociopath? The only thing that put his mind somewhat at ease was the way she was when she
played with her toys or wanted him to read her a story just like any other little kid would. Maybe
she was playing him, because she thought that's what he wanted her to do? Isn't that what
sociopaths did? He hoped that's not what she was doing . . . No, the love she had for him and Beth
seemed real. It had to be. Maybe she needed a little brother or sister to look after so it wasn't all
about the killing? That's what'd saved him from being a mindless killing machine, or that's the
conclusion that he'd come to when he'd been forced to take a look at why he was the way he was
and how he didn't want his daughter to be. Being forced to think about it like that might've made him think he hadn't turned out too bad all things considered, and he now wholeheartedly believed that it was looking after Sam, putting someone else's needs above his own, and maybe looking after their Dad the same way, that'd kept him from going down that path.

Maybe when they got back to the camp, he'd make more of an effort to incorporate Lily into their family, because this brother or sister thing might need to happen sooner rather than later, and Rogue already kind of treated Lily, like a little sister even though Lily was older . . . or was she still older than Rogue after the time Rogue spent away from this universe? Maybe Rogue was a little older? At the very least they were probably the same age. At any rate, Dean didn't want to wait for Beth to get pregnant and the 9 months that followed for Rogue to start having to look after someone else. Be a while before he felt like he could take it beyond the kissing he'd enjoyed in Kansas anyway.

For practical reasons he'd had to stop all of that after they hit the road. Then they'd been in Iowa, but with the rest of them around, and Dean feeling like he had to keep an eye on the rest of the town in case they decided to attack, he hadn't really been in the mood. Then they'd been on the road again. No time for it then. Then Henry showed up, and all of Dean's time was spent watching him and watching Rogue. Didn't exactly make him much in the mood either. Then they were back on the road again, setting Croat traps in Nebraska, and dropping Josie off at the Kansas camp. Now they were in Heaven, probably the last place he should've brought his daughter considering the things that'd been done to Beth up here. Being up here now, he was all too aware of the fact that if Beth had gone right out of the elevator, they would've been heading closer and closer to the prison, and he wasn't entirely sure that if he went there it wouldn't trigger him to have a flashback of what had been worse than Hell for him.

Taking the physical torture on himself and breaking was nothing like watching the love of his life tortured mercilessly over and over again without the ability to do anything about it; feeling her blood and guts and tissue sprayed all over him time and time again; hearing her screams when things got really bad; watching her other times, lay lifeless, knowing she was exerting her power the only way she could by not screaming; feeling the way he used to feel about Alistair when he saw the angels who dragged her into the cell or when he saw the crowds of angels watching what was done to her for entertainment. It'd left him insane afterwards. The things he'd said. The things he'd done. While he'd been on shaky ground after he got out of Hell, he never went full-on insane the way he did after what Crowley made him see, touch, taste, experience, like he was really there. Here. Wandering the halls on the opposite side of Heaven from where it'd happened, the same Heaven where it'd happened, not a cleaner Heaven the way the others were in other universes.

The blackened walls and dimmed lights really kind of looked the way he felt about this place. The unholliness of it. The evil. The fear. The hatred. The overall darkness that seemed to close in on them the further they got from the elevator. It was like it all represented the way this place really was, a place he hadn't been since before Crowley sent him here as a not-so-silent witness. It deserved to look like this for what they'd done to his Beth. The universe deserved to look the way it did, like a rotting, dying world that exposed this great evil, this great injustice that had been done . . . torturing an innocent soul, one that started out here younger than the little girl in his arms.

It made him sweat and feel physically sick being up here the longer he was. And then it hit him . . . his breaths started coming out in short bursts, his body shaking, the blood, the screams, the things he saw done . . . the things that were done to him, the things he did, and they all mingled as his back hit the wall, and he was momentarily lost until he felt a hand on his face that felt cool against his hot skin. It graced his face with a light touch, and he forced himself himself to open his eyes even though he still couldn't breathe. He was mostly expecting it to be his daughter, not having realized that she'd been taken from him and handed off to Henry for safe keeping.
Dean looked into the icy-blue eyes he knew all too well and watched them flutter between those and the warmer blue-grey eyes he knew even better. He loved them both - the icy-blue and the blue-grey. She couldn't control the back and forth as a war she probably didn't even know about raged inside her between wanting to feel something for him and not letting herself feel something for him. Her eyes did the same thing when she held Rogue. One second they be a blue-grey, the next an icy-blue. The icy-blue side of her . . . it was getting more prominent the more she felt. If he kissed her now, they'd go icy-blue. Probably did when he kissed her in Kansas, but her eyes had been closed, or he hadn't really been paying attention, because he'd just been happy to be with her like that again. And she couldn't control the war that raged inside her or the changing of her eyes because of what'd been done to her up here. They broke her, and he saw it happen. Another violent memory flickered behind his own eyes, and he went to close them again unable to breathe.

He hadn't had a flashback or a panic attack to go with it in so long, and he never really got them in front of people . . . definitely not when he was in the midst of doing something dangerous. It was just that being up here where it'd happened, what was going on with Rogue and Henry, and having too much time to think was too much . . . He felt her thumb against his cheek. She couldn't talk him round, because she couldn't make any noise up here. He knew part of her was trying to gently get his attention to help him calm down, because it wasn't safe for them to stay here for too long - that was the icy blue side - and part of her wanted to get his attention to help him calm down, because she cared for him. Either way she was being patient.

He opened his eyes again and her finger was in front of them. Unlike the time he'd flipped her onto her back in Hell, he knew what she wanted. Should've known what she wanted then. Should've never gone on that trial mission. They could've survived the mission without it, and he never would've had to hurt her the way he did. Hadn't really been him. It'd been as much him as those guys hanging out with Cas right now, but it had been at the same time, and he hated the way he'd been the last few years of that. Maybe he wasn't any different than them. Maybe it'd happen again, and he'd be forced to live for eternity, trapped in the soul of another guy who looked like him. That'd been a different kind of torture. The more stress he felt, the more violent images flashed behind his eyes, and they weren't all of what happened to her up here. Now that he'd thought about the mission, he thought maybe they wouldn't have survived without training. Half of them had died. He might as well have been dead, and he remembered every second of being a demon. Sam died, and he remembered why. Cas died. He didn't remember that, and the memories of being imprisoned in some other guy's subconscious peeked his anxiety causing him to relive flashes of what Sam had done to him when Dean was a demon before those memories morphed into images of Sam being one of the prison guards that'd hurt the angel in front of him.

She brought her finger down, because he wasn't focusing. He looked in her eyes. Neither the icy-blue side or the blue-grey side of her knew what to do. He didn't want her to feel like that, like she was doing something wrong. With his sweaty palm, he grabbed her hand that'd fallen to the side of her body, extended her pointer finger, and then shakily put it back in front of his face. He focused on that. Focused on the lines and intricate patterns and memorized them, each ridge, each fold, each callous that'd built up in response to her angel blade. When he'd focused enough, she started to drop her finger, so he could focus on her eyes, but stopped herself as she realized maybe her eyes were part of the problem, but it was too late. He'd already latched onto them and wouldn't let go.

Instead of thinking about why her eyes were doing what they were doing, he thought about different times he'd seen them one way or the other. When they first met. Not the times that didn't count to him. The times he met her as a kid only mattered when he got to keep her the third time and to another him that wasn't him, and even then they never mattered as much as the time he met her right after he got out of Hell. He thought about the time she saved him from being chopped up by a house full of men looking forward to Hell when her eyes changed. He thought about the first time they stayed at the cabin and their training, their first kiss on their first Christmas together.
when her eyes changed again, and he stayed with that thought for a little while until his breathing evened out and matched hers.

What the hell just happened? It shouldn't have happened. He was better than that. They couldn't afford for him to - His thoughts of disgust for himself paused when she ran her thumb over his cheek again and shook her head. The look in her eyes might as well have said, "Don't." Don't hate yourself. Don't beat yourself up. Just stop. And it wasn't because she had icy-blue eyes that would have probably wanted to get going. Her eyes were blue-grey and warm. Her look changed fractionally, and now it said, 'I may be broken, but I'm still here to carry you,' or that's what it said to him. She probably didn't think she was broken, but overall the look still said that she was there to carry him, and every time he got back up, it meant he wasn't weak no matter what happened before that, and he knew that's what that look meant, because he knew her. He knew her better than she did right now. Didn't need some stupid connection or mind reading thing to do that. Just had to pay attention, and he must've done that more than he'd thought over the years. It made him briefly wonder if there'd ever really been anything beneficial about any of that stuff. He didn't feel any different about her. Didn't know her any less. And from the looks of things, she still knew him and knew what to say without saying it even if she didn't remember how it felt to do it until now.

Dean took another long, slow breath and gave Beth a nod to let her know he was all right now, and she relaxed before her eyes turned into the icy-blue in preparation of leading them on their way. Dean glanced at Henry, and Henry had the grace to ignore that he'd seen anything by not giving him any sympathetic or questioning looks. He just handed Rogue back to Dean, and continued following them. Dean really hoped that what just happened didn't make Henry want to go back, so he could keep his grandson from experiencing what lead to what he just saw. Dean would go through it all again to be right where he was in a heartbeat. The bad made the good sweeter.

He looked down at Rogue, and she was watching him. She put her hand on his cheek the way Beth had and patted it softly before pointing to his eyes. Yeah, he knew she wasn't used to seeing him like that. Angry. Loving. Happy. Depressed. She'd seen those. Never fear, anxiety, or a lack of control. He wondered if it'd change the way she saw him. And then something occurred to him as she patted him again before wrapping her arms around his neck in a light hug that he knew she wasn't going to break until they got out of here. It was for him as much as it was her. The way she picked up on other people's emotions, especially her family's emotions . . . it was real. If something upset them, she wanted to make it better, to protect them from it. If they were happy, she was at her happiest. Maybe she wasn't a sociopath and wouldn't become one. Just had to nurture that ability to empathize, sympathize, and care. How? He didn't know, but he didn't know what he'd done so far to make her the way she was. Maybe he hadn't done anything. Maybe it's just the way she was. He hoped he didn't crush that.

The further they went, the darker the halls seemed, and Dean wondered if in addition to the chapel, there were a bunch of angels that came this way to try and protect the souls in Heaven. He doubted many of them really gave a damn about the actual souls, but he knew that the souls were what gave them their power, so it would've been a smart tactical plan if Raphael hadn't unleashed the worst Hell had to offer, like a tidal wave that swept up everything in its path. When they got to the human part of Heaven, he wondered what they'd find. He knew it was supposed to be a little like walking through an invisible portal. One second they'd be walking down the hall, and the next, without warning, they'd feel a change in the air as it wobbled around them, and then the next step, they'd be looking down a hall with doors down either side that lead to peoples' own personal heavens. It was normally just an invisible curtain that hid it from the rest of Heaven, but would it be walled off now? Would they have to dig their way through to get to the other side? Did Beth know other ways into it, or were these invisible curtains that surrounded it the only way through? If they were, and they were all walled off, then there might not be a way through. If the walls were down, could you only get past the curtains if you were dead? Beth had just been a soul up here when she used to
occasionally slip through to the other side. Why did any of this matter? Because Dean was counting on his Dad now more than ever to get through to Henry.

