

# Supernatural: Redemption Road



## Volume Four

Virtual Season 7, Episodes 21-24

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# Episode 21: The Sprinting Dead

Author: Nyoka

**Characters/Pairing:** Dean/Castiel, Sam, OCs






**Rating:** NC-17

**Word Count:** ~54,5000

**Warnings:** language, sexuality for Part I

**Beta:**  [zatnikatel](#)

**Author's Notes:** A million hugs of gratitude to my amazing artists for sticking it out for this chapter despite the crazy summer, and for their patience and inspiring work.

**Art:** Chapter cover and digital designs by  [animotus](#), which you can also find [here](#); digital painting by  [smallworld\\_inc](#), which you can also find [here](#); digital paintings by  [slinkymilinky](#), which you can also find [here](#); digital paintings by  [ammo](#), which you can also find [here](#); and digital paintings by  [kuma\\_la\\_la](#), which you can also find [here](#) (all art contains spoilers for the episode).

**Summary:** *In a jungle of long-ago mystery, Dean and Castiel grow closer as the world around them begins to spin out of control.*



"Thus you may understand that love alone  
is the true seed of every merit in you,  
and of all acts for which you must atone."  
—Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*

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## I. The Call

*In the Air over the South Pacific  
Fifteen Miles North of Easter Island*

Dean slides a shaky hand over his thigh, fingers nervously drumming along to the hard rhythm of *Master of Puppets* spilling out of the earphones of Sam's iPod. His brother had passed him the music player once they were airborne, probably figuring it was the most effective way of calming Dean down. Dean sucks in a deep breath, eyes squeezing shut tight just as the lyrics fill his head: *Hell is worth all that, natural habitat. Just a rhyme without a reason. Never-ending maze, drift on numbered days. Now your life is out of season.*

Dean opens his eyes when he feels Castiel squeeze his hand. The angel's seated on Dean's right, his long body leaning in toward Dean as if offering protection, and Dean shoots him a thankful smile before pressing his head back against the headrest and humming softly to himself. The window to his left shows only wide-blue sky. He's seen the same thing for the last thousand miles – the last three hours – and he doesn't really feel any need to see it again. Dean turns his head away.

The problem is that the charter plane is too damn small and too damn cramped, and they've been in the air for *way* too damn long, as far as Dean's concerned. In the seat across from him, Sam's smiling to himself, oblivious and unconcerned, geeking out to his giant world atlas, which showcases the glossy shine of remote Polynesian islands scattered in a sea of infinite blue every time he turns the page. Dean sighs; at least someone seems to be enjoying their little misadventure.

When the plane rocks around him, Castiel squeezes Dean's hand tighter. Dean breathes in and out, sucking in deep breath after breath for several moments, feeling like some kind of lamaze coach. Or maybe Castiel is the coach, and Dean's the one going into labor. Fuck it, Dean groans, turning off the music and dumping the iPod at his feet. It's not working anyway. He lets his gaze fall out of the window again, onto the expanse of blue ocean rolling out beneath them.

He really friggin' hates planes. Especially these small little-bitty ones they've been hopping around in since they left Brazil. They were able to dump the German tour group at their stop-over in Santiago de Chile, before boarding what Dean assumes is some kind of small smuggler craft. Their pilot, Raúl, is a friend of Harper's, and he'd been traveling with a crate of weapons, everything Sam, Dean, and Castiel would need to kick some serious monster ass in the near future.

Dean turns away from the window, and tries *not* to think about hurtling two-thousand feet above the

Pacific. It's a five-hour flight, and it's been bumpy the entire way going. They're in a four-seater, single-engine Cessna 172 Skyhawk, and Dean knows enough about machines to know this one is older than dirt, probably held together with duct-tape, spit and a prayer. It's noisy too, the engine's racket drowning out most attempts at conversation. It's just the four of them now, and Raúl tosses Dean a thumbs-up every time he straightens the tiny plane out after it lurches unexpectedly. Dean grunts and squirms in his seat.

"We'll be landing shortly," Castiel whispers in Dean's ear, hand squeezing Dean's again. It's weird to be the one being mother-henned, because Dean's so used to being the one looking out for people. But he knows Cas has got his back, and for once he's able to let loose a deep breath and sink lower in his seat. He's managed to keep his lunch so far, so at least he has that much going for him. Since taking off from Santiago, they've made only one fuel stop – on a small, remote South Pacific island with a landing strip hacked into a grassy field. Needless to say, Dean had not been impressed.

"Still don't know why we couldn't have driven," Dean groans, purposely pouting.

Castiel's lips curl softly as he teases the fingers of their joined hands together. "Because even the Impala is not *badass* enough to drive over two thousand miles of sea."

Sam snickers from across the way, tossing his giant atlas aside and picking up one of the books he'd brought with him. "This contact we're meeting sounds awesome. Modern-day Indiana-Jones type. She wrote this book," Sam pauses, holding up the tattered hardback in his hand, "about the use of magic in the modern age. It's fascinating."

Dean rolls his eyes, sighs wearily. "Thank you, Professor Winchester."

As if on cue, the plane lurches forward again, Sam chuckles, and Castiel kisses Dean's cheek to comfort him. Fuck everything, Dean sighs, closes his eyes, and hums *Fade to Black*.

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The late afternoon sunlight flashes across the still water, and in the distance Dean can see the curved outline of the island, the lush, rugged green coast welcoming visitors to what could easily be the edge of the world.

"Easter Island is thought to be the most remote inhabited island in the world," Sam's saying with nerd-boy glee as he unbuckles his seatbelt. Dean grunts and works to steady his shaking hands in order to unhook his own seatbelt. A moment before, the tiny plane had touched down on a private dirt airstrip outside the port town of Hanga Roa.

"Bienvenidos a Rapa Nui!" Raúl says cheerily from the pilot seat once the engine finally cuts off, and Dean feels like he can actually breathe again.

"Dude, we so have to see the Rano Kau," Sam says, a big goofy smile covering his face as he waggles his *Lonely Planet* guidebook at Dean.



"Is that some kind of kinky porn?" Dean squints at his brother skeptically. "Should I warn Mira?"

Sam flips him the bird and begins packing his books back into his backpack. Castiel is laughing at them softly, running his hand up and down Dean's arm, a gesture that Dean maybe likes a little too much. "I remember when that volcano last erupted," Castiel comments. "It was magnificent. The ash blackened the sky for almost a year."

Dean tenses, brows arching. "It's not still active, right?"

Castiel shuffles his bookbag onto his back and begins to slowly exit the plane behind Sam. "Not for more than five thousand years," he says with an assuring smile.

"Dude, sometimes I forget you are *so* friggin' old," Dean huffs, climbing down from the plane behind Castiel and breathing in the fresh, oxygen-rich island air. He looks around at the bumpy dirt runway, frowning at the fact that they seem to have landed on yet another airstrip in the middle of nowhere.

"How old are you exactly, Cas?" Sam says, helping Raúl to unload the rest of the duffle bags and the container of smuggled weapons from the plane.

Castiel looks at Sam for a moment, smiling mysteriously. "*Old*."

Dean snorts and stands beside Castiel, watching Raúl perform his routine check of the plane. Happy to no longer be trapped in that thing while in the air, Dean closes his eyes and lets himself readjust to the feel of solid ground under his boots. The temperature is mild, and a gusty breeze is coming in from the sea, drying the sweat on Dean's skin.

"So what now?" Sam asks, dumping his duffle bag full of research at his feet and standing on Dean's right side.

Turning from the plane, Dean surveys the desolate landing site, trying to get their bearings after being in the air for so long. Miles of grassy fields surround them on all sides in what Raúl had called an old, abandoned sugar plantation.

Eyes panning over the expanse of remote countryside, Dean takes in the broad, summer-green hills that hug the shores of the white-sand beaches he'd seen from the air.

"I think that mountain to the west must be Rano Kau," Sam says, holding out a map and locating their coordinates.

In the far distance, Dean hears the sound of an old engine, and he cocks his head toward the hills for a long moment before he sees what he'd been listening for.

"The welcoming party," he says, pointing to the sky-blue Land Rover turning the corner of the dirt road, kicking up dust and bumping over the rocky terrain.

When the vehicle grounds to a halt a few feet in front of them, Castiel goes tense, and Dean waits a beat before putting his hand on Sam's shoulder to prevent any forward motion.

They wait another moment, and then the driver's-side window rolls down all the way, and a woman sticks her head out, a broad smile working its way across her face. She pushes her shades up, settling them atop her head, and says, "Sorry I'm late, gentlemen. I got caught up giving a video lecture to a group of researchers from the University of Hawaii on the impact of ancient gods on modern religion."

"Professor Eloni Nam'ulu?" Sam says, stepping forward and circling toward the driver's side.

"That's me," she says and jumps out of the Land Rover, her big boots kicking up sand and dust as they hit the ground. She's short, not more than 5'3, and her sun-browned legs extend from rumpled khaki shorts. She strides purposely toward them and shakes all of their hands as they introduce themselves.

Dean thinks back to all the info Harper had shared about their contact. Professor Nam'ulu is a renowned archaeologist and ethnologist in her early fifties. She's on sabbatical from Oxford, and she's written extensively about Cthulhu cults. Lucky for them, she'd been tracking the weird happenings across the world and has followed the movements of one particular Cthulhu cult across the islands of the South Pacific.

Dean eyes her for a long moment, taking her in. She's rugged in appearance, her voice whiskey-rough as she chats in Spanish with Raúl. She has a full, heart-shaped face with olive skin and thick salt-and-pepper hair twisted up into a sloppy bun. Something about her reminds him a bit of Ellen, or maybe Jody Mills. She seems to have the kind of smile that eases tension, calms nerves, and hints at a wellspring of inner-strength.

"So, you're actually hunting Cthulhu?" she says, her words interrupting Dean's thoughts as she turns to meet his gaze head-on.

Dean responds with a shrug. "Something like that. Looking for a weapon that could stop him."

Eloni shakes her head, eyes closing for a moment before she turns to look at each of them. "I've been fearing this moment would come. All the signs...all the cult activity."

"So you know he's real?" Sam says, brow creasing.

Eloni sighs softly and says, "Spend most of your life digging up ancient civilizations and your outlook on what's 'real' changes. There's evidence of something like Cthulhu going back thousands of years. This is no fairy tale, gentlemen."

"Many myths and legends have an origin in something real," Castiel says, and Dean smiles at that because, hello, *angel*.

They move quickly then, loading themselves and their bags into Eloni's Land Rover, which she expertly maneuvers back onto the road with no wasted time. The sun is high in the sky as they take the winding dirt road past another farm, and up into the foothills of one of the mountains, its rocky peaks rising lava-brown against the clear sky.

Castiel pushes close to Dean in the backseat, and takes Dean's hand in his own. They've been doing this



a lot, joining hands every chance they can, pulling themselves closer together in some way, an outward symbol of what they've always known to be true deep down: every part of them is linked, bound together in this crazy way Dean doesn't have a name for.

Dean glances out at the rolling water of the South Pacific. Maybe theirs is a connection that runs as deep as the ocean.

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Twenty minutes later, Sam's tracking their path on the map he's carrying. They're following the main road that winds along the coastline of the island, cows and horses dotting the green hills they pass. The road's unpaved, uneven, and potholed, and it sends the Land Rover bouncing with every mile.

"Think we'll have time to see the giant Moai statues?" Sam asks, twisting his head to take in more of the countryside, his long hair blowing with the wind.

"We head out tomorrow morning," Eloni says, raising her voice to be heard over the vehicle's engine. "But maybe you can spend a couple of extra days here before you head back to the States. The history of this island is a history of a people that survived against remarkable odds."

"They were so cut off from the world," Sam says, recalling what he read in the guidebook.

"It was what sped up the end for them. When they no longer had trees or resources, they were trapped here," Eloni says. "It's a tale of caution, in many ways. You can see pictures carved in the cave walls, depicting people's dreams of escape. Pictures of birds flying toward the sky. With no wood left to build boats, all the Rapa Nui people could do was look enviously at the birds that sailed effortlessly through the sky. All they could do was dream of flying."

Castiel clears his throat, and Sam turns to see Dean running his hand along the curve of the angel's back, where his wings would be if visible, and it's a motion that Sam knows is meant to give comfort. He smiles, wonders if his brother will ever admit to being in love with Cas.

"We're headed toward Pukao now, a beach on the north side of the island, which is where I am renting a home," Eloni explains. "We'll stay there tonight and then set sail out of the main harbor at Hanga Roa in the morning."

The road twists around a hill and then past a rocky cliff that plunges down toward the ocean. Waves break hard against the rocks there, and the air smells of salt and water. Sam thinks how idyllic this would all be if he didn't know what lurked out there beneath the surf. There are little cottages dotting the island, built simply with wood harvested from the towering palms, and there's a small beach just around the next bend, a small cove of calm blue water and white sand.

It's here that Eloni heads, directing the Land Rover inland. Sam glances out of the window, at the wind raking through the tall palms, at the grass huts lining the roadside.

"This community is called *te pito o te henua*," Eloni says, the road's rocks grinding loudly under the

wheels of the vehicle as she turns into the curve. "The navel of the world."

"The middle of nowhere," Sam says as they round yet another curve, following the uphill slope.

"So a question then: where can a guy get a cheeseburger out here?" Dean says from the backseat, and Sam rolls his eyes, shooting his brother a dirty look.

"I saw cows on the hill two miles back," Castiel says, tone thoughtful.

Sam snickers, wondering if this was Castiel's way of offering to provide for Dean. "Seriously, guys?" he asks, exasperated.

"No need to scare the cows, Castiel," Eloni says, smiling from the driver's seat. "I've got food covered."

Dean whoops in satisfaction, and Sam grunts, glancing out of the dusty windshield, eyes widening as the vehicle rounds up a long, curved driveway. Before them the trees part to reveal an immense clearing, backdropped by the cloudless blue sky and lush volcanic hills. In the clearing itself is a sprawling two-story hacienda shaded by palm trees and edged by a landscaped lawn.

The Land Rover continues to wind up the gravel driveway before coming to a stop at the top of the circular drive. Sam manages to close his mouth when the engine cuts off. "Um, wow," he says.

Eloni smiles, shrugging. "One of the perks of finding long lost treasures: governments like to put you up in style, and museums pay very, very well."

Sam chuckles, turning to take in the rest of the villa. The house is made of white stucco and red hand-etched clay tiles, and the entrance is flanked by white marble columns. Orange and red tropical flowers add a burst of color to the scene; they crawl alongside vines up the ornate archway that leads to the front door. Palms dot the lawn, swaying gently with the breeze.

They sit there gaping at the house for a long moment, before the tall, wooden front doors fall open, and a lanky teenager walks out to greet them.

"Everyone, this is my son, Tukuah," Eloni introduces as she climbs out of the Land Rover, Sam, Dean, and Castiel slowly piling out behind her.

The boy's taller than Eloni, with a lean, wiry body and big hands he hasn't quite grown into. He has to dip his head as Eloni leans in to kiss his cheek. She ruffles his curly, dark hair as she pulls away, and asks, "Everything in order for our guests?"

"I've set up everything in your study," he says, nodding at his mother before turning a shy, dimpled smile on Sam, Dean, and Castiel. "Welcome to our home. You can call me Tuk."

"It's an awesome-looking house," Sam says, shaking the boy's proffered hand.

"Wait 'til you see the inside," Tuk says with a smile, motioning for them to follow him.

Sam, Dean, and Castiel quickly unload the vehicle, and arms laden with duffle bags, they follow Eloni and Tuk past a grand fountain and stone steps, and through the main entrance to the house. The entranceway opens into a foyer with elegant ornamentation, and they all pause here for a moment as Eloni whispers, "*Hekai ite umu pare haonga takapu Hanau epe kai noruego.*"

Sam frowns, nudging Cas. "What's she saying?" he asks, voice low.

"It's a prayer recited to appease the spirit guardian of the home," Castiel says quietly. "A chant passed down from the original inhabitants of the island, when they dwelled in its caves."

"Oh, cool," Sam says, recalling reading something about the tradition in the history book he skimmed about the cultures of Easter Island.

"Dude, this place is friggin' ginormous," Dean says from next to him, bringing Sam back to the moment.

Sam nods, humming as he takes in the wide expanse of the luxuriously decorated living room. Sunlight streams through the large picture windows, bouncing off the crystal chandeliers. In the hallway, the whitewashed walls are covered with paintings, while sculptures and art pieces decorate shelves and tables, displaying an array of world cultures that Sam feels the need to stop and investigate at every turn.

Dean shoots him a "you're such a geek-boy" look that Sam takes in stride, because there are masterworks of art in this house, and he has no shame in *geeking* out over them. Plus, he's feeling good. Like, really *good*. He's gone weeks without Lucifer daymares, and exercise and meditation have helped him to feel more centered in his body. When Mira first introduced him to a new plan of intense mind-body healing practices she first learned at the hands of Buddhist monks in Nepal, Sam had been skeptical. But during the past three weeks, whenever she stayed over, they'd been getting up early and doing two hours of deep meditation and yoga that worked to calm the mind. It wasn't a cure-all, nothing would ever be. But combined with the right mix of medicine, herbal teas, and the techniques he'd picked up from Jody and her books, Sam has been managing his attacks better. He and Dean probably both need years (no, make that *decades*) of heavy counseling and other treatment, but for now they were keeping each other going, keeping each other human: making sure they don't get lost in the sharp-edged, dark corners of their memories.

Sam turns to look behind him. The rear of the house opens up with patio doors that lead down to an Olympic-size pool, surrounded by dark adobe tiles. Beyond the pool is a wide expanse of green lawn and then the ocean going into the distance. Not for the first time, Sam wishes he hadn't talked Mira out of taking this trip with them. But she's back at home, working with Tamara, Missouri, Bobby, and every other hunter in their inner-circle to keep the world in one piece while Sam, Dean, and Castiel go treasure hunting. Damn, he would have liked to take her skinny-dipping in that pool though, and from the look on Dean's face, Sam knows his brother is thinking the same thing in regards to Cas. Sam smiles at the Winchester brothers' newfound priorities.

Sam can only shake his head, a small chuckle passing his lips as he makes his way down the hall behind Castiel and his brother. It's been a long while since he and Dean have both been this wound up

in other people, and not just each other. It feels like their little world is expanding bit by bit. It feels good.

Sam notices that the deep interior of the house smells of burning herbs and oil, which give off a warm, familiar scent. He looks around for the source of it and sees a bowl filled with leaves and dried flowers situated on an altar at the end of the hallway.

"Harper didn't tell us you practiced," Sam says carefully, shooting Dean a look, knowing how his brother feels about witches.

"You're a witch?" Dean asks, voice sliding sharp with distrust.

"I only work on the light's side, gentlemen," Eloni says, turning to look at them. They're standing in front of the wide, sweeping staircase, preparing to ascend.

Tuk places a hand on his mother's shoulder and adds, "It helps us with our work."

"Meaning?" Dean says lowly.

"It's alright, Dean. I only sense benevolent energies in the house," Castiel breaks in, his voice a soft rumble. "The magic practiced here is one of protection and guidance."

Eloni looks at Castiel, eyebrows arching. "Do you have the second sight, Castiel?"

Castiel frowns, tilting his head. "I don't know? I do have many sights. I'm...I *was* an angel of the Lord."

Eloni's mouth drops open, but Dean clears his throat loudly, cutting in to say, "Uh, so, yeah, Professor it's good to hear that you're Glinda the Good Witch and all. Me and Sammy haven't had the best experiences in the past."

Eloni seems to ease up at that, and Sam is grateful. "I understand," she says. "Spellcasting helps me in my day job. When I'm seeking artifacts, locator spells and protection spells ensure that I am able to do my job safely."

"And sometimes we have to break curses," Tuk adds as he begins to climb the grand staircase. "You'd be surprised how many dig sites we arrive at only to find objects that are covered with old curses."

"So all the old stories about cursed tombs are true?" Sam asks, eyeing the top of the stairs. Two wings of the house spread out on either side of the staircase, and Eloni and Tuk begin to lead them down the left wing.

"Most of the old stories about most everything are true," Eloni says with a smirk, echoing Castiel's words from earlier.

Sam laughs, nodding. If there's one thing he's learned on the job, it's that. He peeks into one of the first bedrooms, eyes widening. The room is almost as big as most one-bedroom apartments he and Dean

have stayed in over the years. In fact, the rooms are actually more like suites, and there appears to be a large balcony attached to each one.

"You all will have this wing of the house to yourself. Any bedroom is yours for the duration of your stay," Eloni says.

The room Sam finally dumps his stuff in is pretty sweet. Nicely decorated with dark wood furniture and modern art, with floor-to-ceiling windows along the far wall that overlook the grounds. Plus, the king-sized bed looks big enough for all of Sam's limbs.

Dean and Castiel choose a room a couple of doors down, and Sam smiles because he is more than happy to not have to be scarred for life anymore by the noises he hears radiating from their bedroom at night, thank you very much. He heads into their room and whistles at the view. It's incredible: white sandy beaches with the ocean stretching off into the horizon.

"When we kill this sonofabitch, we're taking a much needed vacation here, man," Dean says, collapsing spread-eagle-style on the bed and sinking his head down into the downy, silk-covered pillows.

Castiel sits beside him on the bed, smiling down at Dean, whispering, "I'd like that."

Sam smirks at the display, unable to resist adding: "Or you guys can just come here for your honeymoon."

Dean flips him the bird and mutters, "Bond chick."

"Wholphins," Sam retorts with a laugh, and damn, Cthulhu-apocalypse or not, it feels good to laugh like this again.

"Rest yourself, gentlemen," Eloni says from the doorway, smiling at them indulgently. "Make yourselves at home, the house is yours. If you are able, please meet me downstairs for four o'clock. I can show you my research."

Glancing at his watch, Sam takes that as his cue to head back to his room. He has two hours. Time enough for a shower, a nap, and a catch-up call to Mira. Oh, and maybe a dip in the hot tub he saw down by the pool.

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"Tell me something, Cas," Dean says, because this place is incredible, and brings back all those dreams he had when he was twelve and wanted to be Indiana Jones. "Is this sort of like looking through an old photo album?"

Castiel runs his hand along Dean's lower back before stepping around him to eye the ancient relics covering the table. "It's strange to see things I once saw in their prime, eroded by time," he says after a beat. "It's not something I used to think about. But now, I look around and think of the limited amount of time humans experience here on Earth."

Dean sucks in a sharp breath and winds his hand around Castiel's waist. "You need to think about cheerier things, man."

Castiel meets his eyes and smiles. "If it makes you feel better, I often think about you," he says simply.

Dean feels his face heat up and turns away to look across the room to where his brother and Tuk are pulling books off of one of the shelves. They're currently on the bottom floor of Eloni's villa in a private study the size of most libraries. It houses Eloni's research and private collections, and in many ways this place could be called a private museum, with its rows of dark wooden cabinetry displaying relics and artifacts from around the world.

Floor-to-ceiling dark mahogany bookcases line the walls, crammed with hundreds of books on history, lore, and the supernatural. Dean explores, running his hands along the bookshelves, his hunter instincts telling him to make note of all the books he might need for future reference. Dean definitely wants to introduce Bobby to Eloni because he thinks maybe these two were meant for each other.

While Castiel moves to look around further, Dean follows the row of artifacts before him, a mix of ancient masks, hand-carved wooden statues, tools, weapons, and pottery. Dean pauses for a moment, eyeing one particular mask sitting on a shelf, his hand instinctively running over his amulet. The bronze mask sort of resembles it, a human head with bull-like horns.

"Hey Eloni," Dean says, finding her at a nearby shelf.

Eloni looks up from the copper plate she had been reaching for. "See anything that you like?"

He points to the mask, asking, "What's the story on that? It kind of looks like my bronze charm."