The other John and Mary had seemed to be making progress with Henry, but then they fucked it up by telling Henry he should go back. Selfish dicks. They just wanted to undo the decision they'd made to come here. He didn't really know them. Hadn't taken the time when he was a demon or after they got here, but his opinion of them dropped after Henry told him what they'd said... and maybe it'd made his opinion of Henry skyrocket for a couple of reasons. Henry could've kept that to himself, found the nearest abandoned occult shop to get what he needed to go back, and ruined everything without ever telling Dean about what they'd said or why he was doing it, but he hadn't. Henry had told him what they'd said and seemed to want to really talk to Dean about it in a real conversation with Dean as a sounding board.

And the other reason his opinion of Henry had improved was because Henry must have questioned what they'd said enough to want to talk to his own son, which meant that maybe Henry wanted his own son to talk him out of going back. That had to be it, right? Henry would've just taken the advice of a guy who looked like his son if it's the advice he'd wanted to hear. Now, Dean just needed his Dad to do right by him for once. No strings attached. No selling his soul in a show of love that would make Dean feel guilty for being alive. No giving him empty compliments about taking care of his family and then following them up by telling him to kill the people that mattered to him the most... Who was he kidding? That was never gonna happen. His Dad would do what the other John had. Dean already knew that, and maybe that's why what'd happened back there had happened the closer they got to talking to his Dad.

He didn't want Beth lost up here forever if Henry went back. He didn't want her to suffer more than she had. He didn't want her to go back and experience all that without him being there even as a phantom, because he was sure that he had at least partially been there with her in spirit, and that's what'd helped her through. Without the life he'd lived that lead up to Crowley doing that to him, Dean wouldn't have been there for her. He didn't want Beth to have to start over again on rebuilding her soul if she even made it that far the next time. He didn't want to lose his daughter who was only here because of the Apocalypse. He felt so much anxiety about where this was going to go, and it only got worse with every day that Henry was here.

The easy thing to do would be to just kill Henry and make it all go away, but he couldn't do that. It was wrong, straight up murder, and he wasn't a murderer. He was a killer, but he wasn't that. Sure, he'd killed Saoirse, but she wasn't human. He was sure of it, and she was a threat to his family, but Henry was a threat too, a bigger one that she'd been, and Dean didn't murder family. That's what Henry was. Should've never gotten to know him. Might make it easier. No, he still wouldn't have been able to do it. It was wrong and maybe a part of him wanted his grandfather in his life in a meaningful way. He guessed he'd probably have that if Henry went back, but he wanted Henry in his life with the way the universe was now, backing him up, acting like the father Dean should've had, training him in things that Henry knew about the MoL that Dean hadn't learned yet, and vice versa with the things that Dean knew and Henry didn't. The part of him that was missing Sam was slowly but surely seeking some kind of a bond with Henry that he shouldn't want since Henry wanted to take everything away from him.

He felt his attention focus on Beth as her steps slowed. She was walking up to a wall in front of them and took a slow breath before her fingers reached forward to touch it. It was solid. She looked over her shoulder at Dean. This must be where one of those invisible curtains should've been. It was still walled off, which made sense, since the angels were still weakening by the day without their access to the souls in Heaven. Dean felt himself relax. They'd just have to wait for Pamela to show up in Kansas to talk to is Dad, but if the place was still walled off, then there wasn't much chance of getting through, which meant that Dean had more time to figure out what to do about
Henry before his Dad opened his big trap and fucked it all up.

First thing he was gonna do was have Beth take them, not to the chapel, but to the prison. He wanted Henry to see what he'd be condemning Beth to if he went back, and he wanted Rogue there as a visual reminder of how small Beth was when she'd been locked in there in the dark and when the torture began. Henry seemed to think that Beth was okay. He wouldn't want that happening to her, right? She seemed closer to Josie, but Henry seemed to like talking to her . . . . probably because of what she was, but still. He'd definitely taken a shine to Rogue. Dean just had to be a little more forceful in his attempts, use the visual of Beth's blood on the walls to prove a point. That had to work, didn't it? Henry seemed like a decent guy. Dean exchanged a glance with Henry and shrugged, like 'sorry, but at least we tried,' and Henry took one last look around the ceiling and walls in an almost whimsical way, like he was at least glad he got to see this place and wanted to remember how it looked. Maybe they could stop by the chapel on the way out after they went to the prison. If Henry thought this was impressive, it wasn't anywhere close to as impressive as that room had been. Maybe those weapons in the vault were fair game now anyway.

Dean turned, expecting Beth to lead the way back to the elevator, so he could tell her he wanted her to take them to the prison, but then he heard a painfully familiar voice behind him. "Dean?" A chill shot up his spine. It wasn't the voice of the inexperienced, younger John Winchester that Dean had left back in Wisconsin. It was the weathered and hardened by time John Winchester, one who wouldn't understand, because this one had sacrificed his family time and time again. Dean exhaled a slow breath. He'd been a match for his Dad the last time he saw him . . . well, not when he was dead that one time. That time, his Dad had told him that the angels didn't think he could do what needed to be done with Sam, and that's why they wanted to hold onto him permanently. He'd barely paid attention to him after that and had focused all his attention on Joshua, so he could get back. The time before that though, he'd had his Dad mostly in check . . . except his Dad still told him how it was gonna be on that last day with Dean going with Sam to confront Lucifer while his Dad went to be Michael's temporary vessel. He'd figure it out. He had to figure it out. He wasn't gonna let his Dad sacrifice this family for the greater good too.
An Evil Face in the Mirror

Chapter Notes

This is from the POV of the Sam that is not from this universe.

Sam snorted as a hypodermic syringe pinged off the wall near the other the other Sam's head. It was only getting worse, and it'd continue to get worse with time. This place was rife with negative energy, and the violent ends of the poor tortured souls of the Croats made them the perfect candidates to become vengeful spirits - maybe faster than you would expect, because they all seemed to know which one of the Sams had made them Croats in the first place. Why was it going to get worse? Well, this is where their bodies were being stored without being salted and burned. Some of them would've stuck around just because of the way they died in agony as the infection was burned away from their souls. Some of them would've stuck around, because they would've had unfinished business, like trying to find family members they'd lost track of after they were infected. Some of them would've stuck around because the man who'd released the infection was the one who ultimately killed them in writhing pain, and that was their unfinished business. Why were almost all of them sticking around then? Sam wasn't sure.

From his own experience, he'd say it had something to do with Heaven. Like when Metatron took control of Heaven and kicked out all of the angels, he'd sealed if off, and souls of people who died after that got stuck in the veil. Maybe it was the same thing? Maybe Heaven wasn't blocked off in this universe, but the part where humans went was, so reapers didn't have anywhere to take them unless they were destined Hell... Sam suspected that's why not all of the previously Croatoan-infected spirits were sticking around. Some of them must've been heading down there before they were infected. But as for the rest of them? They were here, and they made their presence known with cold spots, violent shoves, objects flying, the odd appearance at night, and the smell of ozone as they got stronger... and it was all directed towards one individual.

"You know we could stop that from happening if you'd let us salt and burn these bodies," Sam muttered, before turning another page in the book he'd found to read.

"Can't. Right now, they're just angry. They aren't vengeful yet."

Sam paused before sitting up and directing his full attention to the mad scientist version of him on the other side of the room. "Wait, you mean you want them vengeful?"

"Once they go vengeful, we can do something about their bodies... if we can find the right ones. Death gets them in his lock up if they're vengeful."

So, he wanted to by-pass the Heaven problem by sending them to Death's lock up? Smart. A little too smart. Sam sat back and went back to reading his book before nonchalantly saying, "Good luck with that. I'm not digging through any of those bodies to find the ones you want to burn."

The other Sam sighed. "Yeah? What is it you're doing here exactly? You're supposed to be helping me. So far, I've seen very little helping, and a whole lot of sitting on your ass and doing nothing. You can do that in Kansas. Don't need you doing it here and distracting me from what I'm doing."

And miss out on these Croats doling out the occasional bite or the spirits getting the occasional
swipe in on the Evil Sam? Not a chance. Besides, Sam was convinced the real reason there were rotting corpses stacked up in those two rooms over there wasn't because the other Sam was trying to create vengeful spirits, so their souls had somewhere to go now that they were dead, but because the other Sam was trying to stink him out, and if that's the case, he wasn't going. He had a stronger stomach than that . . . although after a couple of weeks of curing Croats, the smell was starting to get to uncomfortable levels even over here as far away from the rooms as possible, wearing a mask, and with some kind of vaporub spread over his top lip . . . but he had an obligation to stick this out as long as possible.

He hadn't necessarily seen the other Sam do anything that would require him to step in and put an end to him, but maybe the Evil Sam would do something as soon as Sam left. There was a slowly-growing army of vengeful spirits around here. Maybe the Evil Sam knew a way to control them. There were lots of things the duplicates in this universe knew how to do that Sam would've never dreamed of knowing, so what if the Evil Sam knew a way to do that, and he enacted his plan as soon as Sam left? And with the other Sam making things as uncomfortable as possible in here with the smell of those bodies, Sam felt like he had to stay here, because an unspoken challenge had been thrown down. If he caved first, Evil Sam would think he was weak. Evil Sam would also think that he could do whatever the hell he wanted without someone watching him, but Sam wasn't going to let him do whatever he wanted. He needed to stay as long as possible to make his point.

"What? I'm helping. There's just nothing for me to do right now. Gadreel can't get anymore until you're done with those 15." Sam's job was to make sure the newly arrived Croats had been properly blinded and were incapable of moaning, groaning, or screaming when they got here, since Gadreel was getting too weak to smite them even a little, and Sam didn't think it was a good idea to let the other Sam do anything overly violent, not that Sam hadn't found a relatively non-violent way of doing what needed to be done if Gadreel hadn't quite done the job. Since they had to do this somewhere with electricity in order for the machines to work, Sam had gotten Gadreel to go get a Lasix machine. Gadreel strapped them down, and Sam made sure the laser did the right amount of damage before they could see too much, but not before he kept them from being able to scream to any potential Croats outside the building. Super glue for their mouths didn't really work when they just pulled their lips apart . . . not with their hands. Oh no, those were bound straight away, but their bodies were so decayed that they literally ripped their lips apart to open their mouths some way. Duck tape worked better, but it had to keep being reapplied regularly throughout the process, since they licked or bit through it even after they were supposedly sedated.

They could still hear . . . all the way through the process, so everyone here had to be careful what they said around the Croats even if they weren't entirely sure that the person or persons controlling the Croats could use them to hear as well as see what was happening around the country. The Croats had to be able to hear for the killing exorcism to work from what the Evil Sam had told him. He'd witnessed the frustration in the other Sam after having gotten them all the way to that stage in the process only to find out that he'd have kill them with a knife to the head . . . couldn't use a gun, or they might alert any Croats outside that they were here. Everything after they were blinded and taped up was the Evil Sam's responsibility from taking them to the other beds, strapping them down, sedating them, starting the purification processes, moving them to the next stage in the process, and then finishing them off on the machines at the back before doing the killing exorcism on any that were ready and discarding the bodies after that.

"Yeah, about that. Any idea when he's going to be back?" Gadreel had been going out at least every hour on the hour to check the Croat traps and make sure no humans had been caught by them. He was doing one of those runs now.

"No. I think he said something about putting more down in other places."

The other Sam's head snapped up from whatever he was doing over there to focus on Sam. "You told him to do that, or he decided to do it on his own?"

That was the one thing that really made this Gadreel different from the one Sam had known. For whatever reason, this Gadreel had decided not to make his own decisions on anything. Maybe it was because Gabriel was still alive. Maybe it wasn't. Maybe it was just this Gadreel's way of making himself seem as non-threatening as possible. Sam didn't know. He did know that he didn't necessarily like that the Evil Sam had let his guard down so much around Gadreel that he was totally surprised that Gadreel was even capable of making a small decision like that on his own. It didn't bode well for any of them if the guy who was supposed to be watching Gadreel wasn't, because he trusted him. "I didn't tell him. Maybe Cas did or somebody else told him." The Evil Sam nodded in thought before going back to changing the dosage of holy water on the Croat in front of him. "You know you can't trust him... at least not yet. He hasn't messed up."

The Evil Sam stopped what he was doing again. "You mean because it's his face to screw me over by secretly working for the enemy, kill someone I care about, grow a conscience, and then try to make it right after by sacrificing himself to help us out." So, the Evil Sam was aware of the dangers of having Gadreel around. Sam shrugged, and the Evil Sam sighed. "We have a little time before that's supposed to happen."

Time. That was so screwed up here. Sam wasn't entirely sure of the year or even the month. He wasn't even sure how long the rest of them had been on the mission and if the mission counted toward the year that Dean had been in Purgatory in his time or if they were supposed to be fighting over Benny or doing the trials that they'd never do here. There was no real timeline of how things were supposed to happen, just little dots of similarity to other universes that reminded them that those things were supposed to happen to someone else. He thought of something. "You don't know that... And what if Vampire Dean is supposed to be like Benny was for me?"

The Evil Sam considered it. "Maybe. I don't really know him. I don't really know any of them."

"They're all the same. I mean, they're exactly the same, and the more time they spend around one another, the more alike they are... You should see them fighting together. They just know what the others are going to do without having to say anything. Kinda like..."

Sam let the end of his sentence hang in the air unspoken, but the Evil Sam was fine with picking it up for him. "The way it used to be with you and your brother?" Sam shrugged while he thought about it, and the Evil Sam let him for a few moments before pointing a pen in his direction and saying, "If you look like that at just the thought of it, then I think you need to worry more about you than me." By the time Sam looked at him, the Evil Sam was scribbling away in his ridiculous charts.

"I'm nothing like you."

This time the Evil Sam didn't even bother looking at him before he went to the next bed to check that Croat's stats. "Yes, you are... I just have to ask though. Are you more dangerous of Vampire Dean, my brother, Cas, or Beth?"

"What? I'm not -"

"Yes, you are... I bet that's why you're here as much as anything. You want to kill me, but more than that, you want to find out how not to be me, and to do that, you have to get to know me. Besides, you were jealous of Benny AND Cas in your universe, right? At least that's what I got from the show I watched... You screwed your brother over again and still wanted him to turn to you first instead of them."
"No, I -"

"Yeah, you did, and then you tried to guilt-trip him into submission with that whole confession you gave on how poor you were always letting him down, so he had to turn to them . . . What a bunch of crap. What about poor him and the fact that he's the one who keeps being let down by you?"

"Whatever. That was years ago. I don't really know what has to do with anything going on right now."

"Because you let him down again . . . and it isn't because you got the mark off his arm. I'm betting that you think it was because you died and left him to face what happened after you died alone, which is how you both ended up in this hell hole. Deep down, you were fine with the idea of you two taking a step back as long as he was as miserable as you, but he's found people he can turn to for anything. I bet you've made friends too, but you aren't really yourself around them . . . always on your best behavior, because you don't want them to mistake you for me, and you know that none of them would do anything of any real significance for you. Nobody there would die for you the way your brother would. Nobody there would put you above themselves the way he would . . . and now he's found people who will do that for him. And he'd do that for them, or did you miss the part where he was willing to give up part of his soul in the off chance he could help the Dean that's a vampire?" While Sam took that in, the Evil Sam maintained his intentionally stoic face so as not to grin like he knew he'd gotten all that right. "And just so you know, killing me would only make things worse."

Sam exhaled an incredulous breath. Couldn't believe he almost fell for that. "If you think I'm going to let you -"

"It's not up to you what I do. It's up to me, and you killing me will make him see you like me, because I haven't done anything except keep my head down and fix my mistakes one by one, which is what you should really be doing too . . . so which of them are you more jealous of right now?"

"I'm not -"

"All right. Don't admit it, but you should probably know that I'm keeping as close an eye on you as you are on me."

Sam felt his heart flutter a bit. That was the first direct threat he'd gotten from this guy. It was maybe the first threat that this guy had given to anyone since they'd been here. "Why? I'm-"

The Evil Sam's eyes narrowed fractionally for a split second before he cut him off. "Nothing like me . . . So, you keep saying. Do you know what makes you so dangerous?"

What kind of a game was he playing now? "What?"

"You haven't hit rock bottom yet. You're so far from it that you can't even see it from where you are, and that means that you have that much further to go. It makes you more dangerous than me."

Sam exhaled an exasperated sigh with a shake of his head. "Right. And you're there now, is that it?"

"No. I'm climbing my way out. Croat by Croat. Soul by soul. Minute by minute that I stay as far away from my brother as possible . . . for his sake and without him having to ask me to do it. I don't expect him to be my brother again. I don't necessarily want him to be my brother again, because I know what I keep doing to him, and I can't do it to him anymore . . . and I won't let anyone else do that to him or anyone else he cares about either."
"Just to be clear. You're talking about killing me if you think I'm going to be a threat to the rest of them?"

"Did I say that?"

"Right, well then you're going to torture me if you think I'm going to be a threat to the rest of them?"

The Evil Sam sighed. "I'm not going to do either of those things to you . . . So, you might as well start talking while you're here, so I can talk out of being the total dick I know you can be before it becomes a problem."

Sam pushed out a short laugh. "You mean before I become like you."

"Whatever . . . and just so you know, I'm cutting my hair tonight."

"What? Why would I care if . . . No, this is my thing. You just want them to start attacking me too. Well, it won't work. They can probably smell the evil coming off of you."

Sam received a smirk in response before the Evil Sam said, "Guess we'll just have to see . . . You know you should be thanking me."

"Because you haven't tased me yet?"

"No. Because I heard that before they died, the Purgatory Sam and Dean were thinking of coming here and rounding up as many vengeful spirits as possible, so they could maybe strike a deal with Death to get out of going to his lock up . . . 100 souls each is what they were thinking."

He wondered briefly who'd told the Evil Sam about that before he looked past the Evil Sam toward the 'disposal' rooms. They weren't too far off of that first 100. "You really think that'll work?"

"I don't know. You'd probably want to make the deal with Death before you go getting rid of the spirits. We could summon him . . . if you want."

He made that sound so normal, like it was no big deal to summon Death. Probably had some ulterior motive for doing it. "Let me think about it."

The Evil Sam shrugged and turned to go back to his 'patients.' Sam wondered if it might be possible. This was certainly the easiest way to find that many spirits, but then wasn't it wrong to intentionally turn people's spirits vengeful, so they could be sent to Death's Lock Up in place of Sam and Dean? Didn't seem right. It's not the same as finding spirits that had already gone vengeful. It was making that way on purpose, so he could get he and his brother out of something . . But then, it's not like these spirits were going to get into Heaven as long as Heaven was on lock down, and it's not like they weren't already starting to go vengeful. Being stuck in the veil was probably worse than being sent to the lock up. And he really wanted he and Dean to end up in the same place after they died, somewhere good. The idea of being behind bars in a cell next to Dean's or in a cell across from his or a few cell blocks over from his did not sound appealing to him if it was going to be like that for eternity. At the very least, he needed to maybe use these spirits as a bargaining chip to keep that from happening if Death wouldn't go for sending he and Dean to Heaven. Maybe they could have free reign to go back and forth between their cells or something? He'd have to come up with an airtight deal that wouldn't come back to bite him in the ass when everything was said and done. Maybe he could use the Evil Sam's help with that.
"Okay, I get that. What I don't understand is how it's any different than going Christmas shopping in the past . . . Not that I'm even sure why that had to be done when all we have to do is take whatever we want now . . . the food I get, but the presents - "

Cas shook his head and interjected. "Were bought form multiple places, so the wealth was spread out, and since it was done in the 70s, Fate had time to course correct if anything of any importance was changed, not that I think that it was."

After seeing how easy it was to go back in time using the spell, so long as you had a human soul - something neither Cas or the vampire knew until they tried it in the basement of the hospital, Kevin had been asking questions about it every time he opened his mouth, which wasn't often, but enough that it was something they were all thinking about now. "But how do you know for sure that it didn't? Is it because it was something insignificant?"

"Yes. They were items that were bought, not stolen, so it wouldn't have made the news. Nobody was harmed. Nobody that is known in the present was contacted and told anything about their future."

"What about the guys who lost money in the poker games? What if they lost their families after that and didn't have kids they were supposed to have, so those kids didn't have their own kids, and those kids aren't adults or kids in our camps now? You wouldn't know if people who were here before they left weren't here after they got back, because their history was rewritten to make it seem like they were never really there."

One of the Deans, who'd been listening to Kevin's debate looked confused. "Wait, so are you saying we shouldn't go back, or that we should, because I thought you were arguing we should."