Eloni steps closer to Dean, taking his necklace between her fingers and examining the amulet for a long moment. "I've never been sure of the exact origins of my mask, since horned gods appear in many ancient cultures. I would guess that the one you're wearing is an Egyptian protection deity," Eloni says, stepping back to pick up her mask from the shelf and examine it. "This is something much older. I've always thought this mask was a Sumerian warrior."

"Does it burn hot in the presence of God?" Dean asks, smirking.

Eloni shoots Dean a curious look. "I highly doubt it."

"Then mine is still cooler," Dean says, shrugging. "Mostly though, cuz Sammy gave it to me. Speaking of my brother..." He turns to see Sam pretty much humping a bookshelf as he makes orgasm faces at being near so many old books.

"He's definitely enjoying himself," Eloni says with a soft laugh.

Dean grunts, shaking his head. "A little too much if you ask me, but hey, to each his own."

Eloni pats Dean on his back before making her way over to her son. Before following, Dean pauses to

take another close look at one of the artifacts in the cabinet in front of him, a stone carving depicting some kind of joining between man and woman. *Kinky*.

"That one's a fertility idol from Atlantis." Castiel's warm rumble distracts Dean from trying to figure out the spiral symbol carved into the bottom of the stone guy's mammoth-sized dick. Dean turns his head; the angel is standing along his back, his breath pressing warm against Dean's cheek, and looking intensely at the display.

"Are you telling me that *Atlantis* was real?" Dean asks, skeptical.

Castiel looks up at Dean, his frown deepening. "Of course it was real."

Dean huffs out a breath and shakes his head. "Cas there are just some things you need to ease a guy into."

"Is this about your sex life again?" Sam interrupts, coming up from behind them and frowning at Dean like he just tasted something gross.

Dean groans, and Castiel shakes his head. "No, although Dean and I are taking it slow," the angel says quietly.

Sam's eyes widen. "Okay, way too much information for me," he mutters and turns around to head back across the room.

"Cas, what did I tell you about scaring Sam away with stuff like that?" Dean asks, shaking his head and trying not to laugh.

"Be comforted by the fact that he doesn't look as troubled as the time he walked in while Mira and I were discussing the Kama Sutra's use of Tantra," Castiel assures.

"Wait what? As in *tantric* sex?" Dean says, because *wait, what?*

Castiel shrugs. "She'd been exploring the connection between spirituality, worship and sex, and had questions about how humans could tap into tantric energy for not only pleasure, but spiritual awakening and healing. She and Sam had been practicing deep meditation and she wanted to bring that ritual into all of their day-to-day—"

"Wait, please don't say anything else," Dean cuts in, crying on the inside. He has to shake it off. though, so he continues, "Anyway, sex is sex, Cas. We don't need all that hoodoo magic added to it."

Castiel looks up at Dean, a curious expression on his face. "You're made uncomfortable by this, I see," he says, voice soft with understanding. He looks at Dean for a long, searching moment, and Dean feels like pulling his eyes away, embarrassed, but before he does, Castiel adds, "Dean, there's actually nothing to feel shame about. I understand that humans rarely like to connect their unions to spiritual expression, to a sacred act. Even for my brothers and sisters here on Earth, they often had sex as their human vessels had sex, without connecting it to the sort of divine expression angels shared with each other when we joined in our true forms."



Dean lowers his voice and asks, "So angels do have sex? I mean, I *know* you all can have sex when you're in human bodies, which actually still kind of weirds me out. But, like when you're all multi-dimensional wavelengths and stuff? You have sex like that?" He'd always wondered what that would be like for them.

"Although I've never had the occasion," Castiel says, smiling softly, probably thinking back to the first time Dean had asked him the question, and the resulting failed experiment at trying to get him laid at a brothel. Dean sometimes has the worst ideas. "But yes, we have what is more closely akin to spiritual communion. We experience each other, but also through each other, we experience the divine, the essential oneness of ourselves with our Father's creation."

"Huh," Dean says, because that seems pretty intense. In truth, sex with Castiel has been among the most intense experiences he's ever had in the bedroom, but the thought of connecting on an even *deeper* level kind of freaks him out.

Castiel is smiling at him, knowingly. "Dean if you'd like, I can introduce you to Tantra. It simply involves tapping into the full expression of our existence, a merging with our combined sexual energies."

"Seriously, guys, are you *really* still going on about your sex life?" Sam says, reappearing at Dean's side with an armful of books. He shoots them both scandalized looks before saying, "Mind helping us out over there with the research instead?"

Dean happily obliges, shooting Cas a 'please behave' look before following his brother to the large oak table in the center of the room.

"You gotta admit, this place is pretty cool," Sam tells Dean as all three of them take their seats around the table.

"I could tell by the fact you were making orgasm faces at the books," Dean quips, waggling his brows at his baby brother.

Sam shoots him one of his *looks*, before rolling his eyes at Dean and continuing to whisper sweet-nothings to the 200-year-old copy of *One Thousand and One Nights* in his hand.

Castiel sits close beside Dean, craning his neck to gaze up into the shadows of the room. "This room is heavily warded," the angel says quietly. "Eloni has done well in protecting her work."

"It's why my son and I have used this place as our base of operation for the past three months, making the move from Chile to here. It allows me the privacy I need to track the Cthulhu cults moving across South America and the South Pacific," Eloni says, joining them at the table. She unrolls a giant map across the surface, and Tuk appears at her side, placing books at each corner of the map to hold it open.

While Tuk takes a seat at the table, Eloni continues to speak. "I didn't make the link between the chain of events happening globally until I started tracking the cults' activities. The disappearances, the strange signs, the cosmic upset – from all that I've researched, they are portents of the Beast's rise. The cults

know it too, and they've been making arrangements across the world, especially here in the South Pacific islands, to prepare its way."

"That's why shit's been so bad all over," Dean says, voice coming out thicker than he'd expected.

"The cults are using very old rituals and magic," Eloni says quietly. "Things that I've only heard of in legend."

"In many ways this is a time of legend," Castiel says, voice booming loud and ominous in the solemn quiet of the room. Dean turns to look at Cas, but the angel's eyes are glazed over, his face lost in thought.

Sam throws Dean a curious look, but Dean can only shrug. Sam turns to look at Eloni and says, "Professor, we know Harper filled you in about our plan." He pauses, running his finger along the spine of another one of the tomes he'd been examining. "We need to locate a specific artifact. Along with an artifact we already located in Brazil, our sources say it could help us to stop Cthulhu."

"Hastur's weapons," Eloni says, nodding her head. "I'd heard of the legend so long ago, but when Harper spoke of the sword you'd found, I just knew it had to be the same ones. He asked me if I knew how to use the sword. But I told him I could do something better: find the other artifact."

"That's exactly what we need," Sam says, voice eager.

Eloni runs a hand over the map, fingers trailing across the expanse of the Pacific. "It's said that Hastur made three weapons powerful enough to be used by his followers against Cthulhu," she explains. "Each on their own, or combined together, could do damage to the Beast. Even kill him. Or so the legend says."

"We lost the dagger," Castiel says, voice low with regret, as he reenters the conversation. "So there are only the two remaining."

Dean touches Castiel's knee under the table, looks at Eloni, and says, "And we're hoping the two remaining weapons will be enough to stop him."

Sam voice is quiet, tense, when he asks, "So you can help us locate the third?"

"I can," Eloni says, looking at them all for a long moment. "But there's one more thing you'll need once you attain Hastur's artifacts." She motions for Tuk to retrieve something from one of her locked cabinets.

A couple of minutes pass, and Dean's legs begin bouncing up and down in anticipation. Castiel traces a hand over his thigh, and Dean feels himself calming immediately.

"What is that?" Sam asks when Tuk finally sets a large book down in the center of the table. It had to weight a few pounds.

Tuk smiles wide and answers, "*The Necronomicon*."

Sam frowns, throwing a skeptical glance at the book. "That's just fiction."

"Yeah, Lovecraft made it up," Dean agrees, taking in the aged, weathered cover of the book. The book is bound shut by metal clasps, and its dark-brown leather hide looks almost like tanned human skin. The symbol on the cover is so rusted it is hard to make out.

"You come here chasing Cthulhu and you're going on about fiction?" Eloni says, huffing out a disbelieving laugh. She leans over the table and looks down at the heavy grimoire for a long moment, running her hand over the symbol on the cover. "No, this is the real thing. The one that inspired Lovecraft's fictional grimoire that goes by the same name. This is *the book* that Lovecraft based all his stories on."

"Well, shit," Dean breathes out, looking at the aged and beaten cover again, this time with wonder. "That's definitely something we didn't come across at Visyak's place."

"Dr. Eleanor Visyak?" Eloni says, brown eyes widening in surprise.

"Yeah, did you know her?" Sam asks, voice curious.

"I did," Eloni nods. "She taught Medieval Studies at San Francisco University. I ran across her many times in my career. We traveled in the same academic occultist circles, you might say. She'd been looking for a copy of this text for a long time, in fact, but I never revealed to her that I had one of the only copies still surviving on Earth. There was something about her that I just didn't trust. I could sense the black magic coming off of her."

Sam snorts, adding under his breath so that only Dean and Cas could hear, "Probably because she was a nine hundred-year-old monster from Purgatory."

Castiel shifts at Dean's side, and Dean places a hand on his thigh again. Dean knows that Cas is probably thinking about what he did to her in order to gain access to the spell that would open the doorway to Purgatory. It was her blood that Cas used to draw the ritual's sigils on the wall. Dean shakes away the thought and turns his eyes to the old book. "What is it that we need from this book anyway?"

"A spell," Eloni says, opening the book to reveal weathered, yellowing pages filled with small text, sketches, drawings, and sigils.

Dean feels his throat tighten, his neck prickling. "Another one. Of course," he mumbles.

"There's a specific ritual needed to wield the weapons?" Castiel asks, moving his hands toward the book.

"A very powerful one that you'll need to perform before using the artifacts," Eloni says, pushing the book toward Castiel before continuing with, "The book tells the histories of Hastur and Cthulhu. It also provides the spell and a map for where the artifacts are located."

"Why has no one located all of this before?" Sam asks, frowning. "If the book contains this kind of

information..."

"Because like you said, Sam, everyone thinks this is fiction," Eloni says, exhaling a tired breath and shaking her head. "There are only five copies of the real *Necronomicon* in existence. No one believed Cthulhu would rise because no one believed he even existed."

"No one but his followers," Dean says, running a hand through his hair and groaning in frustration. He sits back in his seat and turns to watch Castiel peel back the pages of the book carefully, fully absorbed in his reading.

"Lovecraft did a good job of hoodwinking all of us," Eloni says quietly.

Dean shakes his head again, as if he can shake the craziness of this moment away. He attempts to throw a grateful smile toward Tuk and Eloni, but his lips manage to only curl into a sad grimace. "We really appreciate your help," he says anyway, frowning at the roughness in his voice.

"I didn't know what to do with all this information," Eloni admits. "I've been sitting on this all, at a loss as the world around us goes mad. But when Jonas called, it all made sense. It's like I've been waiting here for you, compiling this all because you were meant to find it."

"Fate," Castiel says, huffing a breath, but never raising his head from the book.

Dean clenches his jaw. "Or something," he murmurs. Cas touches the small of Dean's back, and Dean can still feel the imprint of his hand long after he moves it.

Sam leans forward then, steepling his hands under his chin as he looks at Eloni. "Professor, how did you even get involved with all of this?" he asks, in the sort of curious tone that Dean suspects he used on all his professors back at Stanford.

"I inherited my father's obsession," she says, lips curling sadly.

Dean shoots Sam a pointed look, because, well, yeah, that's something they both know a hell of a lot about. He clears his throat and asks, "How so?"

"My father was an academic like myself," she explains, voice sobering. "He taught history and civilization for over twenty years before he started concentrating exclusively on word religion. He was researching comparative demonology across cultures for a journal article he'd planned to publish. And well, one day he met himself a real demon." She pauses, takes a deep breath and looks at them all steadily. "He survived the possession, fortunately. Unfortunately he became a true believer in the supernatural, and that is what really destroyed him. You see, he tried to tell his colleagues about his experience, but they all thought he'd gone crazy. My father would insist to them: 'These things are real,' he'd say. 'We must do something!'" Eloni quirks her lips in a sad smile, shaking her head. "He lost his tenure, his funding, and his family. It ruined him."

"But you believed him?" Sam asks.

"Not at the time," Eloni says, exhaling deeply. "I thought he was a crazy loon like everyone else did. I

hated him in fact, blamed him for destroying our family, breaking my mother's heart. But years later, after he died, I came across boxes of his old research. The things he talked about...they blew my mind. I was in grad school at the time, and it gave me the freedom to look into a lot of what my father had been researching before his death. Look long enough, and you will find the truth."

"True enough," Dean says on a quiet exhale. "Most people though...they don't want to see what's right in front of them. They rather lie to themselves than believe in this stuff."

"The thing about doing the work that I do," Eloni says, turning to glance at Tuk, who's watching her quietly. "The work that Tuk and I do together as a family," she corrects with a smile. "We see all the ways that human society has tried to deal with our boogiemans. Myth and legend, folklore and fairytale. Religion itself. Just words we use to talk about things that the historical record doesn't know what to do with. To talk about the mystery of our creation. Tuk and I, we go where the mystery is."

"Aren't you freaked out by the stuff you find there?" Sam asks, sounding genuinely curious.

"Every damn day," Eloni says, laughing softly. "Every damn day."

"You are brave to do this work," Castiel says, looking up for the first time in a long while. He turns to regard all of them when he says, "This book is very old, very powerful magic, some of which I have not seen used in thousands of years."

Eloni cants her head, expression wry. "How old are you exactly, Mr. *Angel of the Lord*?" she asks, her voice a low tease.

Dean, Sam, and Castiel all answer at the same time, laughing: "*Old*."

Eloni arches a brow. "Okay, then," she says, smirking and sitting back in her chair. "What other questions do you have for me?"

Sam reaches out and slides the *Necronomicon* in front of him, eyeing it carefully. "What else can you tell us about this? About any of this stuff? I feel like we need to be as prepared as we can be before taking this on."

"We do," Castiel agrees with a nod, running a hand over his stubble in a way that Dean always finds a bit endearing. Dean smiles to himself and looks away as Castiel continues to speak. "I do not know very much about the Great Old Ones myself," the angel admits quietly. "Their time is before even that of the angels."

Eloni still looks like she wants to play *20 Questions with Castiel, Angel of the Lord*, but she lets it go and says instead, "Alright, then. But if I'm giving a lecture on Cthulhu history, I need to get some food and wine in my system. How about we reconvene upstairs in the dining room, and we can talk more about this over dinner?"

On cue, Dean's belly lets out a low, rumbling growl, and everyone around the table starts laughing. Dean sighs, giving them all dirty looks before he says, "Please tell me there's pie."

Sam makes a face and stands up from the table. "Ignore my brother, professor."

"Shut it, Sam. I had to ride in a death machine over two thousand miles of ocean. I want some pie," Dean mumbles, and Castiel leans over and massages his back, whispering in his ear that even if he doesn't get pie tonight, Dean will definitely get something else just as sweet.

Dean smiles because, yeah, that'll work too.

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The formal dining room is as breathtaking as the rest of the house. Paintings and mirrors cover the walls, dark draperies hang across the wide windows, and a low-hanging chandelier casts the room in a delicate ambient light.

Castiel is helping Tuk and Eloni with dinner, but Sam finds Dean standing by himself, a troubled frown on his face. His brother is looking up at a painting hanging over the far right wall of the dining room when Sam comes up behind him to examine it. "Damn, that almost looks like an original," he breathes out when he sees it up close.

Dean jumps, seeming surprised to find Sam there. "What are you on about?"

Sam points to the painting. "The original is definitely in the Louvre right?"

Dean looks confused. "What original?"

Sam squints, moving closer to examine the painting in more detail. It's definitely a really good replica of Raphael's famous masterpiece picturing Michael killing Lucifer. "It's called 'St. Michael Slaying the Dragon'," Sam explains, trying not to let it remind him too much of the Cage. It doesn't really remind him of it at all; the two angels' actual battles resemble nothing of the soft, almost tranquil scene in the painting.

"Whatever it is, it's creeping me the fuck out," Dean mutters, turning away from the image. "I remember seeing the same painting in the Green Room Zachariah trapped me in."

"Then we definitely won't be starting with The Book of Revelation," Eloni says, joining the both of them by the painting, bottle of wine in her hand. "The history we are here to talk about precedes it anyway. In fact, it inspired it."

Sam turns to her and asks, "What do you mean?"

Eloni answers softly with, "*And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent called the Devil, and Satan which deceiveth the whole world; he was cast out into the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.*"

"From Revelation 12:9," Sam says, all too familiar with the passage.

"Yes," Eloni nods. "But Lucifer wasn't the only thing cast into the earth. There were Dragons aplenty before him. And there's a reason he was also called the Dragon or the Beast." She pauses and looks at both Sam and Dean for a long moment before continuing. "Take a seat, gentlemen. Let's eat and talk all about the beasts of old."

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Sam feels a little guilty for digging into his plate as he watches Castiel and Tuk move back and forth from the kitchen, placing hot dishes on the table as they become ready.

But according to Dean, Cas has become somewhat of a Top Chef contender in the kitchen. It's kind of funny, and sometimes Sam imagines what they all would be like as normal people, living some idyllic domestic life. Dean and Cas would host Sunday dinners, and Cas would own a little bakery shop on the corner of some small-town Main Street. Sam would own a couple of dogs that Dean would spoil rotten and try to steal away from him with slices of bacon in his pocket...

"Yo, earth to Sammy," Dean says around a mouthful of mashed potatoes. "You eating your roll?"

"Dude, gross, please swallow," Sam says automatically before taking a very pointed and big bite of his roll. Sam meets Dean's glare with a flippant grin.

"Shut it, bitch," Dean mumbles, but his frown turns into a wide smile as Castiel walks back into the room with a huge steaming pan of what looks like glazed lobster.

"Are you sure we can't help?" Sam says, taking the pan from Castiel and placing it in the center of the table.

"Everything's just about ready," Castiel says, taking a seat beside Dean. Tuk and Eloni arrive a moment later, placing the last items onto the table and taking their own seats. Eloni settles in at the head of the table and passes a bottle of expensive-looking red wine around, which Sam uses to fill both his and Dean's glasses.

A colorful array of food items now covers the table. Seared salmon and stuffed lobster, fresh salads and steamed vegetables, creamy potatoes and baked pork chops. Rolls warm and buttery enough to melt in their mouths. Sam licks his lips, and begins to fill his plate, only pausing when Eloni dings her spoon on her wine glass to get their attention.

"To safe journeys," she says, raising her glass in a toast. Sam follows, and he sees Dean directing Cas as well in the toast.

"To safe journeys," they say all together, sipping from their glasses.

They pass serving bowls and dishes amongst each other, and for a long while no one speaks, the soft clanking and clacking of silverware against plates the only noise in the room as they all take the time to enjoy a home-cooked meal.



A while later, stuffed beyond stuffed, Sam picks up his spoon and samples the vegetable soup. Spicy and garlicky, just the way he likes. "This is all amazing," he says when he manages to pause in between sips, smiling over at Eloni and Tuck. "Thank you for your hospitality."

"Your angel here was great help with dessert," Eloni says, casting a smile Castiel's way.

Dean seems to light up at that, and Castiel flushes when Dean nudges the angel's shoulder, and Sam really needs for them to get married already and adopt kittens. *Seriously*.

"Truth is, this is the least I could do," Eloni continues, heaving a heavy breath. "Seeing as you're trying to save the world. The next few days are not going to be easy."

"So, this is like the last meal before the execution?" Sam says, wiping his mouth with a napkin and settling back in his chair.

"Well," Eloni says, running a finger along the edge of her wine glass. "Your last meal before confronting an eons-old tentacled sea beast."

"Same difference," Dean mumbles, pushing forward in his chair to fill up what Sam suspects is his third plate.

Sam grabs the last bread roll before Dean can reach it, and smirks when his brother shoots him another murderous glare.

"Don't forget to save room for dessert," Tuk says in amusement as Sam swallows his bread in two easy bites.

"I always have room for dessert," Dean says around the bite of food in his own mouth. "Ain't that right, Cas?"

Castiel makes a non-committal noise from the back of his throat, but keeps on eating even though Sam can tell he's smiling to himself in the way the angel sometimes smiles with his eyes. Sam shakes his head at the two of them, and spoons more potatoes and steamed veggies onto his own plate. Second serving in hand, he turns to look at the professor and says, voice pitched low, "Why is any of this Cthulhu stuff even happening?"

Eloni puts her fork down gently and wipes her hands on her napkin before placing it back on her lap. "Prophecy?" she says, opening her hands wide as if to say 'who knows'. "Your guess is as good as mine, Sam."

Sam sits back in his chair, sighing. "I wish we knew," he says, rolling his napkin between his fingers and trying not to let all of the uncertainty swirling around in his head unsettle his stomach.

"What I do know is that the *Necronomicon* is said to be one of the most powerful grimoires of black magic," Eloni says into the quiet of the room. "It even predates the *Lesser Key of Solomon* when it comes to rituals for demon summoning. It foretells the rise of Cthulhu's sunken city of R'lyeh, and the awakening of Cthulhu and the other Great Old Ones. It also has spells to help bring several powerful

deities, multi-dimensional beings, and monsters from the underworld into our world."

Eloni pauses, looking up when Tuk arrives with pie, coffee, and tea. The smell of freshly brewed coffee pulls Sam's attention away for a moment as Eloni helps Tuk pass cups and saucers around the table before continuing. "The book's stories, incantations, invocations, sigils, rituals, spells, and prayers are based on pantheons and traditions older than most modern religions, but I've found that the book also relies heavily on Sumerian cosmology and spirituality," she says.

"Isn't Sumerian religion thought to be the basis and inspiration for most modern religions, including Judeo-Christian beliefs?" Sam asks, cutting himself a piece of cherry pie, the rich aroma filling his nostrils. He knows Dean will be pleased.

"Yes," Eloni says around a mouthful of pie. She swallows, sips from her coffee before continuing. "That's why many of the themes you'll find there are replicated throughout several religions. We even see it with Cthulhu. Think of Tiamet or Dagon of Babylonian mythology. Or the Leviathan of Christian mythology. Legendary sea gods representing chaos and destruction."

"Are they all based on the same creature?" Dean asks, pouring himself and Cas cups of coffee.

"Many of them, possibly yes," Castiel breaks in, taking his cup of coffee from Dean and sipping at it slowly before adding, "Some represent the same primal, chaotic cosmic force, just renamed by different religious traditions. But that's not always the case for all of the Great Old Ones. There are times when many of these are separate deities, whose powers simply manifest in similar ways."

Sam recalls the Sumerian rituals and rites of purification and invocation they've used many times in their line of work. "But for the gods that represent the same forces across traditions," he says, understanding dawning, "it would explain why so many rituals and protective sigils that are based in this overarching Sumerian belief system work across the board, right?"

Eloni taps a finger on the cover of the *Necromonicon*. "Exactly," she says. "And another thing that's true across all traditions: the fact that so many ancient, malevolent gods are constantly striving to break into our world through a gate or door that leads from the outside in. They are waiting for the age of the old gods to begin anew. In the case of Cthulhu and the Great Old Ones, their followers are always looking for ways to open the gates. Or to take advantage of an opening that already exists."

"The rips between the worlds," Castiel says, eyes widening. "We've seen them happening in many places across the globe. It's what these deities are using to come through."

Dean hands Sam a fresh cup of coffee, and Sam lifts his cup to his mouth and watches his brother over the rim as he drinks. Dean looks worried, his eyes clouding over as he glances at Castiel. After a beat, Dean pushes his half-empty plate away with the tip of his fingers. He leans back and drums his fingers against his coffee cup. "And they're not stopping."

There's a moment of heavy silence, and Sam feels his belly twist uncomfortably. He sucks in a breath and releases it, turning to look at Eloni. "Where does this connect with the modern pantheon?"