Kevin had suggested that they just go back and stop the Dean who was a vampire from becoming a vampire, and that Dean - both Dean's actually - had said that as sucky as it was, you had to live with the consequences of your actions. You couldn't change the past, or bad things happened. It did seem like Kevin was changing his stance now . . . or maybe not. "No, I'm saying it should be consistent. Either use it or don't, but you can't just assign something as worth going back in time to do based on the idea that nothing is being changed, because it could be, and by the time you figure out that it has, it'll be too late to undo it . . . Do I want to go back and save my Mom? Yes. Do I think we should? No. If we did that, then we might as well just stay in the past, because we'd have to stop her from being bitten by a Croat or stop Meg from finding her without killing Meg because of who Meg is now, or we'd have to do who knows what else to keep something worse than what happened to my Mom from happening to her . . . Do I think we should go back and keep this guy from becoming a vampire? Yeah, I do, because I'm guessing the risk isn't any higher than going back and stealing a random selection of blood types from a hospital, not so much that they had none left, but enough that we got what we needed."

Cas was convinced. "Then we won't use it anymore."

"No, that's not what I'm saying - "

"i know what you're saying, and even though the probability of changing anything in the past by shopping for Christmas is extremely low, the risk is still there, so we won't use it anymore . . . Maybe that's the lesson Beth was supposed to learn by not being allowed to reverse her immortality. She got too used to cheating on the mission by using the spell, and God wanted to
prove the point that now that she was back home, she couldn't continue doing it."

One of the Dean's muttered, "Harsh lesson," while the other muttered, "Awesome. No Thanksgiving. No Christmas. No pie."

The second one, in particular, sounded as though he had been looking forward to the feast he'd been told they had here during the holidays, so Cas said, "We'll make it work with what we have in this time from the other camps and non-perishable items we find in the stores . . . nobody will go hungry."

That Dean was quick to respond. "I know that Cas, but it's not about going hungry . . . It's a . . . It's nothing. Never really did holidays in my universe. It's not a big deal to me, but what about the kids?"

Cas looked at Kevin. "Kevin was right. We've been lucky so far. What if we make one of the kids disappear because of something we do in the past? Gabriel and I would know they were gone, but you guys wouldn't, and then how would we fix that? We couldn't interact with whoever went back in the past, or it'd be another change to history with potentially worse consequences for the present and might even create another entirely new timeline with 10 tablets in it. The consequences of us not succeeding with those in another timeline when we did in the only universe where all 10 tablets are supposed to be could destroy everything Chuck has created including us, and we couldn't just go through the next 40 years looking for a chance to change something back to the way it was when we wouldn't know what changed to make the kid disappear. The child who disappears could be gone forever. I think they'd rather not have the holidays they had last year and be alive than one of these Croats or dead."

The Deans came around to that argument. Kevin, oddly enough, did not. "Oh no. You're not going to pin ruining Christmas on me. Just let us go back and keep him from becoming a vampire . . . Nothing has really happened since he became one, so nothing will change, and it will be consistent with the low probability of changing anything in the past to shop for the holidays." Cas opened his mouth to disagree, and Kevin said, "So, if your plan is to no longer use the spell, are we just not going to use the spell to go back and get the tablets off of Beth? Is the mission over now?"

Cas hadn't thought of that, but it was different. "We're not going back to a civilized time. We're just going back a couple of years to a time when nobody in the camps will be affected. We aren't talking to Beth or any of you who were with her in the past. We're switching the tablets, and nothing will change."

"Yeah, except that if we do it too early, we'll have two of each kind of the wrong tablets. How will we explain that to our past selves? Or I may not get the killing exorcism if we do it too early . . . and how often do we use that?" All the time. They used it on their mission. They used it on Abaddon. They couldn't switch the tablets.

One of the Deans looked from Kevin to Cas and said, "So, we'll do it just before Beth puts them back. That's probably when her attention wasn't on them the most, right?"

Kevin shrugged, but then said, "Yeah, after Sam walked up, we were pretty busy eating and then putting the finishing touches on our trucks. Then she put the tablets back. We went to the beach to look for any monsters the ocean washed up, while Beth went into labor, and then Cas took her. He left the tablets behind, but I would have known they were the wrong tablets when my Dean and Sam brought them back to me at the camp. That trip is when I finally got good at reading them . . . guess it was like my 40 days in the desert . . . and then what? Would she have gone to switch them again? What things since then won't happen, because she'll be off switching the tablets? The Civil War in Heaven? Because that happened, we were able to get rid of Raphael, so maybe he'll still be
around. What about finally getting rid of Crowley? Will that still happen, or would we still have to
deal with that creep? What about finding out what was going on in the Kansas camp and saving
them or saving the people in the monster camps? What if we do this and come back to a full-blown
war between Eve and the Leviathan? What about the mission to the other universes? What if that
doesn't get done?" Cas reluctantly began to agree that maybe they shouldn't be doing this. As soon
as this mission was over, he was going to find and destroy all of at least one of the ingredients used
in the time spell. It was going to take some time to find it all. Kevin saw the look of determination
on Cas's face and quickly said, "Just let us go back and change him from becoming a vampire . . .
nothing important has happened since then."

That wasn't necessarily true. "We found out Croats are being used as a surveillance system for an
as yet unidentified powerful entity."

Kevin countered that. "If the snow's still going to melt, then we're going to find that out anyway."

"Sam found a cure and has started curing them."

"Maybe he would have done that anyway. I don't see how this guy being a vampire would change
that."

"I'm an angel again."

"Something you don't really want to be anymore."

"Abaddon is dead."

"If we don't change us knowing the killing exorcism, then that will still be the same."

"Not necessarily. She'll show up wherever Henry does, and he'll go where his grandsons are. It was
fortuitous that they were both there together. What happens if he shows up with just Sam or just
Dean and Abaddon is released somehow? Right now we know she's dead. If we change anything,
that may no longer be the case."

"It's not a problem if we don't do anything, right?" Everyone looked at Vampire Dean, and he
continued, "So, we won't do anything. It was always a long shot anyway, and if switching the
tablets is gonna do anything to change anything important or give this universe Crowley back, then
we can use this as a search and rescue mission of Maine or something and mark it off our map."

Kevin quickly said, "If this is about Abaddon, all of you know the killing exorcism now. I don't
think it'll - "

Vampire Dean glanced in Kevin's direction and said, "I'm not undoing this. I can't."

"You can. There's nothing - "

Cas knew why Vampire Dean was reluctant to get rid of his vampirism, so he said, "He has
responsibilities he cannot fulfill if he is no longer a vampire."

The vampire seemed a little unsettled by what Cas had said, so before Kevin could ask for a
detailed explanation of what Cas had meant, the human Dean stopped him. "He's right. Doesn't
matter why. He just is." The Deans shared a look, and the vampire gave the other a nod in thanks
for cutting the conversation short. He didn't particularly want anyone to know why, but knew the
human Dean did because the human Dean was him and would understand it. Cas understood it too
even if vampire Dean hadn't said anything to him about it.
It wasn't because he could read his mind that Cas knew. He just knew how Dean Winchester thought, and he knew that the vampire Dean was only still alive because Beth had convinced him to stay alive by telling him that she had to live forever. It may be something she'd said at the time to keep vampire Dean from letting the other Dean cut his head off, but the vampire had taken it to heart. He was the one without a family, without a Sam, and somewhere along the line, he'd adopted the people on the mission from this universe as his. Maybe it was when he was responsible for Rogue, and Gabriel was responsible for both of them. Maybe it was after they thought the Dean from this universe was dead and gone or a demon never to be seen as himself again, but Vampire Dean had decided that he was going to give his all for this family. Now, he wasn't as needed as he'd thought he'd be and had receded to the fringes, waiting for when his new family would need him. It made Cas feel disheartened for a variety of reasons.

For one, it meant this Dean was trying, but really just felt useless as of right now. He thought he was even more unimportant than Dean Winchester usually thought he was. For another, it meant that vampire Dean would most likely always feel that way, an outsider to something he'd once thought he might be an insider on in a new life, only to have it snatched away from him at the last second and then further taken from him by becoming a vampire. That Dean would always feel tainted by what he was, would always struggle, and that's on top of what he would feel being Dean Winchester. It meant that even though he'd always think he was an outsider/second choice/someone who didn't belong, Vampire Dean was essentially waiting for his moment to step into a situation he had idealized and when the time came for him to step into that role, vampire Dean wouldn't think he was up to it because of what he was. Any fleeting time that Dean may have thought it was something he could do was gone now that he was a vampire. It made Cas feel sad for vampire Dean, but it also made Cas feel guilty for saying they couldn't do anything to help that Dean. It also made Cas feel a pang of grief for his own Dean, because it brought to mind that one day his Dean would be dead, and that's when vampire Dean would have his chance, and really that just made Cas miss his Dean's vitality preemptively even though his Dean was alive and somewhere in this universe right now.

Because of how low it made him feel, Cas decided to try and say something positive. And maybe he was tired of being angry all the time, angry about being an angel again, angry about angels in general, angry about being totally ineffectual on the mission and then dying, angry about the games his family always seemed to have to play just to survive, angry with Chuck for those games, angry with the way some people in this universe hurt others, angry at the way his family was always hurting, and angry that as a human or angel, he was never able to stop his family from excess pain. Just angry. "He doesn't need the tablets. He's already mastered his less-than human nature . . . almost too much, or his headaches wouldn't happen. His senses wouldn't be as high alert if he weren't hungry all the time . . . It'll become easier in time. It's his human nature to have self-doubt in his inner strength, and I think that even if he had forever, he'd never be able to overcome that. It's part of who he is."

Cas intentionally avoided looking at vampire Dean to see his response, because he knew that what he'd said would make any Dean uncomfortable, and Kevin shook his head and looked out the window before saying, "All right. Fine. I was just trying to help, because I don't think it's fair, but I guess none of the rest of us get a do-over, and if it's what he wants, then I won't mention it again . . . So, I guess I'm going on my first mission if we're searching Maine."

The human Dean quickly looked to Cas to see if that was true, and it was apparent to Cas that that Dean had been overestimating Kevin's experience in this world and was now having second thoughts about having Kevin here, so Cas tried to put his mind at ease. "His first mission to find people and supplies. He was also on the trek to take the tablets back, and that was a mission on it's own."
Both Deans asked simultaneously, "So this is only the second time he's left the camps?"

Apparently Cas's response hadn't had the desired effect. Kevin, sounding almost bored, said, "Fourth, if you count the time I left the Vegas camp to go to the Wisconsin camp, and the time Beth asked God to keep me hidden from Crowley after he took the Purgatory souls." At the look on their faces he laughed before adding, "In case you haven't noticed, I'm not the Kevin you guys knew . . . I know how to look after myself. I've heard what happened to them, and I think that where your Kevins failed, is that they relied on you and your brothers to protect them instead of learning how to do it themselves. They almost had it after they escaped Crowley with the demon tablet, but then I guess they must have thought it was easier to let you and your brothers go back to protecting them. That, and I don't think they ever fully embraced the life . . . I don't mean as a hunter. I mean as a prophet and all that entails. It's more than just reading some tablets . . . It's about protecting what's in those tablets, and to do that, you have to know how to protect it . . . and keep yourself out of the enemy's hands. If Sam did anything good when he was in Vegas, it was teach me how important that is. I think your Kevins still saw being a prophet as a burden, or they wouldn't have struggled to even just read the tablets."

Vampire Dean had already surmised most of that, possibly because the memory of his own Kevin was so fresh in his mind, but the human Dean said, "And you don't?"

Kevin went back to looking out the side window and shook his head. "Not anymore."

After that, the cab fell into what Cas thought was a semi-comfortable silence until the Deans broke it to make it seem more light-hearted, which did the opposite, or at least it did for Cas despite Kevin joining in on their banter. They were concerned about having Kevin here. Making sure he got back to the South Dakota camp alive was now their prime directive. Cas supposed that they didn't want another dead Kevin on their hands, but if this universe was good at something, it was bringing out a person's strengths and weaknesses to their fullest. You could either use your strengths to acknowledge and overcome your weaknesses or become the worst version of yourself. It was true of the people out here in the wild and the people in the camps. It was true of the people Cas considered family too. Ultimately, what you got were either the best or worst versions of people. This universe had definitely made Kevin the best version of himself that he could be. They'd see that in time. As luck would have it, Cas only had to wait a couple of days to be proven right on that as well as at least a couple of things he would have rather been wrong about.
Embracing the Present

Dean's features steeled, the way they did when he got out of the truck to fight something that needed to be fought. It was a change I think only Henry, Rogue, and I saw, but it was noticeable if you were looking. It was one of the many masks I knew he had, but I hadn't actually thought he thought this was going to be a fight. Maybe I shouldn't have asked Chuck to bring John out so we could talk to him . . . talk, not hand over our daughter to disembodied souls. This wasn't Hell where you were completely solid . . . except maybe in the prison, but on this side of Heaven, where the souls who were supposed to be here went, that wouldn't work. "Dean, he's more solid than a spirit up here, but he's not completely solid. He can't hold her." Dean reluctantly brought her back to his chest and looked at me over his shoulder, like I was ruining his plan, and he wanted to know what he was supposed to do now, but knowing she wouldn't be dropped, I relaxed, and me relaxing seemed to have the same effect on him. I wondered why. Maybe it had something to do with my eyes. I didn't have long to wonder about it, because John took the lead.

With a smile, he looked at our daughter and said, "Is this Rogue?"

Dean turned to look at his Dad again, war mask firmly in place. "You know her?"

"Haven't seen her in-" He paused to exhale a laugh of disbelief before saying, "Doesn't feel like it, but we must not have been able to see anything down there in a while. The last time I saw her she couldn't have been more than a few months old, and you were taking care of her on her own with Sam's help and doing a fine job from what I could tell . . . except she didn't have a name. Adam told us what it was after she finally got one. Then things went quiet. Haven't heard anything since."

They must have been able to see her when Cas had Crowley babysitting me in Hell. I guess Dean and mine's connection must have hidden her from them when I came back, and not long after that is when they would have been sealed off for good. I guess if we unsealed the souls, so Sam's Croat souls could make it through to the other side, it'd make it possible for the souls already in Heaven to see what was happening on terra firma again. I wondered what they'd think of the place now.

"Yeah, well a lot's happened since then . . . Most of the angels are gone. Raphael is dead. Michael is dead. Crowley's dead. We stopped a war between Eve and the Leviathan . . . went on a mission to save some other universes and brought some of the people we found there home with us, so you might see more of me than just me. There's a second Sam now too."

Without looking away from Rogue, as she tried to touch his hand and laughed when her hand went right through his, John tilted his head in Henry's direction, while saying, "Is that what he's doing here?"

Dean shook his head. "No . . . He's your Dad. He - "

"He's not my father . . . My father was a mechanic who actually stuck around to raise me."

Dean glanced over his shoulder at Henry and then back at John. "No. Henry is . . . Uh, turns out our family has done weird longer than we thought. He - "

John's eyes lifted to Dean's face as he cut him off. "Did a spell to out run a demon and got stuck in the future? I know. Your mother told me." He glanced in my direction. I guess he must be referring to the time I told Mary about that when we were discussing me having Rogue.

Dean breathed out an unsure laugh. "Uh, yeah, well, I guess this is that future, and he wants to talk
to you."

"Not sure there's much to say."

"What, are you kidding me? You thought he left all these years. He didn't have a choice. I'm not saying that he didn't put the job first, but you're the last one who should be judging him on putting the job before family."

"Is that what you think I did?"

"It's what I know you did . . . and it's something I need you to not do now. You're dead. You shouldn't even get a vote, because it's not like you and Mom dying when you did would change, just the how, but he wants to hear what you have to say about it."

John looked at Henry for the first time. "Do you know what he's talking about?"

"I do, son. He - "

It would appear that John had his own war mask, because that's right about the time he started wearing it. "Let's not go with calling me son, just yet."

It unsettled Henry, but Henry adorned his gentleman's mask . . . Men and their fathers. What an odd mix of emotions they brought out in one another. "As you wish . . . He's talking about me going back to my time, raising you . . . potentially erasing this godforsaken future where I find myself."

John immediately looked to Rogue and then Dean. "And she wouldn't be born?"

Dean relaxed a little after realizing that his Dad understood before glancing in my direction and saying, "And Beth may never get out of here . . . I can't explain it, but I think some things that have happened in the last couple of years are what made it so she could . . . things that won't happen if anything is changed."

"So, your family, or the world? Is that what you're saying?"

"That's how I see it."

"That might be how you see it, but that's not how it's going to be."

Mistaking what John was going to say next, Dean's expression changed again into one of anger. "I knew you'd throw me under the bus . . . always have. Always will. Don't know why I thought it might change now. For all your talk about family, you never really understood what it meant."

Opting not to address what Dean had said, John faced Henry. "Is that it? You wanted my vote on what you should do?"

"Something along those lines."

John's eyes narrowed as he assessed Henry. "Or were you looking for forgiveness? As it is, I still remember the day my father walked out and never came back . . . which tells me you've either decided to stay or something is going to keep you from going back."

He was partially right. If this was a loop, then something happening in the future to change the past would be remembered, like Dean and Sam didn't know they were going to save me in the past from the Rugaru, but Kevin, Cas, and I remembered me surviving under unexplainable conditions, so it
must've always happened that way because of what'd happened in the future, or the way Elkins wound up with the Colt was because it was handed down through the generations of his family after Sam and Dean went back to the past to get the Phoenix's ashes . . . but that's if this was a loop and Henry was supposed to go back to his time. If he wasn't and did? "Or he could do something unexpected and cut the branch back to when he left. Nothing that's happened on this branch or lots of others would happen . . . everything would be different, and none of us would remember this life."

John looked at me and then at Dean before saying, "Would it mean he or his brother won't be born?"

Henry said, "No," and Dean began to reluctantly agree, but I said, "Possibly," which drew everyone, except Rogue's, attention onto me. Henry was the first to say, "I thought you said that in the universe where I never left, they were born."

"They were, but that was that universe. There was a universe where Mary didn't die, and they had 2 more kids . . . Each change from the original time line that happens will lead to different results, which means there is a possibility they won't be born . . . like let's say Mary never meets John, then she won't have his kids, and the Apocalypse may or may not still happen, or if she doesn't make the deal with Azazel to bring John back, she won't have his kids. It's the split second decisions, ones where we could go right but choose to go left, that make a new universe possible. You could end up with several new universes, especially because you'd be going so far back in time . . . You might even end up with several universes with all 10 tablets, and that could be catastrophic for everyone in all the universes if there's one where we don't succeed. The further back you go, the more changes that are possible, and you could end up with hundreds of new branches. Some with Dean and Sam being born. Some without. Some that might turn out like the one I saw, where Sam was a married lawyer, and Dean was the last in the line of the Men of Letters trying to keep the family legacy going. Some that might end up just like this one for one reason or another. Some where Sam might be born first and then Dean or where one might not be born in favor of a different kid, a girl, twins . . . you get the picture. The possibilities are endless."

Dean looked at me and said, "But this one is special."

"Yeah."

Looking down at Rogue, Dean explained "This is the only one with her in it." His attention came back to me as he said, "That's why your Dad said she was one of a kind . . . This is the only universe where I have kid, isn't it?"

"We didn't go to a lot of universes, so our sample size wasn't really all that large considering how many universes I think are out there, but yes, this is the only one where she, specifically, is alive, because I'm rare enough, and it takes our DNA to make her, as well as timing and all the rest. As far as other kids go . . . You wouldn't be born if the angels weren't trying to kick start the Apocalypse, so any universe where you're born, you would be pulled into the hunting life . . . either prepared from a young age, like you and the other Deans we met were, and unable to live a life that would lead to kids, or unprepared, so maybe you'd agree to be Michael's vessel because you didn't know any better, or maybe you'd fight it and still become a hunter . . . again not conducive to kids, so I'm thinking . . . yeah, you wouldn't have many chances that aren't Emma, the Amazon, and Sam killed her when she was less than a week old in most, if not all, of those universes."

Looking back at me again, Dean said, "And this is the only universe where you're you."

"Not necessarily. Remember the one where -"
"You were you, but you were dead . . . Yeah. I remember." Of course he did. He was a demon when we were in that universe, so he was the one in charge of his and the MoC Dean's consciousness there. Ironically, the Dean from that universe cured him because he thought if he was cured, the demon would be the right Dean for me. The Dean from that universe had just had no way of knowing that my Dean would disappear when he was no longer a demon. Ducking his head briefly, Dean smiled sadly before saying, "Yeah, something always told me that your time was supposed to be before mine . . . before, you know." Before Amara made me immortal? Yeah. I knew, so I nodded, and he said, "Well, a version of you might've been in that universe, but the tablets weren't, so she was never up here, and there still weren't any kids . . . the only thing that made that possible was the Apocalypse." That's most likely true too. She was an accident . . . a great one . . . but an accident, nonetheless, one where an Apocalypse was most likely the only situation where I would be that irresponsible.

"What's going on there?" I looked at John, and he was focused on Dean, but tilted his head in my direction.