"Well," Eloni says, picking at the crumbs on her plate. "The Old Ones are said to be the basis of our

subconscious fears of the dark, of the unknown. The reason the Christian Devil came to personify symbols such as the Dragon and the Beast is because these were archetypes ancient cultures were already familiar with. These symbols were the powerful gods that represented chaos before Christianity's rise." She continues by reciting: "And I stood upon the sand of the sea, and saw a beast rise up out of the sea, having seven heads and ten horns, and upon his horns ten crowns, and upon his heads the name of blasphemy."

"They named the devil after a collective memory of a great evil that had already been thrown into the underworld," Sam says, shaking off the image of Lucifer in the form he had known him by in the Cage.

"But," Dean says, tossing his napkin down and leaning forward, pressing his knuckles against the table. "Where did these 'gods' even come from?"

"The Great Old Ones, according to legend, were the original inhabitants of the world," Eloni says. "They were a giant primordial race of ancient deities that ruled the Earth."

"Like the Titans," Sam offers, sipping from his cooling coffee.

Eloni bobs her head. "Same story, different tradition."

Castiel looks up, brows furrowed as if deep in thought. His voice is low and rough when he finally speaks. "We were taught that the Great Old Ones came before the creation of humans, angels, and other monsters and beasts. They were among the first creations of the Father. They were powerful, strong, and destructive. But they were too powerful. They threatened to consume and destroy everything in my Father's creation, so he banished them to the darkness."

"The first origin story. This is why across cultures there are so many stories of chaotic entities trapped for the good of the world, cast into the sea or the underworld and locked away," Eloni says.

Dean clears his throat, rubbing a hand behind his neck. He looks at Cas for a long moment before looking at Sam and Eloni. "So, you're telling me we're dealing with things older than angels?"

Castiel meets Dean's eyes and nods. "Before Satan, there was Cthulhu."

Sam leans back in his chair, closing his eyes. *Damn.*

"Cthulhu: the beast who would rise from the sea at the Apocalypse," Eloni says, voice somber and prophetic. "At the right time, when the stars and the earth were rightly aligned, some powerful force from outside would liberate him, and he would come to reclaim his kingdom."

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Dean's nursing his second beer as the sun begins to set. Head still spinning with information, he walks barefooted along the cool wood floors of the long corridor until he reaches the bedroom he and Cas dropped their stuff in. The fading evening light spills into the room, soaking the white walls in a deep

amber. He sets his bottle on a side table, and settles down on the bed, stretching out and leaning his head back against the soft decorative pillows. The fabric smells of salt and sun, warmth beyond warmth.

Dean closes his eyes for a brief moment, but then quickly opens them when he hears a shuffling noise. He had thought he was alone, but now he notices movement through the french doors leading out onto the balcony. Ah, he'd thought Cas was still hanging out with Sam touring the grounds. But it looks like he'd come upstairs too. Dean manages to pull himself out of the too-comfortable bed and head for the balcony.

It's spacious and huge, expanding the full length of the suite and overlooking the tranquil cove and white-sand beach. In the center, a set of cushioned wicker chairs cluster around a wrought-iron table. At the far end, he sees Castiel doing a series of stretches, probably starting on the set of workouts Dean often finds him doing in the early hours of the morning when the angel thinks everyone is still asleep.

Dean doesn't head his way, not wanting to disturb him. Instead he leans against the rails that surround the balcony, sips on his beer, and soaks up the nice view. It's a breathtaking panorama of land and sea. Over to the left, the sky is painted in pinks, golds, and violets, and the beach is surrounded by massive cliffs. It's paradise, really, but they're not here to enjoy it, even if a part of Dean wishes they could. Off to the right is the far expanse of the grounds, its large palms swaying with the breeze flowing in from the sea. He knows Sam probably fell asleep reading by the pool, but part of Dean still wonders if he's getting enough sleep. Medication and meditation have helped to ease back hellish memories, but Sam's still got far to go. And Dean's worried that all this talk of beasts and the underworld might have stirred up too many things.

A sea breeze combs through Dean's hair, pressing coolly against his heated face. He closes his eyes, tries to not think about the mission just for a moment. Tries to concentrate on the sounds of heavy breathing coming from Castiel. After a few long moments, Dean opens his eyes and turns back to look at Cas, watching how the dying sunlight kisses shyly against his muscled back. Sweat shines in the dip of the angel's hips, and his movements are slow, thorough, long limbs stretching up to the sky as he arches his body in a way that Dean finds almost impossible.

In the last few months, Castiel has learned how to work his body to its maximum. Dean's seen the changes in the way he moves, when they work out together, and when they fuck. Cas is pure force and energy confined in human form, and he's learned to use his human body like an extension of his power. Even now, looking as human as he does – barefooted and shirtless, narrow hips just barely holding up his well-worn sweatpants, lean muscles moving under his smooth skin – he seems to radiate awareness and strength. He appears at home in his body, in his skin, in a way that not even Dean has learned to master himself.

Watching Castiel move, the pure balance and control he shows off as he shifts from one position to another, is strangely relaxing. Dean feels the tension of the day begin to ease away. He leans on the railing and closes his eyes as the wind washes over the balcony and strokes his face like invisible fingers. It's only a few moments before he feels Castiel step up behind him, wrapping his arms around Dean's waist, pressing his front to Dean's back, and settling his face against Dean's neck. "Hello, Dean," the angel whispers, breath puffing warm against Dean's neck.

Dean sucks in a breath, and he doesn't fight when in the space of a heartbeat Castiel catches him by the elbow and spins him around so that they are facing each other. "What's wrong?" Castiel asks him softly.

"Nothing," Dean murmurs as Castiel smooths the back of his hand over Dean's cheek.

"Don't lie," Castiel says, voice low and rough, but he doesn't say anything more, just rests his hand there against Dean's face. Watches and waits.

They're quiet for a time, and Dean listens to the surf for a long while before he swallows and finally says, "What the hell are we even doing out here, Cas? What makes us think we can go up against something that even God knew to lock away?"

"Because we must," Castiel says simply, his fingers brushing against Dean's forehead in a soothing motion, and for another another long moment there is only silence between them, stretching all around them, blocking out even the noise of the lost world they've stumbled into.

Dean's gaze flicks to Castiel's face, calm as the sea. "Why?" he asks.

"Because we couldn't live with ourselves knowing that we didn't try," the angel replies, voice as soft as the breeze. "Because you can't bear to see other people suffering. If there are people in need, you will work to save them."

Dean feels his face warm, and he swallows thickly, sighing. "You think too good of me."

Castiel places his palms over Dean's hips, curling his hands in the denim of his jeans. His eyes glimmer in the low light of the evening as he says, "I know you."

Dean looks at Castiel, the golden glow of his sweat-slicked skin, how the curls of his dark hair stick to his forehead. He reaches out and presses his hand against Castiel's stubbled cheek. "Maybe you do," he whispers. He leans forward then, his eyes sliding closed as he brushes his lips softly against Castiel's own.

Castiel lets out a low rumble, pulling Dean close, his teeth sliding over Dean's bottom lip as he opens to the kiss, dragging a slow, broken moan from Dean's throat as their chests press together. When their tongues meet, Dean can feel something inside of him catch fire, and the air feels charged with it, charged with heat and life and everything between them.

"Goddammit, Cas," Dean breathes out, struggling to find time for air and words around the slide of Castiel's warm lips.

"Language," Castiel chides, dipping in to suck at Dean's neck as Dean runs his hands along the smooth skin of Castiel's bare back, his fingers getting caught in the elastic of Castiel's ratty sweats, dancing below to the warm skin underneath. Castiel rarely wears underwear, a fact that amuses Dean as much as it turns him on.

It's always a surprise, the way Cas responds to his touch, surging up to wind his arm around Dean's neck and pressing him back against the railing. He fits them flush together, mouths and chests and hips,

as he takes everything he needs from Dean, and offers back just as much.

For a long time, against the backdrop of the setting sun and the sound of the ocean, it's just them: slick lips and warm tongues and needy hands. Dean doesn't know how long they've been there when they eventually slow down, and their kisses become sloppy and lazy and sleepy.

Dean lets his head fall against Castiel's shoulder, resting in the crook of his neck. Castiel moves one hand from Dean's hips to his back, as he nips at Dean's neck. His other hand runs through Dean's hair, softly rubbing along his skull. Castiel asks, "You're feeling better?"

"Think so," Dean mumbles against Castiel's warm skin, lips pressing against his steady pulse beat.

Castiel smiles against his neck, but then he pulls away, grabbing both of Dean's hands and leading him back into their room.

"What now?" Dean asks him as Castiel lets him go and wanders off to claim his duffle, searching around for clothes.

"Shower," Castiel says, peeling off his sweats and folding them, and placing them on the dresser before meandering toward the bathroom, completely naked.

Dean smirks, stripping off his own shirt and settling on the bed to kick off his jeans as Cas starts up the shower. Dean slips off his boxers and stands quickly, making his way to the bathroom. It's gorgeous like every other part of this house, its yellow light bright and welcoming. The walls are painted a warm chocolate brown, and the huge shower wraps around the room, inlaid with hand-made and hand-painted porcelain tiles, the curved walls covered by multi-hued stones.

Dean retrieves soap and towels from the bathroom closet before climbing inside the shower behind Cas, the spray from the showerhead hitting his skin in smooth, steady, soothing beats. The water's hot, but Castiel's hotter still, his long, wet body welcoming as Dean slides against him, licking the drops of water from Castiel's skin, running his hand over the smooth muscle of the angel's slick torso. The spray slams deep into Dean's shoulders, pounding out kinks he doesn't even remember getting.

"Tonight we need to rest," Castiel whispers in his ear, close enough that Dean can hear him over the pounding pressure of the shower. "We don't know what we will find out there. We have to arm ourselves with everything we need to fight the Old Ones. There's so much we still don't fully understand about what's happening. But we need to be prepared for every possibility."

Dean blinks, beads of water sitting heavy on his eyelashes. He bites at his bottom lip, listens to the hard beating of water against tile, of his heart against his ribcage. "I know," he says.

They don't say anything else, simply showering together. Dean gets lost in the feel of the hard planes of Castiel's body shifting against his own, in the softness of Castiel's hair as he works soap through it. Dean braces his forehead on his arm, leaning heavily on the wall of the shower when Cas kneels down in front of him and takes him into his mouth. Dean bites his lip hard to choke back the sound of his moans. Castiel's hands are warm and strong pressing into Dean's hips, holding him tight as Dean comes undone.

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An hour or so later, Dean finds himself in bed naked, propped up on fancy pillows and buried under blankets. Cas strokes his hand over Dean's bare belly, fingers trailing along his abs before working their way up to Dean's chest, tracing some invisible protection sigil over his heart.

"There's no way I have the power that I need to protect you against what's coming," Castiel says, voice gone soft in the evening quiet of the bedroom. "It won't be safe for any of us."

"But we knew this going in," Dean says quietly, truthfully. He wraps his hand over Castiel's wrist where it rests against his heart. Castiel flattens his palm across Dean's chest, as if he needs to feel the steady press of Dean's heartbeat against his skin.

"We could lose everything," Castiel whispers.

Dean nods, eyes closing against the thought. "I know."

"No matter what happens, I'll stay by you through it all," Castiel says, sounding for all the world like he's taking a solemn vow.

Dean's silent for a long moment, trying to fit emotion into a set of reassuring words. All he manages to say is, "You don't have to do that."

Castiel raises his head and looks up at Dean intently then. The sun has set, and the pooling shadows of the room make his face hard to read. "Dean, I know where I want to be." The angel brings his hand up and touches Dean lightly on his shoulder, fingers tracing over his fading brand. "By your side."

"Cas," Dean says, his gaze mapping over the angel's face, taking in Castiel's tired blue eyes and dark, rumpled hair, his chin full of dark scruff because he always forgets to shave. Dean's heart feels like it wants to escape his chest, hurts enough that one would think he's having some kind of attack.

Dean sucks in a breath, smooths his palm across Castiel's chin. Shakes his head. They've only been doing this for a few months, really. So he shouldn't expect to have all the answers, know all the right things to say. Or really maybe they've been doing this for years, and they still can't seem to get their act together. Those five years they spent moving themselves into each other's orbit, not knowing what to call the other – friend, brother, charge, something more, something different. Maybe they were even doing this in those long weeks or months or years they shared together in Hell, ones Dean still can't remember. Even after all these months, these years, these lifetimes together, Dean wonders if it'll ever stop feeling too good to be true, like some Djinn reality that will suddenly end. Because even though Cas once said the words, Dean finds it hard to believe: *Good things do happen*.

Not to him. Not to them.

"I know where I want to be too," Dean says after a time, rolling them toward the center of the giant bed, legs tangled beneath the silk-soft sheets.



Castiel pulls at Dean, slack mouth and shining half-lidded eyes. "I'm glad," Castiel whispers to him. Dean wraps his arms around Castiel's shoulders, tucking his head into the crook of the angel's neck.

Sometimes Dean thinks about how crazy this thing between them really is. It's one more thing for him to lose, one more thing to shake his world apart if he takes the wrong step. He knew how to operate when it was just him, Sam, and the open road. He knew what the rules were, what his responsibilities were (*take care of Sammy*), and he knew never to get too close to other people because that might mean he couldn't do his job right. But then came Cas, and fuck it, the angel has made some pretty shitty mistakes, but he's been there for Dean too, fought to protect him, Sam, and Bobby. Despite everything they've seen and done, despite the horrors they've had done to them, Cas stayed.

Dean's heart aches again; it feels like a hand is squeezing it so tight he can't breathe. Shit. Their life is too much to handle alone. Fate. Destiny. The end of the fucking world. Being alive when everyone around you keeps dying. It's too damn much.

"Stop thinking," Castiel says, and Dean does, the feel of the angel's naked body enough of a distraction from the weight of troubling thoughts.

Dean tastes the soapy tang of Castiel's skin (Eloni had stocked the bathrooms with some sort of homemade almond oil and aloe soap that Dean loves the smell of on Castiel). Dean sinks into Castiel's warmth as the angel presses them closer and closer, finding all the ways they fit together, slotting them where they belong, connecting them.

Castiel's body under Dean's hands is a solid comfort, something he can hold on to and map with fingers and lips. Relaxed and pliant beneath him, Castiel rolls onto his belly and lets Dean kiss down his spine. Dean's tongue smoothes over Castiel's ass and thighs, slides into the crease between his cheeks, slicking there in a gentle circle. He mouths along the thin skin before pulling his body up and kissing back across the tanned expanse of Castiel's muscled back.

When Dean slinks back up beside Castiel, he presses his front to Castiel's back and moves his hand across his chest.

"Dean," Castiel whispers as Dean lines up their bodies and rubs against him slowly.

Dean sucks on Castiel's neck, smoothing his hand down across the angel's belly before wrapping it around his cock. Cas leans back into his chest as Dean cups his balls in his palm, squeezing them gently, before jacking Castiel's dick in long, soft strokes. His own dick is slippery, thick, and hard against Castiel's back, pushing and sliding as they move together. Cas whimpers with the motion, squeezing Dean's cock between his thighs, and in no time Dean's humping and spilling down Castiel's legs.

Castiel gasps when Dean's hand speeds up on his cock, sliding along the shaft, fingers playing at the head, and his thumb spiraling in the way he knows Castiel loves. They're both panting as Cas tilts up, falls back into Dean, and comes with a shuddering *Ah-ah-ah*, ropes of thick come spilling in Dean's hands. Dean presses his lips against the warm space behind Castiel's ear, whispers *I need you, Cas*, before Castiel twists himself around, circling Dean's face with his warm palms.

Castiel stares at him for a long moment, fingers still against Dean's cheekbones, his bright eyes mapping Dean's face. "Come here," he whispers, and then kisses Dean, hard and with an edge of desperation.

Dean moans low into Castiel's mouth, his spent cock throbbing against Castiel's own. Castiel draws him in, sucking gently at Dean's lips, his hands steady on Dean's hips and shoulderblades as they lose themselves in the kiss. Dean feels like he's never been this raw before, so peeled back and broken open. Like he's never put so much at risk. Lying with Cas in the dark, at the edge of the world, so far from anything and everything he's ever known. Naked and unmasked. Quiet and content.

A little while later, after they've kissed and whispered to each other in the way they sometimes do late at night, they change into warm pajamas and curl around each other in bed. Dean rests his head against Castiel's shoulder, breathing easy as Castiel runs his hands through his hair. "I choose all of you," Castiel whispers, his breathing heavy with sleep, and Dean closes his eyes and wonders if this is what it's like to fall.

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Dean wakes to the scratchy feel of sand under his skin, to the roar of the ocean in his ears. He's really cold, a salty dampness snapping at his skin and seeping in through his pajama pants and t-shirt. He blinks his eyes open at the feel of a cool breeze, because *what the hell?*

With a groan, he pulls his cramped body inward as he sits up and looks around, eyes widening as he instantly recognizes his surroundings. He's laid out on the beach: the little moonlit cove he could see from the bedroom window, to be precise. He turns toward the direction of the villa, wondering how he got that far. He remembers falling asleep, wrapped around Castiel. And it's still nighttime, late if the blue-black expanse of night sky and the sharp glow of the moon are anything to go by.

Dean pinches himself just to check if he's dreaming, but the corresponding dull pain in his arm makes him frown. His entire body feels grimy and numb from the chill as he climbs to his feet and dusts off his pajama bottoms. *How'd he get out here?* And better yet, where were Sam and Cas?

He looks back toward the house one more time, breathing in the thick smell of sand and briny sea. He then steadies himself on his bare feet, his toes cushioned by the soggy sand, and turns around to look toward the encroaching sea.

Dean pauses, squinting when he sees movement along the distant shoreline. There's something standing out there, moving into the water, a flicker of white against the waves. Something inside of Dean leaps at the sight, taking his breath away. He moves quickly, feet sinking into the sand as he runs toward the ocean. The salt spray wets the bottom of his pants as he steps closer to the water. He frowns, watching the waves crash against the beach, the high tide drawing the water nearer and nearer. The mist from the sea foam sprays his face, and he tastes brine on his lips. He squints his eyes against the darkness and steps toward the edge of the sea; the water crackles and whispers over his feet before a wave surges and breaks across his legs.

The ocean is so dark it looks nearly black, but the full, fat moon sits in the center of the sky, shining a

torchlight across the rolling surface. It's more than enough light to see now, enough to understand. Dean knows what's out there, can feel it in his bones, the same soft, urgent tugging that drew him to Castiel in Purgatory.

"Cas," Dean whispers, eyeing the still figure nervously. The angel's shirtless, in just his pajama pants, and he's standing about knee-deep in the shallow surf, the waves coming up to his thighs as they crash toward the shore. He's staring out to sea, as if completely enraptured by it.



Knowing that this has to be one of Castiel's trances, Dean reaches his hand out instinctively and calls out to him. No reaction. *Of course not*, Dean thinks, trying again with, "Cas, man, you gotta snap the fuck out of it! I'm so not kidding this time! I'm gonna kick your ass if you don't snap out of it!"

The wind seems to capture his words, tossing them out to sea. The tumbling waves in the distance sound loud to his ears. Dean moves closer then, legs getting swept up in the crashing water. Only a few feet separate him from Castiel now, and Dean watches the angel for a long moment: his body is stiff and rigid, muscles tight and wired. As Dean thinks on the best plan of action (*rush at him or wait it out?*), Castiel begins to rock slightly to and fro in that familiar way he's done before, and his soft, freaky chanting begins to fill the night, loud and louder as his voice carries over the roar of the ocean. Like a call into the night, the chant is dark and wild, and it pulls at something deep inside of Dean. Makes him think he hears something answering back from the sea.

*Fuck.*

Dean swallows and nods jerkily, rubbing his hand over his face to wipe away the dampness. "Please Cas, don't do this," he urges loudly. "Not now, not here."

From this distance, Castiel's movements look controlled, but just barely, like he's on the verge of combusting, all this power leashed and bound, but straining to be free. His chants grow stronger, more complicated, taking on new patters and rhythms and words Dean doesn't recognize from the times before. Castiel has always had a low, guttural voice, but his words now seem otherworldly, changed into something darker, deeper. Older.

"Cas..." Dean hopes that the name alone is enough to pull Castiel back this time, but he knows deep down this will take more, like all the times before. So much so that when Castiel lowers himself into the water, Dean's ready. "Oh, hell no!" he yells, his long legs bounding over the waves as he moves to grab Castiel.

When Cas goes under, Dean moves into a running dive, launching himself into the water. The sea's icy coldness shocks his system as he grabs Castiel by the waist and chest in a tackle that brings them both under the surface. The fast current tugs at Dean's body as he struggles to maintain his hold on Castiel, who's still rocking, although his chanting has turned into gurgling as they shift and surge with the water.

For a moment they break the surface, gasping. Dean sucks in a chilling breath that makes his lungs hurt, clinging harder to Castiel's squirming, wet body as he moves them into a swim. There's another struggle as Castiel tries to pull away, and for a moment they go under again, and it feels like the sea's dark shadows are pulling them down and down.

Under the water, it's too dark to see, and Dean's lungs burn with the need to breathe. It's instinct that makes Dean fight back, grab, push, and yank at Castiel the same way the angel had gripped him in the crypt at Paraty, until they're heading toward the surface again, bursting through the water, spluttering and coughing, mouths full of water. They float there for a moment, bodies moving together at last.

"Castiel, it's me!" Dean manages to groan out after he's sucked in enough air. He repeats Castiel's name again and again until Castiel finally stops fighting him, going limp in Dean's arms.

"Come on man," Dean whispers, holding on to him as he moves them through the water and back toward the shore. He isn't even sure Cas can hear him, if he's even conscious at all, and he feels his stomach drop when he thinks about how he could have lost him to the sea again, like he almost did in Paraty.

The chill of the sea cuts deep to the bone, and Dean struggles to keep his and Castiel's heads above the water. Striking out with long strokes and fast kicks, Dean swims with Castiel in his arms. He's a good swimmer, always has been. Sam had tried to convince him to try out for the swim team with him once in high school, but team sports were never Dean's thing. He was too much of a loner, had too many responsibilities, never fit in at most of the schools he went to. Concentrating now on the line of shore in the distance, Dean guides them back in the direction of the beach to shallower waters, letting his arms and legs pull them forward, moving with the current in the way he'd been trained. He concentrates on the feel of water sliding up his calves and thighs and chest, tries not to think about Castiel's silence and stillness.

Dean eventually reaches the beach, dragging Castiel's limp body with him. He spits out seawater onto the sand and shivers, his t-shirt and pants soaked as the water laps around him. Wet, cold, and shivering, Dean pulls Castiel onto the driest sand he can find and kneels beside him. He checks Castiel's vitals, sees that he's breathing steadily, and lets out his own relieved breath. Dean then spends a long moment trying to come back to himself, eyes closed, inhaling and exhaling. Just breathing.

Then he opens his eyes, the brilliant night sky washing over him in dark grays and blues. He tracks his eyes over the spill of silver moonlight dancing across the surface of the ocean and then back toward Castiel.

Castiel, who's blinking up at Dean. The angel is watching Dean with an intense gaze, a light, inhuman cast to his eyes.

"Cas?" Dean asks, placing his palm over his brand on Castiel's chest. "You all here?"

"Dean," Cas rasps out, low and breathless, his hand coming up to tighten around Dean's arm.

"You're okay, we're okay," Dean says, trying to reassure but knowing he sucks at it.

"What happened?" Castiel asks, pushing himself up carefully, sand falling in clumps from his back.

Dean opens his mouth, then closes it, shaking his head. "Man, I don't even know. I woke up out here. And you were out here too, but in one of your trances. About to take a swim. I had to dive in after you."

"That would explain why we're both wet," Castiel says, frowning. He runs a hand over his wet chest, seemingly mesmerized by the sodden state of himself. "I was dreaming about the water," he adds, frown deepening as he turns to look at Dean. "I don't remember much, but I remember the sea. The ceaseless pull of the sea."

"Cas..." Dean stops, not knowing what exactly to say. He presses his fingers into his eyes and tries to clear his mind, but all he can think about is how he's about to lose Cas and maybe Sam too if they can't find out what's happening and stop it. Dean's whole body shivers; he's aching and cold from the nighttime exertion, and he just wants to sleep and for Cas to be alright.

But he's not alright. None of them are.

Castiel looks up at him, lashes wet as he blinks. "I think I must have transported us out here in my sleep. We were holding each other last night, and I must have taken you with me when I moved. I'm sorry, Dean."

"Jesus, Cas," Dean grunts, running a hand through his wet hair, spiking it up. He shivers again. "Instead of just sleep walking, now you're sleep teleporting?"

Castiel stares at him, head cocked in a way that is so much like the Cas of old, something inside Dean swells. Dean swallows hard, turns his head away from Cas. Slowly, painfully, he looks out at the sea. Black and infinite. Easy for someone to get lost in. "I almost...if I hadn't woken up..." He blinks against the heavy tightness in his chest, the fist strangling his heart. "Goddammit, Cas. This can't keep happening," he says softly. *Please.*

Castiel makes a strangled sound, his hands coming up to Dean face, as he says, "Look at me."

Dean is shaking again, from the cold or the adrenaline, he doesn't know. He just feels ready to collapse. The sand is damp and rough, but he falls forward into it anyway, pulling Cas against him and shivering because Castiel's bare skin is like ice.

"I'm sorry," Castiel whispers against his neck, and Dean can't figure out what he's apologizing for anymore, can't figure out what the hell's happening anyway, and he can't get a sense of how any of this is going to end well. All he knows is that right now they need to get moving, get warm. Get away from the blackness of the sea.

Castiel wraps his arms around Dean tighter, breathing in time with Dean now, puffs of warm air pressing against Dean's neck. Dean's still cold, but he's finding it hard to get up, despite the goosebumps on his skin and Castiel's. But he knows they have a long journey ahead of them, and they have to be at their best, their healthiest. No catching colds when they have to fight a mythical sea beast.

"Cas, let's go inside," Dean says after a long moment, coaxing Cas onto his feet.

"He's getting stronger," Castiel interrupts softly, his eyes honing in on Dean's, his hands gripping Dean's wrist. "I don't know how or why I know, I just do," Castiel continues, and his voice is low, urgent, and rough in all the ways Dean has come to love.

Dean doesn't say anything, just leans in, and Cas meets him halfway, touches their lips together and then licks at Dean's bottom lip, before pulling away and looking back out over the dark water. "We're so close. I can feel it."

Dean follows his gaze to the water, to the flat surface of the ocean, and he has the strangest sensation, shivering for an entirely different reason than cold or adrenaline. Castiel's hand brushes his, wrapping their fingers together, and pulling them closer as they begin the walk back to the villa.

Castiel is quiet all the way back to the house, and when they enter Dean momentarily feels bad for tracking water and sand across the nice wood floors. But exhaustion sets in quickly, and they stumble to their bedroom, barely awake enough to dry off and pull on clean sweats and t-shirts before curling around each other.

"I can't lose you," Dean whispers into the dark, too ashamed to say it to Castiel's face, so instead he says it into a pillow. Castiel is heavy behind him, warm and solid and close as he cocoons Dean from behind. He wraps an arm around Dean's waist and presses warm lips against the nape of Dean's neck. He says, voice low and quiet, "*Ego dilecto meo et dilectus meus mihi.*" And Dean knows the words because Castiel has whispered them to him so often in the dark, so many times when Dean feels like he's going to lose it. It's from the Latin, Song of Solomon, 6:2, *I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine.*

Dean swallows so hard it hurts, and then reaches behind him, finding the back of Castiel's neck, yanking his face down and forward, twisting his own head to crush their lips together with enough force to send them both groaning. It's only a moment before Castiel climbs up on top of Dean, taking Dean's face between his hands and whispering to him between biting kisses, his words a mix of Latin, English, and Enochian, his breath hot like fire as Dean slides his hands up along the angel's thighs, grinding their bodies together.

Dean's hands eventually find their favorite spot on Castiel's hips, his thumbs brushing over the perfectly-shaped juts of bone there. Castiel's hands drop from Dean's face, and he slides one against Dean's shoulder, sending sharp points of heat through Dean's body as he presses into his brand, the place he first marked Dean as belonging to him. It's enough. For now, it's enough.

They somehow manage to sleep through what's left of the night. But they don't dream.

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Over breakfast, Castiel looks tired, red-eyed, and pale, and Dean figures he's looking about the same way himself because Sam keeps shooting them both worried glances between bites of his bacon-and-cheddar omelet.

Truth is, Dean feels tense, like there's something underneath his skin, something waiting to burst out and strangle him. They eat breakfast quickly and in relative silence, and then head outside to pack up the Land Rover with Eloni and Tuk's help. It's chilly out, the grasses bending in the wind, the waves foaming on the shores. The sand glitters white like snow, and the sky is a paint-brush flicker of pink and blue. There's too much vibrancy for so early in the morning, and Dean has to turn away.

"Think we're ready to go?" Sam asks him while loading the last of their bags into the back of the Land Rover.

"As ready as we're gonna be," Dean says, raising his head to take in the horizon. The South Pacific sun beats down steadily, and when Dean yawns, he can feel the wrinkles around his eyes deepening. He's getting too old for this.

"What about you, Cas?" Sam asks.

Dean flicks his eyes toward the angel. Standing next to the vehicle while Sam and Dean rearrange their bags in the trunk, Castiel is quietly watching the distant coastline, face unreadable. Last night already seems unreal, a dream even, but Dean doesn't want to ask Cas about it, doesn't want to risk triggering a repeat episode.

Castiel turns to look at them after a long moment, head tilting as he takes them in. "I'm ready," he says before turning away again.

Sam shoots Dean a questioning look, but Dean shrugs, dropping the weapons bag into the trunk and settling against the side of the Land Rover.

"You sure you're doing okay, man?" Sam asks, bumping their shoulders together as he rests beside Dean and sips from his thermos of coffee.

"I'm fine," Dean says. "I mean...I just need us to find this weapon and to kill this sonofabitch."

"You make it sound easy," Sam says softly, frowning.

"Nothing's easy with us, man. I know it," Dean mutters, clearing his throat and looking back toward the house. By the front door he sees Eloni and Tuk laughing together, Eloni patting down Tuk's hair in a way that reminds Dean of Lisa with Ben. *God, Lisa*. That life now seems so far away, another dream that's fading the longer time passes. He can almost remember what their mornings had been like. Lisa shaking him awake after Dean had pressed the snooze button one too many times, her long hair falling over her face as she tickled Dean and sent them both rolling to the floor with laughter. Dean would follow her to the kitchen when she'd leave to start breakfast, teasing her until she burned the eggs. If Ben was staying with friends, Dean would lift Lisa to the counter, kiss her until they were breathless, his fingers tangled inside of her warmth, their breakfast forgotten.

Dean shakes his head. It's a fantasy of a life that he was never meant for. He sighs and turns to look around, catching Castiel watching him from his perch by the bumper. Dean heads over to him, placing a hand at his waist.



"Hey," Dean says, catching his eye.

"Hello," Castiel returns, and something about the awkwardness of the moment makes them both smile.

Dean knows this thing with Cas is different: stronger and somehow more real than anything he's experienced before. But sometimes he thinks about what it would be like to be able to be safe in one place, to wake up next to each other and not have to worry about whether they'd survive the day. Cas is different, stronger too. He's the first person Dean's ever met that makes him feel solid, still; makes him feel like staying in one place. Makes Dean feel like he can be all of himself, completely.

The ocean is smooth and gray outside the windshield when they take off, but Dean doesn't look at it, looks instead at the place where his leg touches along Castiel's in the backseat, mapping the way their bodies curve into each other, the way they keep each other steady.

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They take two vehicles, Dean and Cas riding in Eloni's Land Rover, while Sam rides with Tuk in a small pickup that the boy maneuvers expertly along the rocky coastal roads. Through the truck's window, Sam watches the green pastures that he's begun to associate with the island's simple terrain. There are a few hotels, restaurants, and cottages tucked up along the coastline and dotting the main road into town. The sea is never far away though; the surf sits a few hundred feet from the road, breaking against craggy rocks and pristine sand.

Sam rolls down the window and lets some of the warm air brush over his face. He never used to like the beach when he was a kid. He has an old memory of him and Dean getting stranded at one for days in South Carolina, hungry and cold as they camped out and waited for their dad. He remembers how lonely the sea made him feel back then, the cool stretch of it pulling him toward the sea serpents his ten-year-old mind imagined held domain at the bottom of the ocean. Of course, it just so happens those sea serpents turned out to be real. Even now, when Sam's a million miles from that beach, from his childhood, the sharp smells of damp sand and fish and salt are enough to take him back there. Sam closes his eyes and tries not to think too hard about the sea. About being left by his dad. About dying and coming back.

Another thirty minutes after leaving Eloni's villa, they arrive in Hanga Roa, Easter Island's capital city. It's a small seaside port town catering to the seasonal tourist trade. According to the *Lonely Planet* guidebook Sam read on the plane ride over, the small harbor has a shipping service to Chile, but not much other industry. Surrounding the port is an open-air market, as well as a number of small shops geared toward tourists, offering things like Moai-inspired souvenirs and island tours.

From the window, Sam glimpses the town's unique architecture, small colonial-style buildings, storefronts, and paved roads that wind down toward the docks.

"We have a boat docked here that we use to visit the other islands," Tuk says as he steers the truck into a parking lot a few hundred feet from the pier.

"Do you really think we'll be able to find this other weapon?" Sam asks as Tuk parks the truck and

turns off the engine.

Tuk meets his eyes for a moment, not saying anything. He places his hands in his lap and smiles softly before saying, "When my mother told me that you were coming, I couldn't believe it. I thought there would be no one in the world willing to fight what's coming. But here you are Sam, you and your brother, and the man who calls himself an angel. You've come to save us."

Sam runs his hand through his hair, looks away. "Yeah. We, uh, we're going to try. This thing... Cthulhu. It's unlike anything we've faced before."

Tuk glances at him, smiling crookedly. "Are you trying to say you've never faced a mountain-sized tentacled sea god before?"

Sam laughs, sharp and fast. "This will be our first."

Tuk laughs in turn, the laughter covering up the fear and unease, before opening the truck door and stepping down. Sam follows, eyes squinting as he takes in the line of boats moored at the docks. Only a few people are out and about, sailors, fishermen, and dockhands tending to their boats.

Sam inhales thick sea air when he steps onto the pier, cracking a smile when he sees Dean and Cas approaching. There's never much space between his brother and the angel, their shoulders and hands brushing as they walk side by side.

"Dude, did you see that Duck?" Dean says, pausing in his steps, eyes lingering on the jetty while he practically bounces on his feet.

Cas is watching Dean, looking confused, as he says, "Ducks are not indigenous to this region."

"Not that kind of duck, man," Dean laughs, shaking his head and pulling Cas closer so that he can see what Dean's talking about.

Sam follows them, squinting to see what his brother's pointing at so enthusiastically. And yeah, wow. There's a freaking *DUKW* parked in the harbor, one of those amphibious transport vehicles used by the Allies during World War II, most famously on D-Day.

"General Motors designed like twenty thousand of these things during the war," Dean says, whistling, and showing off the sort of geek-boy wonder he gets whenever confronted by powerful, old, and complicated machines.

When Sam looks back at his brother, Dean is looking right back at him, smiling goofily, eyes clear green in the warm light. "This is kind of crazy right? I always wanted to drive one of those things," Dean admits, chuckling and shaking his head.

"Geek," Sam says fondly.

"Shutup," Dean says, rolling his eyes and pulling an amused-looking Castiel closer to him.

A moment later Eloni joins them on the pier, pointing out toward the water where Tuk is manning a small boat. "He's good with her," she says. "I call her the *Sea Goddess*. She'll get us where we need to go." They follow Eloni farther down the piers, lugging their bags along the way.

"Ready?" Tuk calls down at them from the pilothouse. "Dean, if you get the line, we'll be off."

Sam watches Dean hop into action, obviously excited by the prospect of untying ropes and playing at being a sailor. Tuk already has the engine going when Sam follows Eloni, Dean, and Cas onto the small vessel.

"And we're off," Sam comments, watching Tuk carefully maneuver the boat away from the pier, making ripples in the blue-green waters of the harbor.

"To the Sacred Lands," Tuk says, tightening his fingers around the wheel at the helm as the boat bounces over the green waves. "Where the map says the third weapon lies."

Bracing his hands on the railing around the deck, Sam looks out to sea, the endless blue skies and sparkling water. Breathing in the sharp brine of the surrounding ocean, a rush of something fills his body.

"We're close," Castiel says, suddenly appearing at his side.

"Close to the weapon?" Sam asks, watching as Dean settles beside the angel.

Castiel's gaze sharpens, and he says, "To Cthulhu."

"How do you know?" Sam asks, swallowing hard, his stomach twisting at the thought.

Castiel tilts his head slightly. "I'm not sure how I know. I just know."

Dean clears his throat pointedly beside them, and Sam frowns, but he doesn't say anything else. Both Dean and Cas have been acting weird all morning. Sam turns to watch Dean, who's staring off into the distance, shoulders tense and expression brooding.

They sail past the neighboring islets, Motu Nui and Motu Iti. The bow of the boat cuts through the crashing spray gently, gathering speed as it parts the small waves. Specks of other tiny islands peek out in the distance, and Sam wonders about their names, about living somewhere so isolated from civilization. For a while there is no sound except for the roar of the boat's engine and the lapping of water. Sam leans a hip on the railing, watching the waves hit the side of the boat in a steady rhythm. Almost an hour later he catches his first site of approaching land, a tall, looming island that takes his breath away.

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Watching the large landmass rise in the distance, fog completely smothering its coastline, Dean sucks in a deep breath. He tries to recall exactly what Eloni had explained last night in their planning session.

The coordinates on the map found in the *Necromonicon* lead to a chain of isolated, uninhabited South Pacific islands that Eloni has only visited once before, during an expedition. The islands are so remote that they don't get much exploration, not even by the more adventurous tourists and scientists.

According to Eloni, one island in particular, *Tu'ugamau*, is said to contain the decaying ruins of an ancient, lost civilization. But no archaeologist has ever discovered the ruins – they are said to be hidden by protective magic. But the *Necromonicon* has a ritual that could unlock the island's magic; it would reveal the ancient city where the last weapon is hidden. Eloni has never had reason to look for the city until now, but she believes it to be real.

A fine spray peppers Dean's cheeks, the ocean rolling underneath the boat. He turns to watch Tuk and Eloni at the helm, easing the boat toward the southwestern side of the island chain. Castiel is quiet beside him, but from time to time Dean feels the angel's hands linger against his own, knuckles brushing knuckles.

"There is something here," Castiel says softly, and Dean turns back to look at the looming island parting the mist. He sees a rocky coastline, a mass of trees creating a dense tropical rainforest that he guesses must span the island's interior, and lush, red volcanic hills that border the sea.

"It's like coming to the edge of the world," Eloni says to them from her perch at the helm, sweeping her arms across the stunning South Pacific waters. "This is the Laaki Azmalu. The Sacred Islands."

As they sail past the southern-most point of the largest island, Dean notices a circular reef and lagoon, and granite sands littered with palm trees and seabirds. Tuk docks the boat in one of the island's deep-water coves, and everyone spends the next several minutes unloading their supplies onto the connecting beach and taking stock of everything. The shadow of what Eloni calls Mount Luokla rises in the gloomy distance to the southeast, sheltering them from above.

"According to the text, the last artifact is located in the Temple of the Malama," Eloni says, pulling out several maps and passing them around to the gathered group.

Castiel examines his map and says, "And the Temple is said to reside in the lost city of Lagi."

"A city that no one has ever seen," Sam adds, settling on the ground beside his camping gear.

Dean snorts, his eyes following the map's hand-drawn replication of the island. "Because it's hidden by powerful magic."

"It's why none have survived to share stories of that particular lost civilization," Eloni says, and then goes on to explain that the city is supposed to be situated on the highest point of the island — in the dark, mist-covered Aumoe Mountains in the west.

Dean scans the surrounding area, making note of possible paths in and out, and estimating the trajectory of the journey inland. *Tu'ugamau*. The island is large and green everywhere Dean can see, and the surrounding sea is so blue it melts into the sky. Lush vegetation edges across the cove they've built their temporary camp in, and tall palm trees sway in the breeze coming in from the sea. Sunlight falls across the high treetops leading to the island's interior, flashing down through the leaves. Dean has

to squint against the light as he says, "How long do you think it'll take us to reach the city?"

"We'll hike as far as we can today before making camp," Eloni says, setting aside a coil of rope and a medic kit. She takes out another water bottle and adds, "We'll need to make our way to the center of the island to perform the ritual, and I think that will take about two days at most on foot."

Dean eases down to the ground beside his own bag, reaching for the water bottle Castiel holds out to him. He sips from it and then asks, "You think finding this will be easy?"

"No," Eloni replies, voice honest. "But I do think we'll find it."

"If something doesn't find us first," Castiel says, running his eyes across the trees surrounding the cove.

Dean frowns, shooting him a curious glance. "Do you sense something?" he asks, hand moving to his gun.

"There is a darkness here waiting for us," Castiel says quietly. He takes a breath and adds, "It will not want us to succeed in our task." The angel's words are quiet, but his tone is hard, tense.

"Well, we'll just have to make sure it doesn't stop us," Dean says, meeting Castiel's steady gaze.

Castiel cocks his head sideways and asks, "How do we do that?"

"We kick it in the ass," Dean says simply, and Castiel smiles, something resembling fondness in his gaze. Dean returns the smile, feeling his cheeks flush.

"You're both adorable," Eloni says, casting them both a knowing wink.

"You'll have to excuse my brother," Sam interrupts with a soft chuckle. "He's been waiting to play Indiana Jones all his life. When he was thirteen, he bought his first bomber jacket, fedora, and bullwhip."

"Indy is the man," Dean defends, daring Sam to deny it. As if Sam himself hadn't dreamed of blazing through the jungle with a machete to uncover a lost city.

Sam puts up his hands, as if in surrender. "You're right about that," he agrees with a smirk. "You know as a kid I was always in awe of your childhood crushes. Especially the ones involving Harrison Ford. You'd get all breathless when you talked about him."

"Shutup," Dean groans, flipping Sam the bird and glaring.

"Dean is fond of strong heroic figures," Castiel chimes in, helpful as always, and Dean is really tempted to kick both Sam and Castiel's asses right about now. Tuk and Eloni seem to be enjoying the conversation though, watching them all with amused smiles.

"My brother does seem to have a type," Sam comments, snickering as he catches Dean's eye before waggling his brows in Castiel's direction.

Dean scoffs, eyes rolling. "I will end you," he grumbles at his baby brother's laughing face before decidedly ignoring him by pretending to search for something in his backpack. Where was the damn mosquito spray anyway?

"Okay, boys, leave Dean alone," Eloni says, throwing another knowing look Dean's way and dropping a bag of supplies at his feet. Dean releases a loud, put-upon sigh before Eloni laughs and continues with, "Let's make his day though and get started on finding this lost city."

They spend the next fifteen minutes reviewing their plan of action. It's still early enough to get closer to the center of the island before nightfall; there's enough time to find and fortify a good place to set up camp.

It's only another half hour before they're off. Dean begins the trek feeling ready: the team's backpacks are full of food, weapons, and camping gear. They don't know how long this will take, but they prepared for a few days' worth of travel. According to Eloni, most of the island's defenses are probably magical in nature, spellwork, curses, and the like, but Sam and Dean have packed more than enough monster-killing weaponry from Raúl's treasure chest in case anything unexpected pops up, especially given what Castiel senses on the island.

Castiel's eyes scan the landscape as they walk, his angelic senses probably reaching out, while Sam's eyes track over the road ahead as he flanks Tuk and Eloni's left side. Dean takes a breath deep enough to burn as he follows behind them all, guarding their rear. He doesn't know what to expect as he walks, one hand settled on the machete in his weapons' belt, his long fingers working along the curved edge, the other on his gun.

The jungle is thickly grown, covered with giant species of trees Dean's never seen before, some of them sixty feet high and more, darkening the day even though it hasn't reached noon yet. Dean's boots crunch over the rocky ground, trying to find the right foothold to avoid pits and thick roots, most of which are partly covered with weeds and moss. Water is everywhere, a system of streams and pools that feed into the heart of the island.

They walk for almost three hours, taking their time, picking their way cautiously through the dense lowland jungle, which is alive with sound and movement: the crowing of birds, the howling of monkeys, and the buzz of gnats circling their faces. Dean finds himself measuring the size of the massive tree trunks in his head, wondering about the sorts of things he could carve from them. He thinks he could build enough furniture to fill an entire house from just one tree. Everyone is quiet mostly, although once in a while Castiel names the variety of tropical birds, monkeys, spiders, and snakes they come across, while Tuk and Sam drink in the information like eager students.

Dean breaks out the machete once they start getting into wilder territory, taking the lead for the next few miles as he chops at the tree limbs and thick flora blocking their path, watching the others follow suit. Strands of misty light filter down through the dark canopy of trees above them, but it's gloomier and darker the farther they get into the forest. He's sweated through his layers by the time they take their second break, sitting around each other and gulping down water from the canteens.

"Did you see the size of those flies?" Sam asks, stomping his boots on the ground in an attempt to

remove some of the mud caked on them.

"Size of fucking birds, man," Dean mumbles, tossing his backpack to the ground and digging out a towel to mop the sweat from his brow. Castiel looks unaffected by the heat; although partly fallen, the angel seems able to withstand the heat in a way he couldn't withstand the South Dakotan winter. He drinks his share of water though, his eyes continuously darting to the overhanging branches, ever vigilant in his watch.

"There are remarkable creatures in this ecosystem," Castiel says after a long moment of catching their breath, his eyes reaching out to make contact with Dean's. "Many of my Father's most beautiful creations have a way of surviving and adapting even in the harshest environments."