Dean sighed. "Her eyes? It's nothing. We're working through some . . . issues. She can't lie as well, or at all, and if her fear levels were low before, they're nonexistent now, but on the plus side, her temper is pretty much gone, so . . . "

Interesting. I'd have to ask what other things he'd noticed . . . presuming there's time before Henry does something rash and tries to go back in time . . . I'd thought I was pretty much getting back to normal, but apparently not. I felt a little confused, if I'm honest, about how my reality didn't match up with others, Dean's in particular. Had it always been that way, or was it new? Could I rely on my previous memories of my life without knowing how I'd felt about them in the moment? Was it really that important? I didn't know. I didn't have to think about it for long, because Rogue reached her hands out for me, so Dean handed her off to me, while he explained what'd happened to me to his father. I guess she wants me to hold her. Oh. No. She wants a hug? Now she's resting her head on my shoulder. Maybe she's tired? There's nowhere up here for her to lay down and sleep . . . I didn't think there were any angels up here anymore, but there could be. There could just be so few of them in such a vast space that you didn't stand much of a chance of running into any of them . . . This hall is relatively safe, as there is only one entrance and exit. I guess I can hold her as long as I keep an eye on the end of the hall, stay aware of my angel blade at all times, and put Rogue down should something come for us . . . No, I couldn't just put her down. What a stupid idea. I'll just give her back to her Dad . . . He'll protect her, and I'll protect him.

Rogue released her hold around my neck and looked up at me before putting her hand on my cheek and shaking her head. I didn't know what that meant. She seemed to know that I didn't, because she tensed up her shoulders and then relaxed, tensed up and then relaxed before pointing to my eyes . . . Maybe she could feel me tensing when my eyes changed colors. Tense when they were icy-blue and not tense when they weren't? Unlike my accent, I can't do anything about that. "No game on that, little one. I can't control it." She huffed out a sigh before shaking her head again and pointing at my eyes. I did know how to get them to go back to normal, just not how to stop them from becoming a way I assumed she didn't like. Taking a slow breath, I focused on what I liked about the little girl in my arms, and it didn't take more than a second or two for her to smile and clap silently . . . Yeah, well, we'll see how long this lasts. I didn't even know when I was doing it. I could have done it 10 times in a row just now without knowing I was. I knew it wasn't good for me. Cas was right about it wearing out my soul and making other people more likely to attack me, but I couldn't do anything about it.

It's also possible that it's strengthening my soul, the way muscles contracting strengthen. Rogue's lips pursed together, and she shook her head again before pointing at my eyes. I glanced at her father to see if he might want to take her back, but she put her hand on the side of my face again to
get my attention and shook her head before putting her finger in front of my eyes, the way I had Dean during his panic attack, and I laughed. She smiled before licking her bottom lip and giving me a nod, like she'd figured out why I'd done that and was going to do it from now on to make my eyes look the way they should to her. I hadn't done it because I was trying to make him laugh, but if that's what she got from it, I'll explain it to her some day when she's older. Her finger was in front of my eyes again, and it made me laugh again at how quickly she'd turned into a stern, little, head master when she saw my eyes change. "Rogue, leave your Mom alone."

Rogue looked over her shoulder at Dean, and we both realized we had an audience. "No."

That got Dean's attention. "Did you just tell me no?" I don't think she'd ever told him no, at least not when he was him.

Rogue shook her head. I don't think she'd ever lied to him either. When he came over to take her from me, I said, "Isn't there an age where they say 'no' to everything? I wouldn't take it personally."

Knowing there was something different about my voice, Rogue looked back over at me and then pointed before her eyes looked stern, like she was annoyed with me. Right. I exhaled a sharp breath and got started on focusing on what I liked about her. When my eyes must have changed back to their natural color, she looked her Dad in the eye and patted him on the cheek before whispering, "You say, I protect . . . I protect."

"I said it's our job to protect her . . . and she protects us. We protect each other. That's what family does."

Rogue shook her head. "I protect Mom and Dad."

Dean's eyebrows arched. "Oh yeah? Then who are we protecting when we go to work?"

Rogue gave him a look that said she wasn't buying what he was trying to say, flicked her hand towards her Great-grandfather and Grandfather, said, "They," and then she pointed at the walls, "They." Then she pointed at the ground, said, "They." Finally, she pointed at the ceiling and said, "They," before looking at her Dad and adding, "They, they, they . . . I protect Mom and Dad. Mom and Dad protect they." Realizing she'd overstepped some kind of line with her Dad at the expression on his face, she burst into tears. "I sor - ry." Patting her Dad's cheek, she added, "I lie. I say 'no' . . . Dad sad . . . No sad. I want protect Dad."

Pulling her closer, so he could cradle her head in the crook of his neck, Dean whispered, "That's not your job."

She answered back in a hushed tone, "I protect Mom and Dad, I protect they?"

Dean muttered, "No, we don't need you to protect us, so we can protect them. That's not your job either." She nodded, and he said, "No, it's not . . . You know why we're here?"

"Work?"

"Yeah, I guess it's work. I'm trying to protect you. That's why we're here."

"Protect me?"

"Yes . . . We protect other people too, but nothing, nothing is more important than you."

"No want protect me."
Dean smiled. "Now, you sound like your Mom. Why don't you want us to protect you?"

"No be back."

Dean's smile fell. "Because I didn't come back on the mission?"

She was quiet, while she thought about it and picked at a thread on his shoulder before saying, "Dad go work. No be back . . . I sad . . . cry."

She sat back to look at him, and he said, "You cried?" She gave him a solemn nod before taking a deep breath and stretching out her arms as wide as she could. "You cried a lot?"

She nodded again and said, "Dad protect me . . . work. Dad protect they . . . work." After another pause, she looked him in the eye and said, "Dad no work. I no cry."

Dean sighed and then said, "You want me to quit working? What about all those monsters you've seen your Mom and me fighting? What if they get into the camps? What if they hurt Lily?" Dean paused, while she took that in and then said, "What if they hurt you?"

She quickly shook her head. "No protect me."

"You may not want it, but you need someone to protect you, and that's always gonna be me and your Mom, because it's our job to protect you . . . not the other way around."

She sniffed and then said, "Mom say."

"Yeah, well she was right."

"Want protect Mom and Dad."

"And you do." Rogue watched him closely to see if he'd meant that, and Dean smiled again. "I know you're trying to protect your Mom now . . . And maybe you're right. I don't know. I know what's going on right now isn't good for her, but I don't know how to fix it. I just don't think -" He paused to think of a word he could use to explain it and said, "I don't think we should be mean to her to fix it. I think that will make it worse, and we might . . . it'll take longer to fix."

We might, what? Lose me to the ice cold hunter all the time? Wouldn't my soul wear out if I was like that all the time? Would I become soulless if that happened? No, my soul was locked into my body because of the mark, but would I be all that different from someone who was soulless if I was like that all the time? I wasn't worried about it. I didn't really worry very often. It'd work itself out, I suppose. Dean looked over at me before saying, "And what you see me and your Mom do when we're at work . . . You don't have to do that. We want you to know how, so you can protect yourself, but you can do whatever kind of work you want. We decided that before you were born . . . okay."

"I want."

"Yeah, well, you don't know what you want right now."

She gave him a little growl and then balled her hand into a fist before hitting the palm of her other hand. "I hit. I protect Dad."

Dean sighed over what looked like a losing battle. "I came back. I'm fine."

"No." She paused before bringing her finger up in front of his eyes the way I had. She waited a few
seconds to make sure he understood before taking her finger away and whispering, "No," as if she thought that was enough to let him know she knew he wasn't fine. Then she felt the need to give him a hug and whisper, "My Dad."

Dean's breath caught in his throat briefly, and then he carried her a few feet closer to me and further from his Dad and Grandfather before whispering, "It doesn't matter to you. I'm still your Dad?" She nodded into his neck, and he took a slow breath before looking over his shoulder at Henry. "Yeah, I don't care what you decide. If I have to lock you up until the day you die, I'm not letting you take her from me . . . I'm not letting you take either of them from me. You two fudged up your own families. Leave mine out of it. Make your peace with my Dad or whatever, we'll be over there when you're ready to go."

That would have been a good exit, except for one thing. When we got to the head of the hallway, where we couldn't hear John and Henry's discussion, I finally said, "Uh, I don't know how to get your Dad back to the other side. We might have to stick around and tunnel our way through."

"Wait, you mean you did this?"

"If by this, you mean that I asked Chuck bring your Dad out for a chat, then . . . yeah, I did this."

Leaning closer, he said, "Why would you do that?"

My eyebrows knitted together on that one. "That's why we're here isn't it?"

Taking a step back, his shoulders dropped. "No . . . I mean yeah, it's why we brought him here, but it was no skin off my nose if he didn't actually get to talk to my Dad. I was actually hoping he wouldn't. My Dad's just going to convince him to go back to his own time."

I looked around Dean's arm to catch a glimpse of the two men at the other end of the hall. "I don't think that's going to happen . . . I think for one, your Dad seemed genuinely happy to see Rogue up close. For another, he was watching your entire interaction with Rogue, like he was looking for something. I -"

"What do you think he was looking for? You think maybe he was looking to see if she's a monster because of what she is . . . Do you think -"

I put my hand on his shoulder to stop him and said, "She's not anything, except our daughter . . . just because her Mom happened to be a nephilim for about 9 months doesn't mean anything . . . except to her other grandfather, who from what I can remember is incredibly proud of her."

Dean's brow furrowed as he realized he may have said something he hadn't meant before he looked down at her in his arms. "No, that's not what I . . . I know there's nothing wrong with her . . . I just mean he might think there is, and maybe he's over there right now telling his Dad that she's not a reason to stick around and not go back. Maybe she talked too much or maybe she understands too much for a kid her age, and -"

I stopped him again and gave him a soft smile before saying, "No . . . It's not any of those things. I think he was watching how the two of you interacted . . . Seeing his son be a Dad up close for the first time . . . That's all. Especially, because it wasn't an act. The second she started talking you forgot all about them being there and focused solely on her . . . I think . . . I think maybe it meant a lot to him. Your Dad has had the benefit of seeing you a few times since he's been dead. The last time he saw you on earth, he wanted me to make sure you knew that he was proud of the man you'd become, but that was you as a leader . . . as a hunter . . . as a man who was about to take on Lucifer. Now, he's seeing you a few years later with a kid of your own and how you're excelling at
"Yeah, my kid knows I'm nuts and called me out on it. I'm really excelling here."

"That's right. You are."

"What'd you forget how sarcasm sounded?"

"Uh, I did, but being around you and the other Deans and Sam and Cas have all reacquainted me with it. I'd say I'm an expert now . . . I just chose to ignore it."

He smiled briefly against his will before bringing his free hand up behind the back of my head, so he could touch his forehead to mine, and now we were in something I'd decided to call a family huddle. I found it quite comforting, like I belonged there. It was nice. Whispering, he said, "You really think he was just watching me be a dad?"

"Yeah, I do."

"You could be wrong. You don't exactly have the same eye for observing other people that you used to have."

"My eyes are the same. I have immediate feelings about other people, or do you not remember when I saw the others after I first woke up?"

"You didn't like the looks Sam and Bobby were giving you . . . so maybe you know more than you let on and are scamming people more than I thought?"

"Maybe."

"You scamming me?"