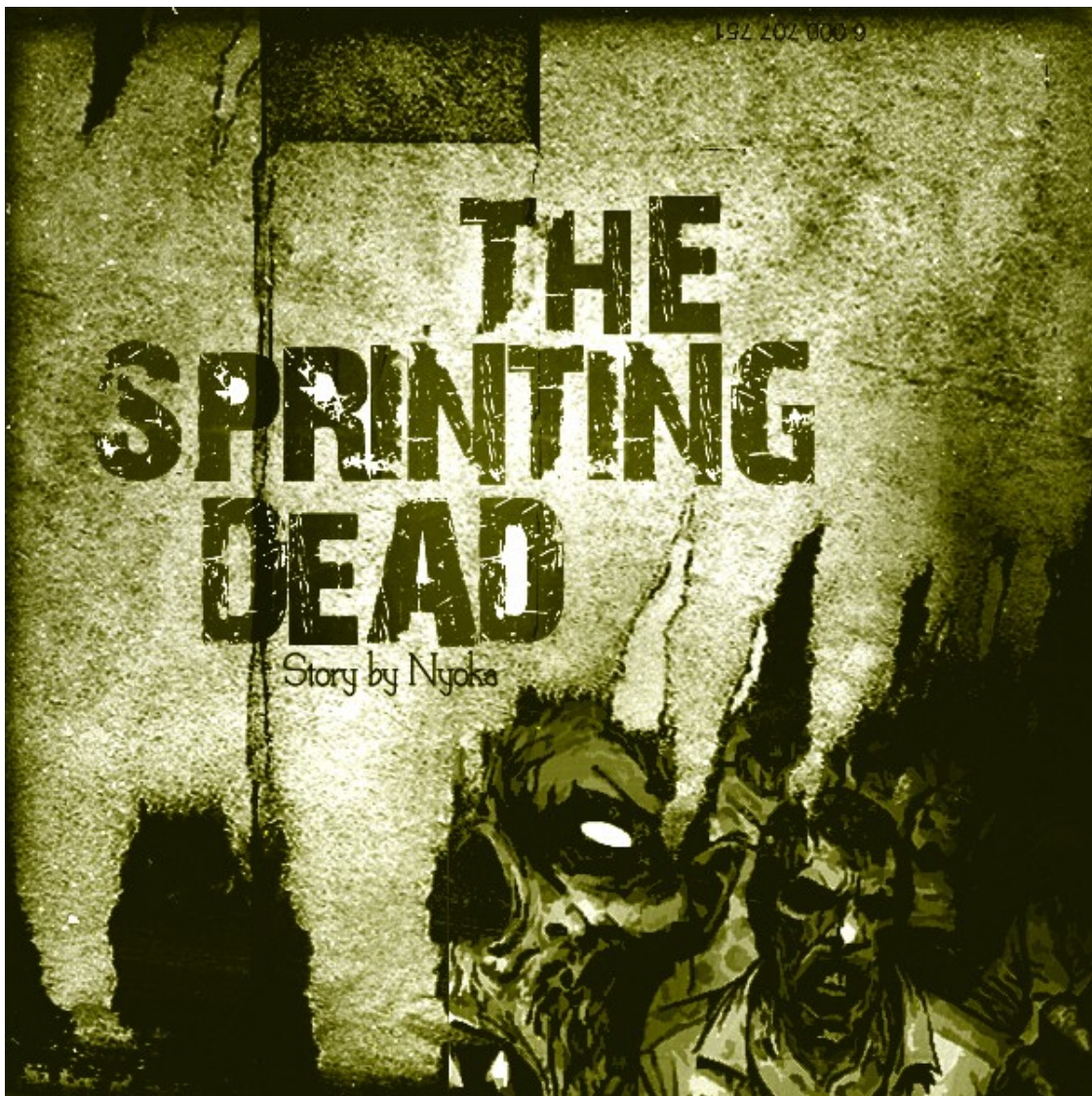
Dean looks away, clearing his throat, feeling too *seen* by Castiel's gaze and pointed words. He fists his hands in his lap; his arm muscles ache and burn from the journey and from using so much pressure to hack his way through the underbrush for the past two hours. The evening swelters, and Dean closes his eyes to it, while all around him the air hums with the noise of insects and other creatures, a cacophony of sound that Dean's only known in the wilds of the southern United States.

"Another three miles, then we make camp," Eloni says after they've rested their legs.

"And we eat," Dean murmurs, following slowly behind Castiel into a narrow partition in the trees leading to the mist-cloaked foothills. They carefully pick their way over roots and around creeping vines, staying close as the ground grows rockier. Dean doesn't say anything when Castiel takes his hand part of the way up, helping him to lift himself up onto a rocky outcrop and surveil the area.

Castiel doesn't let go of his hand until they're another mile down the path, making their way toward the heart of the island.

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"I pressed me close unto my faithful comrade,  
And how without him had I kept my course?"  
— Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*

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## II. The Initiation

### *Tu'ugamau Island*

They rest for an hour in the foothills of the Aumoe Mountains, but then pack up and head north through the trees. There's no trail, so they bushwhack their way through a jungle that hasn't seen a blade in years, and in its own way it's like doing battle with mother nature. They come away sore and bleeding,



exhausted and worn-through. They make camp that night about ten miles east of the suspected location of the city. They find a natural clearing by a small stream after whacking through another mile of forest as the sky darkens. They unpack, set up their tents, and start a fire for dinner. Tuk dozes as soon as he hits the ground, while Eloni and Castiel share stories of their past explorations around the world, comparing their experiences of the people and cultures they've encountered. Dean's not sure what Eloni believes about Castiel's past, but she takes his angelic declarations all in stride, even going so far as to ask him about ancient texts she'd studied over the years.

"I can't believe that legend is true," Eloni says, looking stunned after Castiel finishes recollecting some ancient Babylonian battle that Dean didn't catch the name to.

"I was there as a witness, during the final battle," Castiel says, voice low and warm. "For my first mission, I was stationed on Earth as a guardian, watching over my charges for almost five thousand years, arriving at the beginnings of man's neolithic evolution. That was before I was assigned to my first garrison and sent into battle. It was another five thousand years before I would command my own garrison and be allowed to lead missions on Earth. That was after Anna fell..." He pauses, frowning. "She was my commander for a long time. We were friends. I learned many things from her."

Dean looks up, eyeing Castiel's troubled countenance. He wonders if Cas is thinking about how badly things ended with Anna. About betraying Anna to Heaven after he came back from Zachariah's angel boot camp. About the moment he chose to side with the Winchesters instead of her back in 1978. Does Castiel feel guilty about these things? Despite what happened in the end, for a time Anna had been their ally, and her actions, though misguided in her final days, had been done out of a love for humanity. Dean *knows* Castiel learned a lot from her, about disobedience and choosing a different path; about going your own way. About giving up everything to protect a world you'd grown to love. Thing is, Castiel had a chance to come back from his mistakes. Anna never made it out alive. They've all lost too many friends and allies.

"She fell for so many of the things I have now experienced," Castiel says, as if picking up on what Dean had been thinking. He doesn't come closer, but his eyes find Dean.

"Loyalty, forgiveness, love. Every emotion, even the bad ones," Dean says, repeating words Anna had once told him when he had asked why she'd ever want to be human.

"I think about my old garrison from time to time," Castiel continues, voice low. "I can never return to Heaven. If I did, I would be killed. Rightfully so. I am Heaven's most wanted angel. There is still, as you would say, a price on my head."

Dean knows that all too well, ended one of the assassins himself out in Bobby's lot before inking the sigils that protect his friend into his skin. He places down the spoon he'd been using to stir the stew simmering in a pot over the fire. Sam is busy making coffee and cutting up pieces of bread to go with their meal, so Dean turns around and looks at Castiel again. "Cas, it was war. It..." he starts, but pauses at the look Castiel swings his way.

"I know what I deserve," Castiel says, voice sharp and terse now. "I know what I would do to someone who had done the things I did. The Host is right to send assassins after me." There's a fierceness to Castiel's gravelly voice now, and Dean closes his eyes, understanding that there is no room for

argument here.

Castiel is on the other side of the fire, far out of Dean's reach. Dean's fingers tighten minutely around the canteen he'd picked up, before he places it down and stands up. Eloni comments about needing to check the wards around their camp again, and Sam mutters something about using the bathroom, but Dean knows the excuses are to give him and Cas a moment of privacy, something they haven't really had since leaving Easter Island.

Dean settles down beside Castiel on a fallen log, and for a moment he remembers another time, another place, seated side by side. The first time he'd heard Castiel voice his doubts. *I'm not a hammer, as you say. I have questions. I...I have doubts. I don't know what is right and what is wrong anymore, whether you passed or failed here. But, in the coming months, you will have more decisions to make. I don't envy the weight that's on your shoulders, Dean. I truly don't.*

"It's been a crazy few years, huh, Cas?" Dean offers, when the silence has dragged on long enough, the night slinking its way into their camp and shrouding them in murky darkness.

Castiel turns his head. He looks up, meets Dean's eyes for a long moment. Smiles softly and says, "They have been exceedingly remarkable."

Dean licks his lips, says, "Sometimes I can't believe we made it here, man."

"We almost didn't," Castiel says, holding his gaze for a long, heavy moment.

Dean swallows hard, says, "Yeah, we almost didn't."

They lock eyes for another beat, and Dean really has a chance to look at Castiel for the first time all day, taking in his mud-caked jeans, combat boots, faded green jacket, and dirty hands. There's something about the fallen angel that shines despite the grime, shines even through layers and layers of Dean's tattered old clothes. There's something about him that Dean's always recognized, like calling to like.

Truth is, they will both always be more comfortable with a weapon in their hands than with knowing how to talk to other people (even each other), or knowing how to fit into the world around them. They fit each other in so many ways, and maybe that's all that matters.

"I wish I knew what you were thinking just now," Castiel says abruptly, blue eyes tracking across Dean's face.

"I was thinking about you," Dean says quietly.

Castiel's silence draws long before he asks, "What about me?"

Dean turns away, rubbing his hands across his thighs. "Cas, the other night," he begins, letting out a long breath before continuing with, "Look, maybe I choose all of you too. Just so you know," he whispers, repeating Castiel's words back to him, hoping Castiel understands what he's trying to get at. "I think maybe I..."

Dean doesn't have a chance to finish his thought because Eloni reappears, eyeing them both carefully. "I don't mean to interrupt you, gentlemen," she says, sounding apologetic. "Castiel, I just needed you to check the sigils across the way. I think I did them right, but I wanted to be sure."

"Yes, I can take a look," Castiel says, standing quickly and glancing at Dean for a brief moment before walking toward the camp's perimeter.

Dean drops his gaze down to his boots, waits for Eloni to tell him what to do next. When she doesn't say anything for a few moments, Dean looks up and catches her watching the fire, a deep sadness in her eyes. "What's wrong?" he asks, concerned.

"You and him...you are close, right?" she asks, jerking her thumb toward where Castiel had disappeared into the treeline.

"Me and Cas?" Dean says, clearing his throat. "We're uh...." He's never quite figured out how to answer this question. *Boyfriends? Partners? Lovers? Really friggin' complicated?*

Eloni though doesn't appear to need an answer from him. She says, "He's your best friend, am I right?"

"Yeah, I guess he is," Dean admits, stretching his arms (still sore from the trek) and taking in a deep breath. *He's my best friend*, he thinks. And ain't that something? If Dean's honest with himself, Cas is probably the first real friend he's ever had outside of Sammy. For so long, the angel had been like this weird mix of family, friend, and partner-in-crime that Dean didn't have a name for. He had always been *Cas*.

"He's your best friend," Eloni repeats, smiling softly, and then adds, "And he's the love of your life."

Dean's eyes widen, and he clears his throat again, kicking at a rock uncomfortably with his boot. "How did you know we..."

"Were together?" Eloni interrupts with a startled laugh. "You're pretty obvious when you're around each other. The touching, the looks, the thick cloud of adoration and longing," she says, watching him fondly. "Plus I married my best friend slash love of my life. We had Tuk and an amazing twenty years together. I know the signs."

Dean meets her eyes, frowning. This was the first time she'd mentioned Tuk's father. "Where is your husband?"

Eloni's face falls as she walks closer to him. "He died of cancer two years ago," she says softly.

"I'm sorry," Dean says, scooting over to make room for her to sit down beside him on the log. He hands her the flask from his jacket pocket as she situates herself. "I think you need this more than me right now."

Eloni sighs heavily, nodding as she accepts the whiskey and says, "You two sitting here reminded me of how we used to be on an expedition. We'd save all of our important conversations for the campfire."

Dean nods, glancing at the fire, watching the smoke billow and make its way toward the sky. The stew looks about ready; smells good too. "It's been a crazy year for us," he says after a beat, returning to the conversation at hand. "Cas and me...we're just now figuring things out."

Eloni nods, sipping from the flask with a grateful sigh. "It can't have been easy."

Dean looks up at her, arching a brow. Smirks. "'Cause we're both guys?"

Eloni laughs softly, shaking her head. "I was actually thinking about the angel-human thing, but I do get how your sex, gender presentation, and gender identity could complicate things as well."

Dean huffs a breath, shrugging. "It's just..."

"I'm not here to judge you, Dean," Eloni interrupts with a kind smile. "Anyway, I'm a historian. And there is one thing I can tell you for sure about human history: homosexuality has been present in every human civilization and in every culture since man began recording his story. It's more *normal* than abnormal."

"Tell that to the assholes who beat up little kids for being gay," Dean says, and there's probably no mistaking the growl in his voice.

Eloni lets loose a sad sigh, nodding. "People can be so awful. They've always been awful," she acknowledges, offering Dean the flask back. Dean sips from it and nods his agreement.

"It's one reason they fascinate me so much," Eloni admits. "Humans are capable of such horrible things. But we are capable of such huge acts of love too."

"Maybe," Dean says, not sure if he believes it.

"If that wasn't true," Eloni offers quietly, "why would you work so hard to save them? You do it because you believe in the best of humanity."

Dean looks at her, scratches the back of his neck uncomfortably, and asks, "Did Sam tell you to Dr. Phil me?"

"Nope, I just sensed you needed to talk to someone," Eloni comments, cracking a teasing smile as she stands up. She points to Castiel, who's making his way back toward them. "I'll leave you to your best friend, now. And Dean, remember something: sometimes the stories of men who loved each other can even make their way down to obfuscating societies such as ours. I've been telling my son the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu for years. Jonathan and David. Achilles and Patrocles. Alexander and Hephaiston. Men with deep bonds that went beyond friendship; warriors of legend who loved each other unto death."

Dean feels himself flushing, but he doesn't say anything. He just turns his concentration to helping Castiel set up dinner. Sam and Tuk join them soon enough, and then everyone's scooping out stew and soaking their bread in the flavory broth. The five of them eat in comfortable silence around the fire pit,

relaxing and resting their tired bodies in preparation for the last leg of the hike in the morning.

Around them the night grows cooler, the sounds of the jungle painting the world in rich tones and melodies. All of it better than the silence in Dean's head.

"You good?" Dean asks Sam a little while later, coming over to where his brother's been practicing a combination of Chi Gong breathing techniques and some weird form of yoga for the past hour.

Sam does these breathing exercises at the start and end of every day, and Dean thinks it's helping him to focus better. Sam's getting stronger, more relaxed, more in control mentally. Before this he spent an hour pouring over research with Tuk and Eloni, and he didn't even break out in a cold sweat at the mention of Lucifer and the fall of the angels.

"I'm good," Sam says, smiling up at Dean as he stretches his long body forward. "I'm gonna do some more of these stretches, and then nap for a bit before taking the first watch with Tuk."

"Stay safe," Dean says, patting Sam on the back before shuffling over toward the tent he's sharing with Cas.

The campfire's still burning in the pit, and the smell of dinner lingers in the air. In the fog of firelight, Dean can just make out Castiel's shadowy form slipping between the flaps of their tent, and he follows him inside.

It's not long before the two of them are twined together in the small tent, blankets pulled tight around themselves, warm skin and slack joints aligning as they squeeze into a single sleeping bag (Cas didn't see why they couldn't just share one, and Dean didn't really disagree). They'd promised not to do much with the others so close by, but they slide together instinctively anyway, hands rolling beneath the hems of their shirts, jeans unbuttoned, tugged down around rocking hips. They can be silent and quick, a little something to tide them over until they take the second watch.

Dean wraps his hand around Castiel's head, brushing his fingers through the dark strands of his hair as their lips meet. It's all heat and light and fire between them, like always; a secret that could burn the world down. They lay tangled, pressing against each other, stroking warm skin, exploring quietly, their mingled panting breaths the only sounds they allow to slip out. They kiss until they're sore from it, until sleep edges in like the light of the moon through the trees above them.

Eventually Dean pulls out from under Castiel and turns on his side. The angel rolls onto his back, sound asleep, mouth parted slightly. Dean reaches out and places his hand over Castiel's chest and just watches him sleep for a while, both of them still snug and warm in their shared sleeping bag.

Dean doesn't know for how long he lies there watching Castiel. But eventually he forces his eyes away and takes a moment to close his lids. He has to tell himself that Cas isn't going anywhere tonight. No sleep walking or sleep teleporting. No midnight dips in the sea.

Tonight they will sleep. And tomorrow they will find the weapon. Tomorrow they will be one day closer to having all their questions answered.

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Eloni casts the circle with a few whispered words, a giant bowl of smoldering herbs cupped in her hands and held high to the sky. She chants toward each cardinal direction, calling on the elements. Beside her, Tuk pinches a dirt and herb mixture to the northern wind, repeating after his mother.

Dean watches it all with a wary eye, understanding that the ritual is the only way to *unveil* the ancient city. They reached the center of the island about an hour ago, exhausted and sweaty from a long morning's trek. It shouldn't take them too long to reach the city once the magic is done.

Eloni's voice rises and Dean looks up as she chants, "*Ati me peta babka, peta babkama luruba anaku, zi dingir anna kanpa, zi dingir kia kanpa!*"

The herbs in the bowl seem to explode, throwing flame and light toward the blue sky. A sound like a low roll of thunder vibrates the air all around them. Castiel stiffens beside Dean, his hand coming up to rest protectively on Dean's arm. Everyone goes quiet, and Dean's hand clenches around his gun.

The air seems to get cooler, buzzing with a low-level electric static that makes Dean think of an old transistor radio. Dean shifts uncomfortably as he takes in the scene around them. The jungle looks the same as it did before: slants of sunlight dancing between vibrant green foliage, smoky-black earth that smells like the sea.

"It's done," Eloni says after a long, weighted moment, her body losing some of the tension it had carried for the past twenty minutes.

"What now?" Sam asks, his voice gone rough and uneasy. He's looking wide-eyed and a little spooked.

"We go west," she says, turning to look at each of them before pointing toward the fog-thick mountain peaks breaking through the distant treeline.

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West is endless. A world of massive trees, intermittently broken by craggily rock formations. But the closer they get to their destination, the more everything seems to grow into a heavy silence. The normal sounds of the jungle calm, decreasing to a soft murmur, and then eventually disappearing all together.

They've been walking for about three hours when something shifts in the jungle around them. All of Dean's senses tingle, and he feels the sudden difference down to his bones.

"We've crossed the barrier," Castiel says from beside him, wide eyes shifting to take in the entire area around them.

Dean shifts, his hands coming up to his weapons bag. It's as if everything had frozen in time. The air itself feels still, absent sound, absent life.

"This has to be the place," Eloni whispers into the preternatural silence, taking the lead. Her rifle parts the tree limbs in front of them as they walk forward, moving from the thickly-packed jungle and into a wide, cleared grove.

About a hundred feet in front of them, the jungle ends at a deep, narrow gorge, at the bottom of which a river of sea-green water gurgles loudly as it rushes by, probably emptying into the sea somewhere along the coast. Connecting this side of the island to the next, there's a rickety old wood suspension bridge that spans the length of the ravine.

Dean frowns, eyeing it with trepidation. "I thought no one has inhabited the island for thousands of years."

"Wait, there's a bridge to a magical hidden city?" Sam asks curiously, coming up beside Dean. He fishes his canteen out of his pack and takes a long drink, eyeing the bridge dubiously.

"But remember people *have* come here before, those who have been able to get around the magic. But they never returned to expose the island's secrets," Eloni says quietly. "The bridge looks at least a couple of decades old. But whoever built it is probably long gone."

"Something *is* still here," Castiel says, voice carrying from the edge of the treeline where he's been circling the area. He pauses and looks at the bridge, walking slowly toward it, his steps measured, careful. He stops a few feet from the bridge, squinting. "What is that place?"

"The bridge?" Sam asks, frowning and moving closer to Castiel, and Dean follows behind.

Castiel looks Sam's way. "No, I'm referring to that building. It's some kind of temple I believe," the angel says.

Dean frowns because all he sees is more jungle, thick trees and curling vines. He settles beside Castiel, arms touching. "I don't see anything," he says.

Castiel furrows his brow. "The temple is large, Dean. It isn't something one could miss," he says, voice rough.

"Castiel, you actually see something? It must be the hidden gateway," Eloni says, sounding surprised. "The passage into the city itself."

"Why can't we see it?" Dean says, still disbelieving. He rubs at his eyes, blinks, and tries to see past the dense line of treecover again.

"Castiel's the one with the angel eyes," Eloni says, and there's excitement in her voice. "That means we need to break more of the island's magic. Give me just a moment."

Dean turns to watch her retrieve supplies from her backpack, setting up a quick and dirty altar in front of the bridge. Castiel's body is rigid beside him, the angel's eyes intently focused on the other side of the ravine.

"Come on, Cas," Dean says, taking his elbow and directing him to where Sam and Tuk are already circled around Eloni.

Eloni sets out a bowl of water, a bowl of salt, and four candles, which she places around her. She then casts a circle with a sprig of herbs, chanting quietly as Tuk creates sigils in the dirt with a stick.

"Peta babkama luruba anaku, lugal ù tud nam kalam ma tar ri," Eloni chants, voice rising and lowering rhythmically as she repeats the phrases over and over again, throwing spices and herbs into her bowl.

"Quod occulta est, revelare," Castiel whispers the moment Eloni stops chanting, his gravelly voice resonating in the post-ritual silence.

For a moment nothing happens, but then the candles flare bright blue and the air itself seems to shimmer before everything around them goes luminous, sweetly aglow. Dean closes his eyes against the sudden shift in light, and when he opens them, the world has returned to normal. Except. He sucks in a breath at the sight before him. "Oh, damn," he mumbles. Sam, Tuk, and Eloni seem to be having the same reaction, their eyes and mouths gaping wide.

Eloni gets to her feet with Tuk's help, smiling excitedly. "Looks like we've found the entrance to the lost city of Lagi."

Across the ravine, the trees appear to have parted, giving way to a large monument, towering over the hillside like some ancient guardian of the jungle. Untouched by the nature around it, the temple almost gleams in the afternoon sunlight.

"Damn," Dean huffs, dropping his pack by his feet and checking his weapons.

"The bridge looks solid enough to cross," Sam says from where he's now kneeling down at the foot of the bridge testing the boards and ropes. "It should hold our weight. But we should only take the necessities and leave our backpacks, tents, bedrolls, and extra supplies over here just in case."

Dean nods his agreement, joining Sam by the bridge and examining the state of the ropes and time-warped wood. He adds, "And we all go slow, just to be safe."

"Once we enter the temple, we have to find a door that will take us through into the rest of the city," Eloni says. "A portal."

"Mom, do you think the temple's warded?" Tuk asks as he finishes clearing the ritual supplies.

"I don't know," Eloni says, turning to Castiel to ask, "Do you sense anything, Castiel?"

Castiel frowns, his expression grim. "I can't get a read on the temple at all."

Eloni nods, seemingly unsurprised. "Then we go in ready for *anything*."

Dean climbs to his feet, eyeing the monument for a moment, the dark limestone breaking through the thick foliage. "Okay, then," he says, making a decision. "Cas and I will take the lead, heading in first,



and Sam you follow behind Tuk and Eloni, guarding the rear. Keep the pace slow, and keep your weapons at the ready."

With nods all around, everyone falls into action. Dean pulls the weapons and supplies he needs out of his camping gear, loading up a messenger bag with enough ammunition to take out a small army. He watches Castiel do the same, smiling as he sees Castiel sling a sleek black bandolier across his chest. They brought that, along with Castiel's crossbow, in South Dakota from a weapons supplier Bobby's been working with for years. Dean turns to finish his own preparations, buckling on his thigh holster and adding a knife and a handgun to his hidden ankle holsters.

Castiel picks up a rifle, while Dean loads his Glock. Across from them, Sam's practicing with a pair of knives, while Tuk and Eloni fill their knapsacks with additional ritual supplies. Sam looks up and meets Dean's eye, nodding his way.

"Ready?" Dean asks them all. Everyone looks at him with grim determination, and he takes in a deep breath, holds it, letting it go as the tension eases out of him. A moment later Castiel starts walking, Dean following close at his side as they approach the bridge. Here goes nothing.



The planks are old, but the wood holds under their weight as they walk one by one across the divide. Dean doesn't look down, because *fucking hell*, but he hears the loud, gurgling rush of the river beneath them, feels the rocking of the bridge every time the wind blows, hears the groans and creaks every time his foot comes down on a plank. He sucks in a breath and breathes it out, counting each second as it passes. He looks straight ahead the entire time, following Castiel's steady pace, and before Dean knows it, he's across. He's arrived.

The looming edifice grabs all his attention when he finally steps off the bridge. Shrouded by shadows and vines, the temple sits atop a steep incline, its stone spires reaching into the sky. Dean turns around to see Tuk, Eloni, and Sam crashing through the thick grove behind him, stumbling upon the temple and stopping in awe.

"Incredible," Sam says, shooting Dean a goofy smile. Dean snorts, shaking his head. Sam always had a hard-on for history. When they were kids, Dean used to stay up all night prepping Sam for his Quiz Bowl tournaments, and Ancient Mesopotamia was always one of Sam's favorite subjects. He smiles, watching Sam make bedroom eyes at a giant stone slab.

"Everyone okay?" Dean asks eventually, and they all nod. Only a few moments pass before they start to move again. In front of the temple is an open plaza, stones placed in the ground in an intricate pattern that Dean gives up trying to work out. Before them a staircase leads up to an arched doorway. Dean watches as Castiel approaches, kneeling down in front of the first step and touching the stone carefully. The angel closes his eyes and seems to commune with it for a moment, whispering something that Dean can't hear.

"Cas?" Dean says carefully, voice failing as his body tenses. He tightens his hold on his gun and takes a step closer. His throat constricts, but he's able to ask, "Are you alright?"

Castiel blinks and turns to look up at Dean, eyes shining with a light that isn't natural. "This city was built by followers of the Great Old Ones. We must be vigilant at all times," he says, voice gone almost breathless. "They may be watching."

"Watching?" Dean repeats, frowning at Castiel's behavior. He shakes his head, inhaling sharply as he gazes up at the limestone temple rising above the jungle before turning to look back at Cas, needing to know something. "You'd tell me if you felt one of your trances coming on, right Cas?"

Castiel frowns, coming to his feet. "Of course I would," he says, cocking his head and watching Dean closely.

Dean looks away uneasily, clearing his throat and turning to watch as Sam, Eloni, and Tuk settle beside them. "We should probably see what's inside, see if there's a way through this point to the rest of the city," he says. "But we should also keep a couple of people standing watch out here."

Sam's gaze flicks to Dean. "Why don't you, Eloni, and Cas go in first," he says. "And Tuk and I will act as a lookout."

"You sure?" Dean asks, catching his brother's eye and frowning.

"It makes sense," Sam reassures. "Cas and Eloni can handle any of the magic stuff that might come up inside with you, and Tuk and I can handle anything out here."

"Yeah, yeah, okay," Dean says, still uneasy about separating from Sam, but knowing Sam is strong enough to both hold his own and keep Tuk safe. "Just be careful, and if anything goes down, get to us as quick as you can."

"Same for you," Sam says quietly, grabbing Dean's shoulder and squeezing.

Dean nods, and turns to Castiel, who's staring at the door in silence. "Ready man?"

"Yes," Castiel says, slinging his rifle across his back.

"Let's take a look then, gentlemen," Eloni says, cautiously leading the way toward the entrance, while Dean and Castiel follow closely behind her.

The entrance is framed by a pair of thick stone pillars, and the door itself is carved with a pattern that Dean recognizes from the plaza floor, a set of spirals intersecting.

"What do you think it means?" Dean asks, fingers brushing over the design.

"The ocean," Eloni says with a smile. "The patterns look like the ocean."

"Yeah, it does," Dean says, seeing it now. He runs his finger along what he suspects is the crest of a wave. "On three, let's try to get this door open."

Together all three of them are able to press against the door, sliding it inward, the stone slab making a grinding noise as it moves from its closed position. It's not as heavy as Dean thought it would be, the stone worn away by age and disuse. He pushes his shoulder against the cool stone for a long moment, huffing a happy breath as it gives way and reveals the shadowy interior of the temple. There are enough openings in the stone walls that the inside is lit up with the afternoon sun, ribbons of light punctuating the shadows like stage lights in an amphitheater.

There are two stone pillars in the center of the room, and a stone altar against the farthest wall. Eloni approaches the altar, while Dean and Castiel watch on in silence. "This is the sister temple to the one we are seeking," she says, voice echoing in the silence of the room. "There could be clues here in the writing telling us where the artifact will be found inside the other temple."

The anteroom of the temple is wide, stone floors spanning about forty feet across. The room smells of age, musty and warm, a mix of mold, dust, and the mossy green of the jungle. Its stone walls are carved with images of the sea and with rows of glyphs that track from floor to ceiling.

Dean let his fingers ghost over the surfaces, feeling the cool, smooth lines of stone along the wall. He turns to face Castiel. "Can you read them?"

Castiel frowns, pressing his own fingers along the row of glyphs on the stone slab in front of him. "Several words are familiar to me. From what I can tell, this room tells the history of the city, of this civilization."

Eloni walks over toward them, saying, "The hieroglyphics are only partly known to me as well, but many are unlike anything I have seen, even in my studies," she says, fingers running over the inscription on a tall stone wall in front of her. "And many of these symbols are sea-based. Fish, eels, octopi, crustaceans, mollusks, whales, and the like, used to communicate ideas. This is an amazing

find. Can you imagine the stories in this place?"

"Do you think there's anything here about Cthulhu?" Dean asks, running a hand over the wall before him. The stone here is smoother, worn through with time.

"I do. I think we need to read what's in this room, and we'll better know what to do once we find the Temple of the Malama," Eloni explains. "And we need to find a way through this temple to the rest of the city beyond. This is the gateway between the worlds."

Dean nods, scratching at his chin thoughtfully. "I can look for the doorway while you and Cas try a hand at translating everything."

Eloni nods her agreement. "Sounds good."

"Okay," Dean says before turning from her to look for Castiel. The angel's already on the other side of the room, sliding into a side corridor that goes off from the anteroom, and Dean has to jog to catch up with him. This isn't the time for Cas to go disappearing on them.

"Hey Cas, what—" Dean stops, pausing to track Castiel behind what had once been some kind of hidden door but is now just a slight opening in the stone, enough to fit one's body through.

The room they enter into is large, what Dean figures used to be some sort of library. It's filled with an array of ancient objects, scattered on the floors and on crudely-shaped shelving units. But in front of them is a raised area covered with stone tablets.

"I'll be damned."

Dean startles at the voice coming from behind him. He turns to see Eloni stepping into the room through the passageway. "This is where they must have kept the important things," she adds, voice sounding wistful. "Records, agreements, official histories."

Castiel is walking toward the center of the room, and Dean and Eloni follow him further into the chamber. As Dean passes a shelving unit, his eyes take in the rune stones, crude hand axes, knives covered in ancient symbols, jewelry, and large pieces of pottery that sit untouched on the surfaces.

"More unfamiliar glyphs and ciphers," Eloni says, reaching the platform covered in stone tablets. "This is like the first time I worked with the cuneiform clay-tablets excavated by archaeologists from the city of Uruk, in Sumer."

"Some of these look similar to the birdman petroglyphs we saw on Easter Island," Dean says, settling beside Castiel and Eloni in front of the raised platform.

"The languages share many common traits, which makes sense considering there had to have been trade and migration between these islands at one point in time," Eloni says. "How about Cas I work on deciphering some of these tablets." She turns to Castiel who nods his agreement.

"Yeah, that would be great," Dean says, watching as Eloni and Castiel carefully handle the stone

tablets, knowing that each one tells a story, contains some secret to the past that could potentially shed light on the future.

"And I'll start searching for the through-passage to the city," Dean says, casting one last look at the stone tablets and Castiel's scrunched-up face as he attempts to read them. Dean smirks and turns to head back into the front chamber.

Dean covers the entire room in no time. He presses against the cool stone, checking for possible secret doors or passages to another part of the jungle. What he finds instead are a series of illustrations that run along the upper length of the room. He examines the markings closely, whispering. "This looks like a map. Could it be?"

Before he has time to answer, he feels a hand at his shoulder, and turns to see Castiel, looming into his personal space. The angel's face looks drawn, pale. His body is tense, and his eyes meet Dean's for a long moment, before turning away. Something inside Dean twists as he asks, "Cas, what is it?"

"I have translated the records here," Castiel says quietly.

Dean arches a brow and leans against the stone wall. "All of them?"

Castiel looks at Dean again. "Yes, all of them."

Dean laughs and says, "Dude, you read *all* the stone tablets? There had to be hundreds."

Castiel shrugs. "Five hundred and seventy-eight to be exact."

"He's a machine," Eloni says, coming back into the room, tucking loose strands of her salt-and-pepper hair behind her ear. "To think I gave up after the first five. But from what I could tell, it was a history of the people and city here. What else did you find, Castiel?"

Castiel takes in a deep breath, glancing at each of them before speaking. "I've never seen the language used before, but it had enough linguistic similarities to other human languages that I could decipher most of the text – the chants, runes and spells – as well as the history of the city."

"That's great, Cas," Dean says, settling his body more comfortably along the wall. "Was there anything important?"

Castiel looks at him, and then says, "It tells their creation story, the rise of the city and its great kings. It also tells of the 'Ancient Ones' who wait beneath the earth to rise up and reclaim their domain should certain conditions be met to allow their awakening. It tells of the city's sorcerers working to discover the secret to bringing back the Ancient Ones with a powerful ritual."

Eloni sucks in a breath. "The leaders were trying to bring back Cthulhu?"

Castiel nods, hands settling against the stone slab in front of him. "There was a battle between those worshipping the Great Old Ones and those fighting against them. Those worshipping the Great Old Ones won and claimed the city."

"Damn," Dean says, folding his arms over his chest. He huffs out a breath and says, "What else do they say about Cthulhu?"

"They teach of a prophecy," Castiel says, pausing to frown before continuing. "It details the story of Cthulhu and the rest of the Great Old Ones, how they were thrown into their watery tombs, 'dead but dreaming', waiting for the day when they will awaken, their cities will rise from the waves, and their empires will once again hold dominion over the whole earth."

"So, they were wackjobs," Dean says.

Castiel looks at him, eyes hard and piercing. "They were *believers*. Their philosophers speak of other religion's creation stories, linking their own history to the stories of other peoples."

Dean frowns. "Meaning what?"

"The Apocalypse," Castiel says, closing his eyes for a moment before opening them again, as if it pains him to explain this all. "To them, all religions are linked. The stories are one in the same, a continuum, sharing a common origin. As does the story of the end. It's similar to something that Kali said to me... *all roads lead to the same destination*."

"Cas," Dean says, walking closer to Castiel and placing a hand on his elbow. "What are you getting at?"

"That maybe we didn't stop the Apocalypse, Dean," Castiel says. "We didn't stop anything."

Dean growls, shaking his head. "Of course we stopped it. We—" He stops as a memory pops up out of nowhere, Death chowing down on Dean's own half-eaten turkey sandwich. He starts to speak, thinks better of it and edits what he was about to blurt out. "Mr. D said something to me," he says, and at Castiel's frown he elaborates just far enough. "Skinny little guy dressed all in black, you know him. *Death*. He said something about us not having averted destiny entirely."

"Maybe you just changed its course," Eloni says, voice full of dawning understanding. "Like diverting a river. You damn one route, but it takes another. The river *must* flow somewhere. Destiny *is*."

Castiel meets Dean's eyes, holding his gaze for a long, heavy moment. "The Great Old Ones were the first creations. And they left their mark on the world. On all the religions of the world after them," he explains. "When Elder Gods like Kali crossed into this world to seize power, they were left with the remnants of the Great Old Ones; they inherited their domains. And their stories."

Eloni sucks in a sharp breath and says, "So even though the Elder Gods fought the remaining Old Ones and forced the rest of them into slumber at the center of the world, the die was cast. The story must unfold as it was supposed to."

Castiel nods. "The Beast can be defeated, and it's prophesied how and by whom he will be defeated," he explains. "These records speak of that prophecy. It's why Hastur took action to create the weapons, to play his role in the prophecy. He worked with the Elder Gods to create three weapons that he believed could harm the Beast, weaken him enough to defeat him when he rose again. These weapons

were hidden across the world. One was hidden in this city in hopes that a champion would rise to face the Beast one day."

"It's all prophesied?" Dean asks, groaning. "Fuck prophecy, Cas!"

Castiel closes his eyes for a long moment and then takes a breath, and turns to Dean. "Where is the sword?"

"Sam locked it back at Eloni's house," Dean says. "We thought it would be safest there."

"The signs on the sword are important to this. I knew that the moment I saw them. Do you remember them yourself?" Castiel asks him, voice urgent. "What Kali told us about them."

Dean turns to look at Eloni, confused, before turning back to stare at Castiel. "Uh yeah I do," he says. "Kali told us the sword would be marked by both Hastur's sign and the Elder sign. Both sigils are on the blade."

"Yes, the Elder sign," Castiel says, shaking his head as if he can't believe it. "It's the sign of the Elder Gods who worked with Hastur to create the weapons. The sign was familiar to me when I saw the sword, but I could not understand why. Not until now."

"What are you talking about Cas?" Dean asks, baffled.

Castiel sighs deeply. "In Heaven, Michael had a sign that closely resembled the Elder sign. I think that Michael actually took the Elder sign as his own symbol when he rose in ranks in Heaven. Michael carried a sword with him that bore that mark; *his* mark."

"He carried a sword with his mark," Dean repeats, his mind racing as connections are made.

"He carried this same sword," Castiel says quietly.

"Are you saying that the Archangel Michael once used the sword we now have in our possession?" Eloni asks, voice rising. "Hastur's weapon?"

Castiel nods sharply. "When Hastur was entombed, the Elder Gods inherited protection of his weapons. They hid them. But the Lagi texts speak of a warrior who inherited one of the weapons from the Elder Gods; he would protect it and hide it."

"And you're saying that warrior was an angel. That it was *Michael*?" Dean says, shaking his head. "This is all too friggin' much."

"It makes sense," Castiel says. "By protecting the sword, Michael took the Elder sign as his own sign."

"Oh wow," Eloni says, standing up straighter. "Wow."

Dean laughs, feeling hysterical. "We have the *actual* Michael sword. For fuck's sake."

Eloni is watching them both closely, eyes wide. "But why would the Archangel Michael agree to take the sword? Why would he help the Elder Gods?"

"Because the Elder Gods believed him their champion," Castiel says softly. "Michael is the champion who prophecy said would slay the Beast."

"The Beast of Revelation," Eloni says, eyes brightening. "It's the same damn prophecy!"

Castiel nods, stepping away from them and pacing around the room. "I think...maybe Michael was meant to slay not only one Beast, the one we call Lucifer," he says. "But two."

"It makes sense," Eloni says. "In the Bible it mentions that at the right time, the Archangel Michael, the great prince who protects our people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. He will slay the Beast."

"But one problem," Dean cuts in, words dripping with disdain. "Michael's in the Cage with Lucifer. He's locked up. We put him there. He didn't and won't be slaying anyone or anything."

"I know," Castiel says, voice grave as he meets Dean's eyes.

They're all quiet for a long time, watching each other in the dusty light of the chamber.

"I don't know what this all means," Dean says, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "Fucking prophecy. It's bullshit, man. We rewrote the script, remember? Prophecy is not set in stone."

"But prophecies also have multiple meanings," Castiel says, watching him closely. "They can be interpreted differently in different religious traditions. Did you ever think that maybe they can't be *rewritten*, per se. Only shifted. That maybe they just play out differently, just taking a different course to get to the same end."

Dean huffs a breath, shaking his head. "Goddammit, Cas. That makes no sense."

"Gentlemen, settle down," Eloni interrupts, groaning exhaustedly as she slumps down beside a large stone slab. "Did you know that the Book of Revelation actually mentions two Beasts?" she asks after a time, voice gone quiet. "One of which is a Beast rising up out of the sea."

"I remember that," Dean says, because *damn*, he does. "I didn't believe it was real."

"You didn't believe I was real," Castiel says, voice deep and rough.

Dean catches his eyes, looks away quickly and mutters, "Yeah, I know."

"Across the world, there are many gods, many apocalypses," Eloni says, words soft. "The Bible has just one version. But what we're saying here is that it's incomplete, wrongly interpreted because it's missing how all the other prophecies link into it."

"That would mean that the angels were only trying to fulfill one part of the Apocalyptic prophecy,"



Dean says with a rough sigh. He rubs at his eyes, feeling suddenly tired.

"The Lagi texts tell of a prophecy similar to the one we find in the Christian Gospels. According to the stone tablets, there would be a prophet who would rise to herald the Beast's coming," Castiel says quietly.

"What kind of prophet?" Dean asks, frowning.

"A prophet of lies and deceit," Castiel says sharply.

"Like the False Prophet in the Bible!" Eloni exclaims, voice rising in excitement. "In the Book of Revelation, there are descriptions of two beasts: a beast from the sea, and a beast from the land. They are often discussed as the Beast and the *False Prophet*. It is said that the first Beast comes from out of the sea, and the second beast comes from out of the earth and directs the people of the world to worship the first. We are told the False Prophet was given power to give breath to the image of the first Beast. Along with Satan, these three entities are thought of as the unholy trinity that would bring in Armageddon."

"So we're saying the mythology surrounding Cthulhu and the end of the world can be related back to End Times stories from the Book of Revelation," Dean says, just needing to get it all out in the open, clear. "The two apocalyptic mythologies are linked."

"Yes. The Lagi prophecy is a retelling of the Armageddon story," Castiel says, nodding.

Eloni stands up again, pacing excitedly around the room. "In the Bible, the Beast gathers the kings of the earth and their armies to prepare for war against He who sits on a white horse – a rider who is faithful and true. The ensuing battle results in the Beast being seized, along with the False Prophet, and they are both cast into the Lake of Fire, where they are tormented for all eternity."

"This is a little too Lord of the Rings for me," Dean huffs, shaking his head. "Next you'll be telling me how 'one does not simply walk into Mordor.'"

Eloni laughs, a bit breathless. "Where do you think Tolkien got his inspiration from?"

"Okay, say all of this is true. What do we even do with this knowledge?" Dean asks, frowning.

"According to the Lagi prophecies, in order to kill the Beast we must use the blood of the Prophet in a special ritual," Castiel says. "We must use the ritual to bind them together and cast them into the Lake of Fire."

"We could use the ritual we found in the *Necronomicon*!" Eloni says, grinning. "It could work! By itself, the ritual in the grimoire would only trap the Beast back in his underwater tomb. But combining it with this False Prophet ritual means we won't just stop the Beast or put him back to sleep. We could *kill* him. It would be powerful magic."

"Yes," Castiel says. "I think combining the rites would work. We need a weapon dipped in the blood of the Prophet, which we will then use to slay the beast. Hastur's weapons are the prophesied weapons."

What remains is the last artifact, the one we're here to find."

"Okay, good," Dean says, voice rough, determined. "Let's go find it then, how about it?"

Eloni nods, pausing in her pacing. "I think I know how we find the door to the city."

"The map," Dean says, looking back at the stone slab he'd been examining earlier.

"What map?" Eloni says, brows arching.

"Doesn't that look like a map?" Dean asks, pointing to the engraved stones along the top of the wall.

"It does, doesn't it?" Eloni says, smiling wide, voice excited as she steps closer to the wall. "It has to be the city plan, all its passageways. And look, see, these lines look like roads and these symbols look like directional points," she adds, fingers running over the etched markings in the center of the stone.

"This has to be where we are," Dean says, stepping forward and pointing at the carving of a building that appears at the edge of the drawing, like a gateway leading in.

"I'm pretty sure this is a map of Lagi. These drawings of trees must represent the jungle, and this point represents the peak of the mountain," Eloni says, sounding excited.

Dean points to another set of images that curve out from the entrance, resembling a sun with rays moving away from the temple. "And this is where we enter the city."

"We just need the door to open for us," Eloni says. "And that's the part I found out how to do." She turns around and retrieves a stone tablet, holding it carefully in her hand as she approaches them. "There's an incantation we recite with a ritual that I believe will open the doorway through the temple."

"Freaking yes," Dean says, giving her a smile, his eyes catching Castiel's as he appears beside her.

Castiel brushes their shoulders together, and asks, "Are we ready?"

"Yeah," Dean answers, and he's turning his body to lean closer to Castiel when he feels suddenly thrown off-balance. A shiver runs through him, and he jerks upright. "What the—"

"Something's wrong," Eloni says, the white of her eyes shining in the dim light of the room.

"Yes, something's happened," Castiel says, stepping away from Dean and starting back towards the exit.

Dean and Eloni follow behind him, and they're entering the front chamber just as Sam and Tuk come barreling in from where they'd been keeping watch by the entrance, breathing hard and with their weapons cocked.

"What's wrong?" Deans asks, doing a quick visual scan of Sam for injuries. His brother looks fine, but his eyes are wide and panicked.

Sam visibly swallows and steels himself as he says, "Something's coming, Dean."

"Some *things*. They're in the jungle!" Tuk adds nervously, hands clutching at his knapsack. "They're making these weird noises. Like moans and stuff."

Dean closes his eyes for a moment to steady himself. Then asks, "Did you see what they looked like?"

Sam nor Tuk have a chance to respond because at that moment Dean hears his name being yelled from outside. That's when Dean realizes that Castiel had gone ahead.

"Dammit, Cas!" Dean says, taking out his gun and racing to the entrance. He blinks his eyes against the glare of the afternoon sun as he steps outside, and then turns his head in time to see Castiel slicing the head off of something that looks very old, very gross, and very, very *dead*.

"What the hell is that?" Sam asks, alarmed.

"The guardians of the temple. The undead warriors of Lagi," Castiel says, voice hard. "An army that rises to protect the ancient city. I read about them on wall inside."

"You forgot to mention that part!" Dean yells, turning his eyes to scan the thick treeline. There's definitely more of those things out there in the jungle; he hears the shuffle-crunch of moving bodies, and the sounds of moans and howls that are definitely not human.

"I can try putting up a ward..." Eloni says, hands going to her bag.

"No time," Castiel growls, raising his machete and turning to stare at the gathered group. "Eloni you must work on opening the door, and I will stay to take care of the guardians."

"Not alone you're not," Dean shouts, glaring daggers at Castiel. "Sam and I are going to take care of these with you."

Castiel locks eyes with Dean for a long, tense moment, before the angel nods abruptly, eyes going back to the row of trees. Another howling cry from the jungle has them all grabbing for their weapons and tensing up.

"Did you say *undead*?" Sam asks, voice wary.

"They are the reanimated corpses of the original thirty guardians," Castiel says. "The city's magic gives them eternal life."

"What is this, *Return of the Living Dead*?" Dean grumbles. "I really friggin' hate zombies." His hands curl around his shotgun, nails digging into the warm metal. He turns to glance back at Eloni and says, "Cas was right about one thing though. Eloni, you and Tuk have to figure out the incantation and get the gate opened for us, okay? Go now!"

Eloni hesitates, but nods, grabbing Tuk's hand and heading back into the temple with him. Dean turns

to look at Sam, who's already loading his own shotgun. "Ready little brother?"

Sam smirks, raising his gun. "Yep," he says.

Dean glances at Castiel, who is eyeing the still-twitching beheaded corpse at his feet with a curious gaze. "Beheading them is the only way to slow them down. But it won't kill them."

"Of course," Sam mutters. "Zombies 101."

Dean groans. "We journey thousands of miles to an ancient city in the South Pacific to uncover an artifact needed to defeat Cthulhu, only to find a temple protected by an army of the undead," he says, sighing. "You can't make this shit up."

"Welcome to our life," Sam mutters.

Dean scrubs a hand over his face and squints into the shadows, catching a movement from his left. He bites back a curse when they finally appear, dark figures crawling out of the shadows, seeming to shift out from between twisted tree limbs, out of the jungle's dark holes and crevices. They climb out of the trees and toward them from all directions.

"Shit." Dean lowers his voice and adds, "Get ready."

Turns out the dead don't walk; they *sprint*.

In the blink of an eye, the guardians are surrounding Dean, Sam, and Castiel on all sides. The things are decrepit, falling apart, skin pale if there's any skin left on them at all. Some of them are naked or near naked, wearing only rags and pieces of tattered, ancient clothing. Others are still in full warrior gear, shields and armor rusted but clinging to their dead bodies.