"You've seen me at my worst. I mean you literally had to teach me how to walk again. It hasn't seemed to make you think I'm incompetent, and you've been honest with me, since the moment I woke up. I don't see the point in scamming you . . . but in playing up my weakness in front of the others to get them to drop their guard, so I could learn more about them, I may have also unintentionally made you think I'm not as here as I am . . . or not . . . I think maybe . . . maybe right now, you know me better than I know myself. I didn't know that there were that many differences . . . I thought I was matching up to the way I was. What else is wrong with me?"

He gave his head a tiny shake before releasing my head, so he could slide his hand down to my back and look me in the eye while he said, "There is nothing wrong with you . . . Maybe there are some differences, but you are the way you are, and whoever that is at any given second is who I want."

"Even if I turn into an ice cold - "

"Even then."

Really? He must've sensed my unspoken question, because he said, "Rogue may not get it, but I do."

"I don't. I don't know the difference. When I'm like that and when I'm not, I can't tell."

"I know . . . I'm not used to seeing you like that outside of a fight, but I do know that even when you are tapping into your soul, you're not cold blooded. We're first and foremost. Let me ask you
something . . . earlier when you were holding her, what were you thinking about?"

"I don't know."

"My bet is that it was something about defense . . . maybe something about looking out for angels or remnants of that demon army minus the daevas? Am I right?"

"I did think that this hall was fairly safe, because it had one entrance and one exit that I could defend if I put her down, but then I told myself I couldn't just put her down. I'd give her to you. You'd protect her, and I'd protect you."

"See . . . I'm not worried about it. I have a theory on why it's happening, and if that's all it is, then you'll be fine. It's just going to take some time."

"How long have you had this theory?"

"Just got it, but I think I'm right . . . You got any other reasons why you don't think I should lock Henry up as soon as we get back to Earth?"

My mind had to change gears as I thought about it. "Another reason I don't think your Dad is going to tell his Dad to go back is because of his reaction to the idea that you and your brother might not be born. He wasn't okay with that . . . He doesn't care about the children he doesn't know in other universes, no matter how similar they are to you. You're the ones he raised. I guess put yourself in your Dad's shoes now that you're a dad instead of in his son's shoes where you've been your whole life. If it were Rogue, what would you do? Let's say she grows up to have her own kid and then your Dad comes knocking and saying that he can make your life better if he goes back and keeps your Mom from dying? Would you tell him to do it if it meant that Rogue might not be born and her kid definitely wouldn't be?"

"Not a chance, but there's also no way that's happening, because in order for her to have kids, it means she - "

"She's going to grow up some time, Dean."

"Nope. Not allowed. She's going to be a nun."

"A kick ass nun from the sounds of it." He slumped a little again as he looked down at her. She was asleep. How she could do that up here with how wired her parents were, I didn't know, but maybe she'd gotten something big off of her chest concerning her Dad, and it'd worn her out. "What are you going to do about retiring if that's what she wants?"

"I don't know. When I didn't come back . . . Was it bad?"

His eyes flicked to mine for the answer, and I thought back to when that happened. "She's right. There was a lot of crying. She had Vampire Dean put her to sleep the first night . . . and some of the nights after that. She said he wasn't her Dad, but he hugged like him . . . and there was a video of you and her that my Dad made to show her how you were those first three months I was gone . . . She watched that over and over again non-stop . . . She'd fall asleep in front of the TV or curled up in mine or Dad's arms . . . She wouldn't play with anything, but she kept her pet monster close . . . She didn't talk much, and when she did, it was always about you. She talked quite a bit to the kid you . . . On her good days, she'd hum along with you when you were playing Joy Division on the screen, or - "

"What?"
"Yeah, he put that in there."

"I thought he was in prison then. He catches everything, huh?"

"Guess it's one of the benefits of being him... But seriously."

I hesitated, and he asked, "What?"

How should I put this? "She told you what she wanted. What are you going to do? You can stay home with her full-time. You've done more than enough for the world. You don't have to do anymore than make sure our daughter grows up with the Dad she deserves... the guy who will be able to chase off boys and try his hardest to make her a nun."

He gave me a... not a panicked look, but maybe a slightly tortured one. "It's not that I wouldn't want that, but I think we both know I can't do that, Beth."

"Are you willing to continue to bring her with us the way we have been?"

He looked down at her again and shook his head slightly. "I don't know... I know I've been crazy lately. It's just with Henry and not knowing what he's gonna do... I need her with me, but I don't want her seeing what we do either. Not at this age anyway."

"Could be that her seeing what we do is what she needs to feel at peace... or it will be now that she has some kind of idea of what we mean when we say we're going to work. Her imagination could conjure up all kinds of things that may be even worse than they really are now that she's had a chance to see the faces of some of those very real monsters."

Looking up at me hesitantly, he whispered, like he had something caught in the back of his throat. "I shouldn't have brought her... I know that. I just... I have to do whatever it takes to make sure we keep her... There's not a door 3 on this game is there?"

"Actually there is."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. You could put the job first the way the two men at the end of the hall did. When you come home to her, you can do more with her, so my Dad can make her more videos of memories that she can have of you when you're gone, since your life expectancy will be that much shorter."

"So you're saying that's what I do now?"

"I didn't say that... Is that what you think you do now?"

He looked at her again. "I don't know... All he got were the first three months I had her? Is that all I've given her in the way of memories of me?"

"No. Not at all. There are plenty of other times that he could have used. He chose that period of time, because those were the times when it was just the two of you together for days on end."

Without looking away from her, he asked, "What about you?"

"I'm with you whatever you decide."

Looking at me again, he said, "You'll retire too?"

I think he knew from the look on my face that I was going to say no, because he already had a
response ready when I started to say, "Well, I can't die, so -"

"Yeah, but think of all the things you'll miss out on, Beth. You've only got one shot at this with her. She'll need her Mom around just as much as she does me."

"I know, but with me being immortal or whatever, there are things I can do, things I can survive, that nobody else can - not even my Dad or Cas could, because they can die."

"You can still get hurt. Look at what happened with that djinn ... What if something worse happens and you might as well be dead? What if you get bitten and turned? What if ... I don't know. What if Cas was right, and you get cut up into little pieces? You need a partner. You need me to -"

"But you're not always going to be around, Dean. Those are all problems I'm going to have to learn to face on my own ... forever after you're gone." I don't know why that sentence in particular seemed to affect him the way it did, but it looked like he felt like he'd been physically attacked, like slapped across the face or punched in the stomach ... I don't know. I just know it immediately made me ... well, it made me do exactly what Rogue had done. I burst into tears and said I was sorry, and I think he didn't know what to do about that at first ... maybe because I'd never done that before when I wasn't pregnant, and then his free arm was wrapping around me and pulling me into a hug with the two of them. I didn't know what was wrong with me. I didn't like the way it felt.

Bringing his hand up to rest on the back of my head, he sighed a few moments later. "We'll figure it out."

"No, it's nothing we were talking about ... I don't like the way me saying what I said made you feel."

"You can still feel what I feel?"

"No, but -"

"Then you don't know how I feel."

"Like you were just punched in the stomach."

"Okay. Maybe you do ... I don't know what to do here."

"Take care of her. Stay alive as long as possible. I can take care of myself when I'm not with you. We can take care of each other when I get back."

"Yeah, that's not gonna work for me."

Peeling my face off his chest, so I could look up at him, I asked, "What does that mean?"

He smoothed my hair back and said, "Either retire, or she's coming out with us like this more. I'm not splitting up my family."

"But she shouldn't -"

"Then retire ... Before I screwed up and agreed to do that 'training' mission, you were thinking about it. I think you were ready. You just had a few more things you wanted to do, but there's always gonna be something else ... Quit. Spend what time you have with her now, while you can."

"And after?"
"I don't want you hunting without me."

"Dean, I - "

"I know I've known for a while, but what it means hits me sometimes . . . Just hit me a little harder this time, and . . . I don't know what to do, but I know I don't want you hunting without me, and I know I promised you - "

"You don't have to keep that promise anymore."

"But that's the thing . . . I do. I know it seems like I've done a shit job of keeping it sometimes, but I have . . . No matter what I've said, I've always come back. I meant it then. I mean it now . . . I'm not leaving you alone . . . alive, dead. It doesn't matter. I could pawn it off on one of my doubles, but it's my responsibility, and it's not one I don't want . . . same goes with raising Rogue. We can do it from the camp. We can do it from your little gingerbread house. We can do it on the road, killing monsters, but we are doing this family thing, and we're doing it together while I figure out our situation."

"Okay."

Why did he seem surprised by that? "That's it? You're not gonna fight me on it?"

"Well, I don't know which option we should choose, but I don't see a problem with us doing whatever it is together . . . And I kind of like it when you're bossy and put your foot down."

He smiled and then rolled his eyes. "You have changed." He looked more boyish than he had at any other time since I'd woken up after the djinn attack. Looking down at Rogue and seeing she was still asleep, he said, "Think she really wants to do what we do?"

Watching her, I answered, "It's not like she has a whole lot of different role models that she knows and can try to emulate . . . although she could do a lot worse than you." He gave me a look that said he didn't buy that, but didn't want to argue about it right now, so I said, "On the other hand, kids go through lots of phases, so maybe this is a phase she'll grow out of when she's older. You never know."

"Maybe . . . If she has a chance to get older."

"She will."

"I don't know about Henry . . . I can't get a good read on him."

"I know. I think after he's talked to his son, he'll be different. He's just been playing his cards close to his chest to get what he wants, but I'd say he already decided before we came up here on what he was going to do, and I'd say you're Dad's probably right about him choosing to stay, or I hope he is, because we could really use his help. There's a chance he could do something unexpected and go back in time, but out-playing fate is really hard to do. It seemed easy on the mission, because we had Chuck helping us with jumping in and out of places in the blink of an eye, so Fate didn't have a chance to undo anything we did, but I'm not even sure how it's really done . . . if it's a split second decision or something that takes a lot of planning. I just know it won't be easy if that's what he's thinking of doing. We'll have a harder time keeping him alive than keeping him from going back in time."
Making Amends

Bobby used to say that being dead had mellowed him out. Maybe he'd been right. Finally finding Mary up here certainly had if being dead wasn't the cause. John stood there, left with a man with whom he had nothing to say, and wanting to be on the other end of the hall with a man he knew. He'd known the man down at the end of the hall most of their lives. John had seen different iterations of his son over the years, the joker, the hunter, the rebel, the peacemaker, and the dutiful son, but none so prominent as the caretaker. Whether Henry knew it or not, he had a fight on his hands if he did intend on going back to be the father he never was. Dean would do whatever it took to protect his family . . . family. Maybe John did have a few things to talk about with the man standing next to him. Might as well get whatever intel he could out of him now. "You didn't happen to see my other son down there, did you?"