The first attack happens so quick it gives Dean whiplash. One moment he's aiming his shotgun at the ugliest motherfucker he's seen in a long while, and the next he's wrestling the thing to the ground, grinding his knee into its bony chest, and trying to stop the sucker from chomping down on his neck. Running on adrenaline and fear, Dean's slamming his shotgun into the guardian's face before he even thinks through his plan of action, and then he's pulling the trigger, shattering the zombie's head into a thousand pieces of bone, and skin, and muscle. Pieces of the thing cling to Dean's face and neck. He shakes himself, stunned, mouth flooded with bile as he stumbles to his feet, trying not to vomit.

There's still ongoing commotion all around him. In his peripheral vision, he sees Castiel using hand-to-hand combat and his machete to take on three guardians, while Sam's aiming for their heads with his shotgun. He watches as a group of them circle Sam, who's already torn-up and bloody from the fight. Sam's keeping them at bay by shooting at one and then another, emptying rounds into the guardian's skulls as they hurtle toward him, and in that moment Dean makes up his mind. "Sam, run for the temple! I'll cover you!" he yells at his brother, racing toward him, shotgun in hand.



Sam doesn't stop shooting, only yells louder. "What?! No!"

Dean is eyeing the distorted visage of a guardian as it starts for his brother. "Eloni and Tuk need to be protected. Make sure they find the way into the city. Let me and Cas take care of the rest of these!"

Sam turns to Dean, but that's when the things decide to up their attack. Dean races forward, desperate, watching as Sam attempts to fight one then two of them off, cursing as the things get a hold of him and drag him to the ground.

"Sam!" Dean hollers as his brother goes down, but Castiel is suddenly there, wrenching the creatures away from Sam and flinging them across the grass.

"Listen to your brother, Sam!" Castiel's voice has a hard, uncompromising quality to it. "Go now, and help the professor and her son open the pathway."

Sam doesn't look happy, but he gets to his feet and makes his way toward the temple, and Dean lets out a relieved breath. His hands are shaking, mouth gulping for air, as he turns to face one of the guardians trying to follow his brother.

"Oh no you don't," Dean snaps in its direction, and the thing turns to face him directly, its mangled mouth smiling cruelly. The guardian's armor, which had once been gilded, is cracked and dull. The

creature's breastplate is split down the middle, its ancient sword chopped in half. Flesh falls from its face, putrified muscle and white bone peeking through.

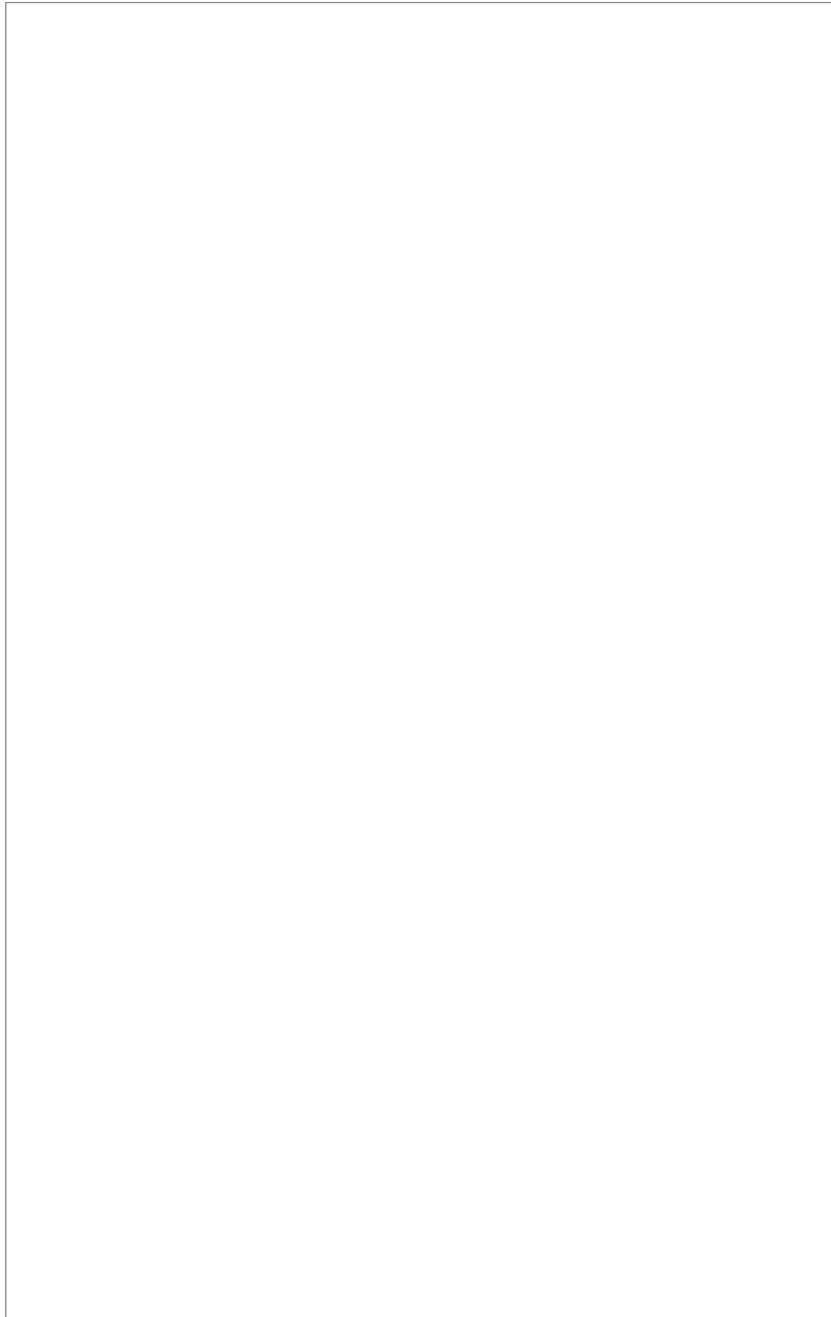
The guardian rushes him, and Dean's machete swings out, slicing through the soft flesh of its abdomen. The hit doesn't slow it down, and that's when Dean gets a good look at the changing situation. Cas is battling a half a dozen guardians about a yard away. But Dean can see the other remaining ones all getting to their feet, bodies reforming as they flank out in all directions.

And then they sprint, all of them at once, and Dean knows what he has to do. He runs like the friggin' wind. The guardians chase Dean into the jungle as he barrels through the dense forest of trees, tripping over the thick roots that snake over the ground. Around him, he hears bodies rustling through the foliage, hard and swift movements following his own.

For a time, Dean even hears Castiel shouting his name in the distance, but Dean's too busy trying to dodge giant tree limbs and chomping zombie teeth. He's not paying enough attention to where he's going, and before he knows it, he finds himself falling to his knees in a clearing, surrounded by a number of undead warriors racing his way.

One of the guardians launches itself at Dean, pinning him to the ground. Dean swings his gun at the creature's head, hitting it over and over, listening the crunch of its skull and the mush of its brain with every impact. He manages to get the body off of him with a sharp, forceful swing of his arm, but just as Dean's climbing to his feet, he's knocked over again, falling onto his back this time.

Sharp pain shoots up through his spine, making breathing difficult. Dean's gasping as he raises his head up, blinking against the light of the evening sun. There, directly above him, blocking the sky, he sees the outline of a guardian. It raises its sword in the air, and the world goes quiet, slows down, stretches infinitely long. There's a hot twist of fear low in Dean's gut, but he can't manage even one word as the creature brings his sword down for a killing blow.



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"Now you know how much my love for you  
burns deep in me

when I forget about our emptiness,  
and deal with shadows as with solid things."  
— Dante Alighieri, *Purgatorio*

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### *Tu'ugamau Island*

The blade is an inch from Dean's face when the undead guardian suddenly jerks back, its decrepit body crumpling where it stands. Dean has only a brief moment to see the creature light up from the inside, its near-empty eye sockets gone ablaze and spilling something that looks like the noonday sun before Dean has to shut his own eyes, curl up, and hide his head in his arms. *Cas*, Dean thinks, knowing the angel's light like he knows the back of his own hand.

A few seconds pass before Dean has the wherewithal to uncurl himself and blink his eyes open. The light has faded from the creature, and all that remains is the burnt husk of the ancient warrior, its head a blackened crisp of decaying meat that has even Dean considering going vegetarian for a while. Castiel is already a few yards away, moving with inhuman speed and grace as he takes on more of the undead guardians. The angel is dancing across the glen like he's in some battlefield ballet, and Dean finds he can't look away. There's something about Castiel like this that's a bit mesmerizing; he's in his element, a powerful force of fury and might, and for a moment Dean is reminded of what *Cas* was put on this Earth to do. *To kick some serious ass.*

It takes Dean another moment to get back his bearings, jumping to his feet to join in the fray. He picks up his machete from where it fell to the ground, and then grabs his Colt 45 from his bag before racing toward the battle. Castiel is pumping bullets into one guardian, while he wrenches the head of another right from its shoulders one-handed. Dean sucks in a breath at the display, watching as the zombie crumples to the ground, headless and spurting blood and black goo, leaving behind a putrid mess of flesh and bone.

Dean has only a moment to take in the rest of the surrounding scene – there are more than ten zombies circling the glen – before one of the undead warriors tackles Dean from the side. They both go down hard, and the next thing Dean knows he's got an armful of monster, all pale, undead skin and black matted hair and dead white eyes, before the thing starts snarling, mouth widening to rip into Dean.

Dean manages to force his gun up between them and shoot bullets into the thing's gut at point-blank range. The force of the impact sends the creature sailing, but Dean doesn't slow down. He rockets to his feet, pivoting around in time to behead another one, sending its blood and hair flying in all directions. He glances up to see Castiel practically flying over the grass himself – he has one creature head-locked in his arm while he pumps two rounds into the guardian racing toward him.





Dean swings around to his right, holding his breath, muscles in his arms tensing as he picks up his abandoned shotgun and reloads it with shaking hands. Not a moment too soon in fact: another guardian erupts from the surrounding treeline, sprinting his way. Dean shoots and shoots, bucking at each recoil, counting each time the creature jerks back after one bullet and then another slams into its chest. But the thing just keeps on coming until he blows a hole right through its head.

Dean can hear Castiel's rifle rat-a-tat-tatting from a few feet away, and he turns his head for a brief moment, watching the creatures go down one by one as Castiel shoots. Panting, Dean raises his

shotgun high and turns to scan the clearing for the remaining warriors. There are about eight corpses on the ground, their heads gaping holes where flesh and bone used to be. Dean knows there are more out there in the trees, circling the glen, but he concentrates on the two bullet-ridden ones pulling themselves up from the ground a few yards from him.

Dean's shotgun is warm in his hands as he takes aim at the head of the nearest guardian. The crack of his weapon rings clear across the clearing. He gets off two more shots, quick and precise, before the two undead warriors fall back, headless and still, onto the ground.

They've been battling these things for so long the sky has darkened, and the world has narrowed down to the smell of rot and the stink of old blood. Shotgun shells litter the grass, crunching under Dean's boots, and the field of bodies surrounding him makes him think of the war stories his dad used to tell him.

Castiel is moving through the clearing, checking the bodies to make sure they're *really* dead. Dean crouches down to the ground, closes his eyes, and sucks in deep breaths. He can feel everything about his body now, the aches and pains, the blood and zombie shit that stains his clothes and skin. He drags a hand through his hair, wincing at the sticky mix of sweat and dirt and blood tangling it. Adrenaline's slowly fading from his body, and in its wake he's left exhausted and frayed. In the silence, his thoughts return to Sam, wondering if he, Eloni, and Tuk made it through the gateway.

"We've killed all but sixteen of the thirty," Castiel says, and Dean jumps, not having heard Castiel's stealthy approach from behind him.

Dean climbs to his feet, groaning and wincing at the twinges in his body, and turns to look at Castiel, who's looking about as good as Dean feels. "Do you sense the remaining ones?" he asks, throat dry and sore from the lack of water.

"Yes, they're scattered in the jungle surrounding us. They're biding their time," Castiel says gruffly as he reaches into his bandolier for ammunition and begins to reload his rifle.

"Friggin' zombies," Dean mutters, watching Castiel's smooth and deft hands load the cartridges quickly into the gun.

"They have proved most difficult," Castiel says, voice a soft growl.

Dean barely has a chance to ask Cas how he's doing before the undead guardians decide it's time for a little *Return of the Living Dead*. Five of the warriors sprint out of the jungle in some sort of intricate, star-shaped battle formation. Dean's reminded of the war tactics he used to read about in Bobby's old tomes on ancient warfare.

Dean backs up slowly, holding his breath, and takes aim as the guardians launch their attack, racing forward with their swords held high and sounding some sort of battle cry that nearly ruptures Dean's ear drums. Shaking off the sound, Dean doesn't even have a moment to think; he just reacts, all instinct and training. He beheads one guardian before he can even blink, watching a second one grapple at him, its bones bursting through armor and skin as Dean kicks it to the ground.

Castiel's pinning a third creature to the ground, ripping its head off its neck with his bare hands. Dean isn't ready when another guardian wraps its arms around his waist and bites down hard into his shoulder. Dean screws his eyes shut tight and lets loose a low groan, feeling the thing's teeth tear into him. Sharp pain winds down his arm and blood oozes across his skin. Dean drops to the ground in a motion that sends the guardian on his back grappling for purchase, but the thing still has its mouth clamped onto Dean's shoulder, its jaws working slowly, and the smell of his own blood has Dean feeling dizzy, ready to vomit.

Taking in a deep breath and centering on the pain, Dean twists in the creature's hold, kicking his leg back, and shooting his elbow out with the right amount of force, so that the guardian loosens its hold enough that Dean can reach for the smooth handle of his machete. Dean wraps his hand around it, and with all his strength he pushes back at the creature, and damn if it feels like it rips out a piece of him as it goes. The guardian stumbles away, and Dean staggers to his feet, slams the butt of his shotgun into the thing's stomach, and then brings the blade down as hard as he can manage, slicing clear through the monster's neck. The creature spasms and twitches, its torso falling to the ground as its severed head lands beside Dean's feet, rolling for a moment before settling, face up.

Dean stands there for a moment, looking into the creature's unseeing eyes, breathing against the white-hot pain working its way through his arm.

"Dean!" Castiel's voice is loud at his side, sounding tired and rugged and battle-worn.

Dean sways for a moment, but settles as Castiel's hand comes up to rest against his arm. He looks at Cas and is surprisingly not at all put off by the bits of zombie flesh clinging to his jacket.

"I thought I was zombie catnip there for a while," Dean confesses, low and rough.

"There are still more coming our way," Castiel says quickly, and Dean jerks his head around, scanning the clearing, heart dropping as he sees that Castiel's right. The last of the guardians are exiting the jungle, making their way slowly into the glen.

A few seconds pass, and then they're all standing around the clearing, surrounding Dean and Castiel from all sides.

"Shit," Dean says. A beat passes in which he counts how many they'd each need to fight, and then he takes a breath and settles at Castiel's side. They stand side-by-side, weapons at the ready, and wait.



Dean glances at Castiel for a moment and thinks, *I should tell Cas. I should just say it...* But he doesn't finish the thought because Castiel turns to him and meets his eyes, and there's something in his gaze that makes Dean's mind go blank.

"We need to end this *now*," Castiel whispers roughly into the silence. Dean's about to ask Cas if he has

a grand plan to do that when it's currently eleven against two, when Castiel gets this hard look on his face and raises his hand in the air, and Dean *knows* exactly what's about to happen.

"Close your eyes!" Castiel booms.

Dean obeys, raising his arms in front of his face. When the light show hits, the searing glow is a shock to Dean's system, and he feels the sheer force of it filling the glen, filling up the whole world even. The guardians' dying screams are loud enough to send Dean to his knees, and he feels chunks of burnt zombie flesh and bone rain down all around him.

Everything goes quiet.

Dean opens his eyes, squints. It's almost as if the clearing is bathed in some kind of weird magic; the grass and the trees and the rocks seem to hum and pulse. He breathes deep, dragging in breaths of fetid air. The muscles in his body slowly lose their tension, and his boots sink into the dirt.

"Dean," Castiel says, voice fierce and low.

"I'm okay," Dean says. He looks up, and Castiel's standing tall in front of him, bloodstained and swaying, but larger-than-life. The angel looks at Dean for a long, considering moment before turning to stare out at the expanse of land around them.

"Is that all of 'em?" Dean asks, eyes tracking across the clearing, zooming in on the burnt husks of zombies littering the grass. He can't quite clear his head, too much adrenaline still ringing loudly in his ears.

"It's over," Castiel says, kneeling down to settle beside Dean.

Dean closes his eyes. He can feel blood clinging to his eyelashes, dripping from the cut on his forehead. He can feel the sweat prickling across his neck. The dirt caked on his face. He counts to three, focuses on making his heartbeat slow.

When Dean looks up, Cas is watching him again. The angel is clearly exhausted from his display of power, and he slumps against Dean, settling close.

"You shouldn't have used so much of your mojo," Dean says, breathing hard. He's mad at himself for being so angry about it, but he knows how Cas gets after a big show like this.

"I did what I had to do," Castiel says fiercely, and Dean wants to fight with him about that, but he's too damn tired, so he just grunts his disagreement and lets Castiel drag them both to the ground, where they settle together to regain enough strength for the journey ahead.

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Sam eyes the front door of the temple again, heart skipping over itself in his chest. *Come on, Dean.*

"Your brother and Castiel will be okay," Eloni says, shaking Sam out of his racing thoughts. "They told us to go on. To find the artifact. And Sam, we must do that while the magic keeps our window open."

"I can't leave them," Sam says, fists clenching.

"Tuk and I need your help right now too. We can't do this alone," Eloni says, and her voice carries authoritatively in the small confines of the antechamber.

Sam swallows, closing his eyes and breathing. Dean would need him to continue the quest, to find the artifact. "Okay, you're right," he finally concedes, fidgeting where he stands, needing to get a start on things.

"Dean *will* be alright," Tuk says from the corner where he's pressing his hands to what they think is the map of Lagi.

Eloni looks over at him and nods. "And in the meantime we find the artifact," she says, her eyes going to the stone tablet she had been holding as she adds, "I'll recite this, and the door should reveal itself to us. But both of you must keep your eyes on the walls."

Sam straightens up and fixes his gaze to the far right wall. He holds his flashlight high, and the shadows shrink back towards the darkness. "Let's do this, then."

Eloni's words are soft as she begins to read, "*Peta babkama luruba anaku, peta abullu daltu eribu, harsag zalazalag...*" Sam listens to the way her voice falls and rises in a cadence that is harmonious and elegant for something so alien. The air around him goes heavy with the language, thickens with its power, filling every corner of the room with the echo of Eloni's voice. The energy in the room sparks, comes alive, shimmers.

Sam stops listening the moment the sigils on the tablet start to glow as the incantation is recited. "What the—" he begins, but pauses, noticing Tuk's expression.

"Sam, come here," Tuk whispers excitedly as he points to the map on the stone slab. The map's engravings are glowing with a similar light to the tablet. Sam's about to warn Tuk not to touch, but the teenager is already reaching up to brush his fingers against the glowing rock. The rock brightens even further, the symbols moving across the wall in zig-zags and spirals.

"Oh my god," Tuk says.

Sam's mouth drops open, watching in awe. He steps forward and touches the images on the wall himself, following their movement with his fingers. The stone feels like a warm stove. "It's the Temple of Malama," he says. "It's pointing out the way there."

Eloni continues to recite the incantation, her voice rising as the images on the wall glow brighter, turning a deep sun-lit shade of gold, and then Sam hears it: the sound of grinding rock and sliding stone. He turns on his heels to see the stone parting on the far wall, outside light slipping into the chamber.



A new doorway is opening.

"I'll be damned," Sam whispers, turning to Tuk, who's gaping at the door, mouth parting and closing like a fish. "We've found the pathway."

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### *Lagi*

The air hangs heavy with mist, humid and sticky. The ground is spongy and soft with overgrown vegetation. From his perch atop a cliff, Sam stares out across the expanse of dense jungle on one side of him and the miles of jungle-covered ruins on the other. From here he can see the distant city on the furthest mountaintop, its tall ruins surrounded by thick layers of fog.

It's incredible. It's...beyond his wildest dreams.

Sam, Eloni, and Tuk have been hiking for almost twenty minutes now, following the path outlined by the stone map they'd seen inside the temple. The sun is a pale circle in the sky, hidden by thick clouds. When the sun comes out from hiding, it lights the trees with a soft, golden glow, which makes them glint against the surrounding jungle. They trek down through lava-colored valleys, wind through dark jungle and verdant hills, pass tall cliffs and wide gorges, and stop to rest in a sea of green as far as the eye can see. Well, Sam thinks, if they have to face down another Apocalypse, at least this one's happening in paradise.

Sam hasn't let go of his gun since leaving the temple, forefinger resting lightly on the trigger. He's on guard in case any more of those zombie warriors decide to make an appearance, but it's been quiet so far. They pause on the side of what was probably a main road, a stone path leading to what Sam figures to be the heart of the city. For a moment he feels like Dorothy in Oz preparing to follow the yellow-brick road. He laughs at the thought, thinking about how Dean would tease him mercilessly if he knew. *Be okay, Dean*, Sam thinks.

Together they follow the wide, paved stone road past the perimeter wall and into the center of Lagi. Sam watches the city unfold tall and dark in front of them, the jungle having done its best to reclaim it.

"Lagi, the hidden, ancient city in the mountains," Eloni whispers, and Sam can't think of a proper word to describe it.

The city center is surrounded by cut stone buildings, standing bright against the dark jungle green. More roads spiral out from the city center into the distance in a web of limestone. Rivers and streams can be seen following the labyrinthine narrow walkways that snake and twine throughout the city. In the distance, a set of four temples rise with the mountain peaks, the gold dusting of the sun illuminating them.

"It's like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon," Tuk says, shock and wonder in his voice. Sam grins, nodding as he looks over at Tuk. The teen's eyes are wide, glittering with delight and excitement.

Simply put, Lagi is magnificent; full of old, stone buildings, huge temples, hieroglyph-covered walls, and massive stone sculptures and pillars, surrounded by wild jungle and vines on all sides. They spend a while exploring the ruins of the guard towers, the ancient limestone speckled with black mold and lichen. Most of the massive stone ruins are covered in vines, making it near impossible to see into the openings.

Tuk acts as a scout. Sam watches as the teenager clambers up a set of tall ruins, shotgun in hand, outlined tall and skinny against the sky. He brings up a pair of binoculars and scopes out the landscape, and Sam turns around and looks at the giant stone sculptures in front of him.

Sam recognizes the stonework as cyclopean masonry, massive limestone boulders fitted together to construct the buildings. Monumental hieroglyphic inscriptions cover several of the rough surfaces, and Sam notices the familiar design element from the temple – a series of continuous spirals, which seem to represent sea waves. Sam places a hand on the center of one of the statues, a giant head with saucer eyes and tentacles for hair.

Sam looks up as Eloni joins him, carrying a spherical stone tablet in her hand. "Some say that all of the South Pacific islands host ruins from the Great Old Ones' civilizations," she says quietly. "But this is the first set of ruins I've seen and believed it to be true."

Sam nods, taking in the sprawling complex of the city, untouched by anyone for thousands of years. "It's amazing," he whispers, the stone of the statue warm underneath his palm.

"It's something out of legend," Eloni says, and they both stare out at the city in silence, lost in their own thoughts until Tuk comes down to join them.

The city center is a mosaic of buildings that resemble sculpted stone giants, much of them hidden beneath mountains of thick, green vegetation. Sam can still make out the series of odd shapes and patterns in the monuments, the strange angles and designs that resemble nothing he's ever seen before. Sam thinks of how Lovecraft had described Cthulhu's home island of *R'lyeh* in his writing – a multi-dimensional place of vast, non-Euclidean angles, an otherworld somewhere in between the planes of Heaven and Earth. Lagi is much like that.