"Sam?" John gave him a direct look that said, 'Don't mess with me. You know I meant Sam,' and Henry sighed. "I did. He was there when I came out of the portal. He didn't say much and nothing to me. I think he was mostly wrapped up in his cure."

"Cure?"

"He found a cure for the Croatoan virus. After we left, I think he was going to move to another undisclosed location, so he could continue his work. I don't know where he is now, but it's probably somewhere along the power grid, so he can get electricity."

A cure for the demon virus. Well, if anyone could find a cure for it, then it'd be Sam, and since he's the one who let the thing out . . . John paused in what he was thinking to massage his forehead, like he was stressed . . . like he was alive to feel that stress. He wasn't. It was just a habit formed over a lifetime of stress, not something he generally let his sons see unless he'd been drinking and his inhibitions were down, but then he'd usually yell, ramble, like the drunken idiot he was, or pass out, leaving the man at the end of the hall to take care of him. He'd been a terrible father. He knew that. He'd done the best he could to protect them and teach them to protect themselves, but being a father . . . that stopped right around the time that the man at the end of the hall had grown into a man at the tender age of 4. Being dead, more than anything, gave you time to think . . . about your life, your legacy. Half of his legacy had destroyed the planet, and the other half was doing it's best to put it right, but if they were both really working on fixing things, then maybe the world would be all right eventually.

Dropping his hand to his jaw, John said, "Did you say power grid? They've got that up and running now?"

Henry looked down to the floor, like he was imagining what Earth looked like now and said, "For now . . . those Croats, as they call them . . . well, I don't know how long whoever is controlling them is going to let the power continue if it means progress. There is something nefarious going on there."

That got John's attention, and his hand fell to the crook of his other arm involuntarily, so that his arms were crossing his chest, but his posture said he was interested in getting the full details on what was happening down there. "What else can you tell me?"

Flipping open his notebook, Henry dictated what he'd written. It was detailed and yet concise . . . wasn't million miles away from the journal John had kept himself. May have even brought to mind a few early memories that were easier to find up here, memories of his father sitting at his desk, scribbling away in some notebook or typing up reports. At the time, John hadn't known that his
father was most likely involved in recording supernatural events, just that it was his dad's 'work.' When Henry was done, John said, "Might want to look into finding something a little sturdier than that, something leather bound. It needs to be able to withstand the beatings it's gonna take if you're planning on sticking around."

Closing the notebook with a snap, Henry shook his head, while putting the book in the inside lining of his suit jacket. "That's yet to be decided."

Well, it was for him. "And find something better to wear . . . something that'll allow you to move when you need to move . . . something that breathes, so you don't get too hot if the summers are really rolling in down there again."

"It's almost winter."

"Then listen to what Dean says when it comes to what you should wear for that . . . He knows what he's doing."

"All of this could be over if I go back."

"It'll never be over. There could be a million different ways it could turn out, but in almost all of them, our family is going to take a big hit. It's in the cards for us. Tell me what these other men, who look like my sons, are like."

Henry looked up at him, and said, "I didn't get to talk to them very much either, but they're not unlike your sons. The ones that look like Dean are . . . well, they're definitely hunters. They have that air to them. They dress like him, just in different colors . . . They seem like loner types, except they're close . . . much closer than you would think alpha males would be. They look to your son for guidance. He makes the ultimate decisions, but either one of them could do it . . . One of them is a vampire. He - "

John wasn't expecting that. "And they let him live?"

"As far as I can tell, they're doing everything they can to keep him from ending it all. I think one of the Deans and their angel friend, Castiel, have gone with him to find a way to make him more human than vampire, so it's easier for him."

"What's he living on?"

"Beth."

John wasn't expecting that either, but you wouldn't know it from his expression. "What do you mean Beth?"

"I mean she draws bags of blood and gives it to him."

"And my son lets her do that?"

"Her father heals her whenever she needs it, and I guess she can't die. She says it isn't because she's a nephilim, but - "

"It's not . . . She could die as easy as any of us, the last I knew. What'd she say happened?"

"God's sister did it and God won't undo it."

"Well, then that's what happened. My son may say she can't lie anymore, but she was never good at
not telling you things that were important. She might've kept some back for herself, but she had a way of telling you everything you need to know . . . This vampire . . . why are they keeping him . . . other than the fact that he looks like my son."

"He wasn't a vampire when he got here. From what I understand, there were some vampires that wanted some kind of revenge on your son and Beth, and they mistook him for your son."

Maybe his son having some decoys wasn't a bad thing. "And he's still hunting?"

"From what I understand, he is killing the monsters around their camp at night and has made it his own personal mission to be your son's body guard out on the road . . . I guess, he doesn't have his brother here with him, and he's - "

"Why not?"

"I don't have a definitive answer on that. His brother is alive, but I don't know why he left. I think someone died, and they both hold him accountable."

"Yeah, well, if that's true, that's probably why he's a vamp now. He agreed to come here thinking it was a suicide mission . . . He probably intended to die not long after he joined. He didn't stay alive to be my son's body guard. Why'd he do it?"

Henry looked down to the end of the hall and said, "On their mission, he took on the role of being Rogue's primary guardian after they all got split up and sent to different universes."

John couldn't help the laugh that escaped him. "God must know what he's doing, 'cause that'd do it . . . what about after he got turned?"

"Beth told him she had to live forever."

Uh huh. "He thinks he's the back up for my son, and I'm betting that deep down, that's why he's fighting so hard to keep my son alive. He'll do the job, but he doesn't think he can fill my son's shoes. What about the other one? There are two of them, right?"

"He's human. He left because his brother released God's sister in their universe. She destroyed everything, including his brother, but she left him as the last person alive."

"So, his brother's dead?"

"No. Beth found a way to bring him back to the same time in their lives that the vampire joined their group, because he thought his brother would let him go without question. He was wrong. His brother is apparently keeping an eye on your other son."

"That could be a problem." Before Henry could ask why, John wanted to get back to his point. "Do you see how their lives turned out? That's all you'd be giving my sons if you went back."

"But there was one universe where I didn't leave, and Sam was married and had a good career."

John looked down at the end of the hall towards his son. "And Dean?"

"Left alone to run the Men of Letters by himself . . . no prospects of a family, and I guess he and his brother weren't close."

"And that's the best scenario you can come up with for them?" Tilting his head in Dean's direction, John said, "The world may have gone to hell, but it'll more than likely go to hell in any life they
could have had. There's only one where he has this. Sam could find it too . . . It's something you and I both had. You could go back and try to have it again, but is that for you or them?"

"It'd be for you and the world."

"Well, don't do it for me. I'm good with where I am now, and I spent their lives doing what I needed to do. I had myself convinced that I was doing it for them, but I wasn't . . . As for the world, it's always going to be in trouble. Any new scenario you create by going back now would end up the same way, with the world in trouble and my sons saving it at the expense of themselves."

John paused and glanced in the direction of Dean again. His son was standing there with his back to them and had his two girls on either arm. It made him smile. Things were so much clearer this side of being dead. "But at least this way, he has that . . . can't rob him of the only chance he'll probably ever get to have it."

"In Wisconsin, the younger you said that I should go back."

John's eyes flicked towards Henry before he said, "And yet you're still here . . . Wanted to get my take on it. The younger me - he had his own family, I'm guessing?" Henry nodded, and John said, "Well, he was making what he thought was the right decision for his family. I'm making what I think is the right decision for mine. As for making things right with me . . . if you stick around for them, then I can let it go if I know that's why you never came back. They need you here now. Maybe you could give them some insight on whatever it is you know about this kind of life."

Henry sighed before ducking his head. When his eyes flicked up to John, he said, "And your mother?"

John looked behind him at the wall. "She's here."

"And when I didn't come back?"

Oh. He was more comfortable talking shop. John turned to face his Dad and said, "Wasn't easy, but she got by. Met someone else. He was good to her. He's here too. Should be interesting if you make it this far, but if there's no room at their table, you can always sit at ours."

"Table?"

"Yeah, we meet up in the Road House." John laughed before saying, "It is not your kind of a place, but when you're making plans on how to help the ones we left behind, it's a good place to meet."

Henry looked behind John at the wall blocking them from where John had been. "You're all still involved?"

"You can thank the couple at the end of the hall and my other son that's already moved over to this side for that one. As soon as he got up here, he decided to kick the rest of their asses into shape . . . been waiting to get back to it for a while now. Got any ideas on why this wall is here?"

"I do, actually. Your sons and daughter-in-law started a civil war up here. God walled you off to spare you from some of the things that were unleashed."

"Is that why Michael and Raphael are dead?"

"No. Beth used the King of Hell to kill Raphael, and that in turn also killed the King of Hell. Your son killed Michael."

"So, that just leaves Gabriel? Any idea where he is?"
"He's at their camp in South Dakota. I have yet to make it that far. I did see him once though, when he was dropping Rogue off. He appears to mean a great deal to them . . . Bringing her along was for my benefit, wasn't it?"

John smiled again. "I'm sure it was. It worked too, didn't it?"

"Perhaps . . . I have another grandson?"

"You do. I wasn't a monk after Mary died. He made it a lot further than I would have thought. 3 years past when he was supposed to die."

"How? If that was his time, then - "

"How are you still alive? From what I understand, your time was supposed to be up a couple of days after you landed in the future."

"I may have had some help."

"Well, keep taking it and make each day count."

"Why do I feel like you're the one giving me advice I should have been giving you?"

"Well, I am older than you . . . had a lot more life experience. One thing I can't figure out though."

Henry, looking like he genuinely wanted to help, asked, "What?"

"How I'm supposed to get back on the other side of this wall. I'm guessing they didn't plan that far ahead when they plucked me out of there."

"They didn't - "

"He might not have, but I guarantee she had something to do with it." Raising his voice to get his son's attention, John asked how he was supposed to get back, and sure enough, Dean looked to Beth for the answer on that one.

"Uh, well . . . I was thinking we might have to tunnel our way under?" Yeah, she hadn't planned this out.

"With what?"

"I don't know. I used my fingers and stones when I tunneled out of my cell, or I did until I could find other things that I could use . . . I was thinking we could get some help . . . some angelic help, and they could bring the right tools. They'll need to secure this side of Heaven anyway before we're done. There could still be demons roaming around up here, and it wouldn't do to have them get in there, but if Sam's going to be curing Croats, all those souls are going to have to have somewhere to go. They can't all just hang out in the veil. Plus, it's a good project for us to all work on together."

Nudging her with his elbow, Dean whispered, "What about Cas? That'll give him his mojo back, right? He doesn't want that."

"He'll figure it out, like the rest of us have. And if we ask him to come help us, then he'll know beforehand, and it won't catch him off guard."

Dean's eyes narrowed, while he watched her. "You already prayed for that angelic help, didn't you?"
"Well, I was going to leave him for you. Gadreel, Hael, and Hannah should be on their way though."

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!