The sun is hot on the nape of Sam's neck as he heads into a hollowed-out stone house, Eloni and Tuk following behind him.

"Let's rest here for a moment before hiking toward the temples," he says. His voice comes out rough, tired.

Tuk drops to his knees beside Sam, groaning and shrugging off his backpack and throwing it at the ground. "I need a nap."

"Soon," Eloni says, smiling indulgently at her son. "Once we find the artifact, we will be able to rest."

Sam places his shotgun on the ground, and throws Tuk a grin. "No rest for the wicked, dude."

Tuk rolls his eyes, laughing as he sips from his canteen.



Ten minutes later they're back on the path of the temple, surrounded by sets of stone houses spread out in weird, complicated patterns. The four temples they'd spotted when entering Lagi encircle the outer city walls at each cardinal direction.

"Do you remember which one it is?" Tuk asks, pausing on a rise where a break in the trees offers them all another amazing view of the surrounding area and its ancient, weathered structures.

"The temple in the North," Sam says, shielding his eyes against the mid-day sun as he glances at a set of stone spires peeking over the treetops in the distance. The temple ruins are set among the rolling hills, backdropped by the blue sea.

It takes about thirty minutes to reach the Temple of the Malama. The mammoth building has been nearly reclaimed by the jungle – overgrown with dense vegetation and gnarled vines that wrap themselves around the ancient stone like a second skin. There are even trees erupting from the base of the building and growing from inside the walls.

"Shall we?" Tuk says after the group spends several long moments starrng at the temple in awe.

"I'll lead," Sam says, taking out his flashlight and heading toward the entrance.

The door slides open easily for them, and within moments they're passing through it, the temple's shadowy darkness closing around them as they enter the main hall. It's cooler and drier inside the temple, but Sam smells the pungent odor of moss and dark soil. Flashlights held high, the trio shuffles through the passage into what appears to be the main room, a large mostly-empty chamber.

Daylight spills in from open windows set high in the room, and Sam's eyes widen when he takes in the walls, covered in a series of hieroglyphic murals that seem to depict a great conflict between giant creatures that Sam knows must be the Great Old Ones.

"Similar to the first temple, I believe these walls tell the creation myths of the people who once lived here," Eloni says, fingers following the engraving on the wide center stone that is placed next to a row of spherical slabs filled with carved drawings. "Their birth and rise, and their destruction. The stories of their gods."

Sam traces his fingers over the wave-like designs that run from floor-to-ceiling in vertical patterns across the wall in front of him. "The ocean is everywhere," he says.

"Water as life," Eloni says as she glances his way. "And death."

"Yeah," Sam says. That's something he knows a little about, thanks to Kali.

"Check this out," Tuk says, beckoning to them from across the room.

Sam heads over, focusing his flashlight on what Tuk is pointing to: a large sculpture hidden in shadows at the far end of the room. It's a tri-headed beast with heads that resemble a serpent, large bat-like wings, and the fins of a fish. Sam lifts his flashlight higher, revealing the glyphs above it near the

ceiling.

"What do you think, Professor?" Sam asks as she steps beside him.

"The walls speak of the Great God from the Sea," Eloni says.

"Definitely something to do with Cthulhu," Sam whispers, peering closely at the three gaping mouths on the statue. He slides his fingers along the sides of one of them, feeling the wave symbols engraved there.

"We should keep looking," Eloni says.

Sam nods, pulling back his hand just as his fingers brush over something jammed into a crease along one of the serpent's eye slits. Slowing his hand, he retraces the crease with his fingertips, trying to get a better feel for it.

"Hey Tuk, shine your flashlight lower," Sam says, before taking a knife out of his boot and inserting it into the crease he'd been tracing a moment earlier. He scrapes the blade along the edge of the eye before working it deeper into the groove.

"What is it?" Eloni asks, voice low and breathless.

"Something's jammed in there good," Sam says, wiggling his knife back and forth.

Sam's about to give up the ghost when he hears something snap loose. He sets his knife down, and then works his fingers over what feels like a carved stone cylinder – no more than four inches long – sticking out of the side of the statue. Sam tries to pry the piece of jammed limestone completely free, but that's when he hears it: something around them clicking into place, followed by a loud, ominous grinding sound as the temple begins to shake.

"Shit," Sam gasps as the floor underneath him opens up and he's falling into darkness.

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### *Tu'ugamau Island*

"Dude, you kinda look like a pint-sized Rambo," Dean says, watching Cas lean up against the trunk of some mammoth-sized tree, his rifle held up against his shoulder, his bandolier slung across his chest. They're both a post-battle mess at the moment, sweaty and dirty, stubbled from not shaving for days. Their clothes are ripped and bloody, and Dean can feel fresh blood oozing from his shoulder where zombie warrior number twenty-four managed to nibble on him. And he knows the scattered bruises and the smudges of dirt and blood on Castiel's face mirror his own.

Castiel is squinting over at Dean. "What is a Rambo?"

"Never mind," Dean snorts, shaking his head. He pushes his machete into the stump of a tree, and

settles his sore body on the ground right beside it. Thick, forking branches spread above them, creating a dense canopy. He adds, gaze flicking over Cas, "I just think that bandolier looks really good on you is all."

"I suppose." Castiel runs a hand over the ammunition belt, and then looks up at Dean. "I still find human weapons strange, and not at all as practical as the manifestations of my grace. But I will admit that I do like watching you with your weapons. I find it to be a pleasing experience."

"Pleasing?" Dean arches a brow, smirking.

A smile twitches at the corners of Castiel's mouth. "Yes, pleasing. I find your prowess in battle pleasing, Dean."

Dean smiles lasciviously, eyes working their way up Castiel's body again. "I do like to watch you handle your sword."

"I was one of the best sword fighters in my garrison," Castiel says in a surprisingly proud tone, totally missing Dean's very obvious come on.

*Good old Cas*, Dean thinks, shaking his head and chuckling. "I don't doubt it man," he says.

Castiel smiles over at him, and Dean has to force his gaze away, feeling his entire body heat up. He squints up at the leafy canopy above, judging the angle of the sunlight. "It's going to be dark in few hours. I think we should find somewhere to set up camp, preferably out of the elements since we don't have our tents and I smell rain on the air. We can work our way back toward the ravine tomorrow morning, and hope Sam and the others will be there to meet us."

Castiel nods, and Dean sucks in a deep breath, trying not to think about Sam out there without him. He eases back onto his feet slowly, holding a hand over his chest where one of the zombies kicked him. The pain is not so intense he can't walk, but the longer they stay moving, the sorer he gets.

"First I wish to see to your injuries," Castiel says, sidling up beside Dean and helping him over to a spot across the way that has enough room for them both to spread out.

"This isn't necessary," Dean grumbles, but he knows his protest is weak.

"Yes, it is." The command in the angel's voice is unmistakable when he adds, "Now lie back."

Dean chuckles, not arguing, loving it when Cas gets bossy and takes control. He pulls off his jacket and layers of t-shirts, wincing as he moves his zombie-bitten shoulder. Then he leans back to let Cas look him over, sighing out playfully, "Okay, Dr. Sexy, am I done for or what?"

Castiel actually rolls his eyes at Dean, but a soft smile hovers at the corners of his lips before he turns away and concentrates on examining Dean's battered torso. The angel's hands are careful and gentle, Castiel having quickly picked up what Dean and Sam taught him about first-aid and emergency medicine in the field, sans angel mojo. They'd packed a few first-aid supplies in the bags they carried with them into the temple, and Castiel takes out the sterile gauze, bottles of antiseptic, and adhesive

bandages as he works.

Castiel is thorough in his examination, and Dean finds he likes the feel of Castiel's hands working over his body, the elegant and deft dance of his long fingers, the warm tickle of his touch, and the feel of his keen gaze as he searches out injuries. His friend's eyes are locked on the job at hand, his fingers making wide swipes with a moist cloth over Dean's bruised chest and wounded shoulder. Beside his smarting ribs, Dean's bleeding from a few scrapes on his face and arms. He closes his eyes as Castiel washes off the crust of dirt, sweat, and blood there, cleaning the wounds out and bandaging them. Dean's a bit sunburned too across his back, and he grunts when Castiel sweeps long fingers across his shoulders and neck to gently apply aloe to the inflamed skin.

Castiel touches his arm when he's done, eyes dark and serious. "You will live," he pronounces gravely, and Dean laughs softly at the hint of sarcasm in the angel's voice. Dean runs a hand across his bare chest, lingering over the bandages Castiel placed there. He eyes the thin lines of old wounds, the soft, shiny pink skin that has healed with time.

"Will I turn into a zombie like in the movies?" Dean says with a smirk, eyeing his bandaged shoulder.

"This is not a movie," Castiel says dryly.

"Could have fooled me," Dean growls, sighing in exasperation. *Friggin' zombies.*

Castiel hands Dean his flask, wordless. Dean sits up and sips at the whiskey, and they're quiet together for a long time. With Cas so near, Dean feels strangely rooted, feels like he belongs here in his own too-tender skin; he feels like he belongs here under the stars appearing in the sky, their light almost as old as Castiel. Dean thinks about those times he had to hunt on his own, when he would pull over in an empty field and lie back on the hood of the Impala and watch the sky. He'd think about how the night sky was the same sky his Dad or Sam were seeing from wherever they were. Dean didn't feel as alone when he did that, and there was a warmth that used to spread from his stomach out, radiating across his chest. It's the same warmth he feels now, here with Castiel.

Dean stares at Castiel's downturned face for a moment, catching sight of the dark circles under the angel's eyes. He says, "Hey, do you need any patching up yourself? You went all badass on those zombies back there. You sure you're doing okay?"

Castiel blinks up at him, as if surprised by the question. "I didn't have enough power left to patch you up, but my body will heal itself. I'm just tired from exerting so much of my grace."

"You should have said something, man," Dean scolds gently, pulling Castiel closer to him so that they can both lean against the tree. "We'll rest for a bit before continuing. Save our strength."

Amazingly enough Castiel doesn't protest the move, simply sprawls across Dean's chest, burying his face in Dean's neck. "You didn't tell me you were tired or hurting either," Castiel chides quietly.

"Yeah, well," Dean pauses, snorting. "I'm not used to people taking care of me."

"You ignore your pain so that you may help others," Castiel says. "I don't like that."

Dean sighs, pressing gentle lips across Castiel's sweaty forehead. "I don't like when you do it either," he mumbles. "Throwing yourself on the line for me and Sam the way you do."

"It's my duty," Castiel says, voice rough. "I still consider myself your guardian, Dean, even if you—"

"Hey, hey, none of that," Dean interrupts, pulling his arms tighter around Castiel.

Truth is, it's weird to hear someone talking about him like this, when it's always been Dean's responsibility to care for the ones he's loved. Sammy. Dad. Even Bobby when he let him. Mom too, before the fire. He remembers trying to make her feel better, holding her with his little arms and telling her that everything would be okay. He remembers kissing her growing belly when she was pregnant with Sam, and promising his unborn baby brother that Dean would take care of him too. Dean knows something about protecting people. About duty. More than two decades later, Dean remembers the words he whispered over Sam's lifeless body, when he failed: *I always tried to protect you...Keep you safe...Dad didn't even have to tell me. It was just always my responsibility, you know?*

Something inside Dean goes cold, remembering how he's failed time and time again. It's all he's ever done.

"I believe Sam will reach the city safely," Castiel whispers against his neck, and Dean blinks back the memories of his past, turning his attention to the angel in his arms.

"I hope so," Dean murmurs quietly. He swallows down his worries; he just hopes his brother isn't facing anything he can't handle. He closes his eyes, feeling the heavy pull of sleep. He thinks about Sam on his own for those two years his soul spent in the Cage, thinks about being unable to save him then too. Never being able to save him. Dean knows he's worthless, useless, and a fuck-up at the best of times, and his entire body hurts from the truth of it. Dean wonders if maybe Cas will realize the truth too and leave again; maybe he won't come back next time.

Too close to sleep, Dean doesn't open his eyes, but he whispers Castiel's name, wondering if he's already gone. But Cas is there: a warmth moving at his side, a hand molding itself to his shoulder, a soft voice whispering in his ear, a light into Dean's darkness. Dean feels himself calming, drifting off to the rough cadence of Castiel's voice, its rhythm like a song Dean's been chasing his entire life.

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*Lagi*

Sam lets loose a yell of surprise and fear; he's falling down what feels like a slide at a water park, its walls narrow and slick and smooth. Seconds later, he's dropping to the floor in a tangled slump, his body slamming hard enough to leave him breathless.

*Ouch.*

He instantly knows he's in another room, although this one smells like old, wet forest, and is pitch

black. Sam has to let his eyes adjust for a long moment before he can move forward without fear of banging against something.

"Okay," he mumbles, slowly peeling himself off the floor and crawling toward the hole in the wall he just slid in through. Flashlight beams are dancing from the other end of the chute, and he knows he didn't fall too far if he can still make out the dim light.

"Eloni! Tuk!" he calls up into the hole, and he hears their muted echoes yelling out his own name.

"I fell down a chute that leads to a hidden inner chamber!" Sam calls to them. *Which, okay, is kind of cool if you think about it*, he muses silently.

"Oh my god!" Eloni yells back down. "Are you okay?"

"I am," Sam says, dusting himself off as he climbs carefully to his feet. He's covered in dust and cobwebs, and he probably looks like something that just rolled out of a grave. "Can you throw me down a flashlight – slowly!"

Seconds later, he hears something knocking around in the chute, and then he's catching the flashlight seconds before it hits the floor. He flicks it on quickly, anxious to find out more about his current predicament. What he finds is a room that's small and confined, probably about fifty feet in both directions. It's shaped like an oval, and the limestone floor is covered in carvings, large, concentric rings that dig deep into the rock.

"Are you alright, Sam?" Eloni calls down.

"I'm alright! I'm just gonna look around," Sam calls back, angling the flashing around the room.

The roof of the room is low, but it's comfortable enough to stand and walk forward, and Sam's able to continue his exploration without falling over. Glyphs line the walls, the same as the floors, but there, in the center of the circular room, is a giant rock pedestal with something that looks like a cup centered on top.

"I'll be damned," Sam breathes, guiding the light closer to illuminate the artifact. He recognizes the writing on it; he'd seen the same sigil carved into the sword's blade. *Hastur's sign*.

"It's a chalice!" Sam calls out. "I think I found the last artifact!" He hears what sounds like whoops of joy from the above chamber.

It's a strange-looking object, in all honesty. Faded from age, coated in a patina of dust, sigils are engraved in the dull metal, which is cool to the touch when Sam finally gets the courage to reach out. His thumb brushes grime away, and with a nervous sigh, he counts to three. "Please don't Indiana Jones me," he mutters, as he carefully and slowly closes his fingers around the cup and lifts it from the pedestal.

On cue, the ground lurches underneath his feet, and Sam gasps, grabbing the cup and jerking back. The cup glows for a moment in his hand, before fading back to its vintage luster.

The ground has stopped moving, but when Sam looks up, there's light spilling into the room from what appears to be a crack in the stone leading to the outside world. Sam laughs out loud, shaking head because it's all so freaking unbelievable. The raised stone plateau Sam steps out onto is covered in a web of thick vines, and beyond the trees and plants surrounding the area, Sam can see the amber glow of the evening sky.

Sam tucks the chalice into his jacket as he stands at the mouth of the temple, watching the last rays of sunlight spill across the valley.

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It's dusk when Dean wakes up from his impromptu nap, and the world around him has turned into a soft, mist-covered dream. The sky's melting into purples and reds, and for a long moment Dean listens to the sound of Castiel's gentle breathing, from where he's still wrapped around Dean's side.

"Why'd you let me fall asleep?" Dean asks, yawning wide.

"Because you needed it," Castiel says, climbing to his feet and stretching his lithe body to the sky. "However we still need a protected place to camp for the night," he adds.

"Yeah we do," Dean says.

Castiel's hand is dry and warm in Dean's palm as the angel helps Dean to his feet. Dean squeezes their hands together and scans the trees around them, rays of dying sunlight cutting through them in ropes of orange and yellow. "I think there should be more cover to the east, nearer the foothills. Let's head there and see what we can find before sundown."

The minutes flash by like a slideshow of pictures, images from the jungle blinking in and out as they wind their way through Dean's overcrowded mind. Castiel's always near by, with his deft hands and his wide arms, and his rough voice whispering to Dean. It's comforting.

The night comes on gradually, heat diminishing to a coolness that has Dean and Castiel walking closer.

"We could possibly set up near here, in those caves," Castiel says about a half hour later, pointing to a series of rocky outcroppings and openings about a mile away, at the base of the bluff. His voice is a low rumble into the silence of the jungle.

"Looks promising," Dean says as they make their way toward the prominent, dark rock exposures along the eastern hillside, flashlights darting through the growing darkness. There's still just enough natural-light visibility to see far into the distance, and Dean suspects much of these weathered limestone formations used to be a series of sea caves, centuries ago when the ocean reached this far inland.

After several minutes of trekking through the jungle, Dean and Castiel make their way out of the

underbrush, winding through the dense patch of woods and toward the mouth of a small cave system. The night is clear and cool, and there's an underlying crispness to the air here. With less tree cover overhead, Dean can even make out the entire sky, all lit up by stars and a quarter moon.

The openings to most of the caves are small, not even large enough to crawl into, but they find a couple that are large enough to pass through and that open up into larger caverns. Dean remembers Eloni telling them that most of the South Pacific islands are riddled with caves, formed by ancient lava flows and centuries of weathering. Many of them were used by the original inhabitants of the islands as homes and fortifications, and it's why so many caves feature in the myths and legends of Rapa Nui.

"This one," Castiel says from where he's hidden behind a row of trees a few feet in front of Dean.

Dean gives a few chops with his machete, breaking through the wiry growth of tree limbs, bushes, and vines that hide Castiel and the cave from his view. As he makes his way toward Castiel, Dean raises up his flashlight and whistles as he meets the angel at the wide opening to the cave. A variety of jungle plants decorate the cave's mouth, their fragrant flowers appearing in soft reds and yellows and purples.

"You brought me flowers? So romantic," Dean says, smirking as he catches Castiel's eye. The angel huffs an exasperated smile, and turns to point into the dark depths of the cave.

The cavern is big, and Dean's flashlight flickers over the solid limestone walls, whose multicolored stone is highlighted by the moon's glow. He notes that they're in what must be a vertical cavern. The ceiling opens up to the sky, allowing soft moonlight to enter into the chamber. It's nearly enough light to see the entire cavern by. Large boulders wind themselves around the room, creating a sense of privacy from the outside.

"Spacious, dry, and decent lightning," Dean declares, smiling over at Castiel. "I say we put in an offer."

"An offer of what?" Castiel asks, frowning at Dean before turning to work his way across the cave floor, fingers running over the walls, sensing by touch.

"Cas, this is why I'm only taking Sam when we go house hunting," Dean laughs, dropping his machete, shotgun, and messenger bag to the ground. "Hey, can you hand me your pack too?"

Castiel settles down beside Dean on a boulder in the center of the cavern, and hands over his bag. Dean does a quick supply check, feeling relieved at what he finds. "I think we're doing good," he says. "We got a first-aid kit, MREs, flashlights, rope, and batteries. I doubt those zombie guards are coming back from your light show, but if they do we should have enough extra ammunition to hold them off."

Dean picks up his flashlight and points it toward the cave entrance, their surroundings illuminated by the brilliant yellow electric beam. "We can sleep here and then head out in the morning to find Sam."

"Yes," Castiel agrees with a nod. "I don't sense that anything will trouble us here. I will put the wards up while you locate wood for a fire."

"On it," Dean says, climbing to his feet. He spends the next fifteen minutes searching the surrounding area for kindling, finding enough pieces of dry wood that he is soon able to get a fire going inside the



cave. Between the slices of moonlight falling from the cave opening above, and the small campfire, enough warm light soon illuminates the small, rocky chamber.

When Castiel returns from setting the wards, he looks tired. Dean's own body is smarting with aches and pains, and he knows they both could use a full night's rest, and some time to just sit and breathe. Dean pauses in front of the fire, quietly watching it sputter and pop. In the silence, he hears the sound of trickling water in the walls and the soft noises Castiel's boots make as they shuffle across the cave floor.

"Dean."

Dean turns to see Castiel standing by the far wall, watching Dean with a soft gaze. "I found something I want to show you," the angel says.

"Oh, really?" Dean smirks, directing his flashlight Castiel's way, the walls behind him glistening as the yellow beam dances along the bumpy rock surfaces. He slowly wanders over to Castiel, leaning into his personal space and placing a hand over his hip. "What did you need me to see?" he asks, brows wagging, suggestive.

Castiel's lips curl in a soft smile, but he doesn't say anything. He takes Dean by the arm and leads him down a tunnel that winds further into the cave system, letting the flashlight guide them along. Dean has to duck his head to avoid a few low-hanging rocks as they make their way through several tight squeezes in the twisting passage, some almost too narrow to turn around in. Dean slides his hand along the surface of the tunnel's walls to avoid tripping, feeling the slick, grimy stone beneath his fingertips. Truth is, he doesn't like enclosed spaces, too many memories of being buried alive, trapped in darkness, but Castiel is close by, and it's only a few more seconds before the cave's ceiling rises higher, the air cools, and the tunnel opens up into another wide chamber.

Dean hears the roaring sound of water before he sees anything, his eyes slowly adjusting to the change in light. He blinks, inhales sharply, taking in the amazing sight before him. The cave leads down to a small natural pool surrounded by boulders, giant columns of stone, and thick jungle foliage. There's a large opening in the cave wall leading to the outside world, but it's the wall of falling water that captures Dean's eyes.

"Holy shit," Dean breathes out, gaze flickering over the tall waterfall, lit up by the moonlight. It cascades down into the pool, forming a secluded grotto. Tiny streams also run in-between the surface rocks and into the pool, giving the entire place the feel of a watery paradise.

"*This* is what I wanted to show you," Castiel says, and Dean doesn't miss the teasing in his voice.

"The source of the water I heard in the walls," Dean says, eyes taking in the water, falling from what must be a stream system a few feet above them.

"There's an underground river system," Castiel says, his voice rumbling lowly in the confines of the cavern. "It feeds the pool here before leading out to rest of the island."

"Sweet," Dean says, listening to the rush of cascading water, its roar filling the cave. Moonlight passes

through the open cavity and shines across the surface of the pool, creating a blue reflection that illuminates the entire space. The cavern is spacious, probably about four hundred feet across. Over time water has carved into the porous limestone rocks, creating giant sculptures of stone that rise up toward the cave ceiling.

"The water is safe for you to drink," Castiel says, and Dean nods, heading down to the edge of the pool and dipping his hands into the cool water. He lifts a palmful to his mouth, sipping at it slowly, its metallic taste lingering on his tongue before the liquid runs down his parched throat. Cupping more water into his palms, he splashes it across his face and neck, scrubbing at the caked-on dirt and mud.

Dean feels Castiel slide beside him, the angel's hand coming to rest against his back. Dean blinks water from his lashes and grins over at him. "So, what now?"

"Maybe we should take the time to fully bathe," Castiel says, voice soft in Dean's ear.

"Are you trying to say we reek?" Dean laughs, pulling Castiel closer and running his mouth over the stubble at his friend's chin.

"Very much so," Castiel says, smiling as he presses a series of kisses along Dean's neck before pulling away and reaching his hand out. "Come," he says, dragging Dean to his feet.

Dean doesn't protest being led around to the other side of the cavern. Within minutes he finds himself completely naked and pressed up against the wall of the cave as Castiel's long fingers trace along his hips, gripping tight as he runs his mouth along Dean's neck. Dean can feel the heat emanating from Castiel's body, soaking into the air.

"You're wearing too many clothes," he whispers because Cas is still fully dressed although Dean's clothes have been tossed to the cave floor.

Castiel presses his face against Dean's neck and smiles. Like Dean, he's covered in grass and mud, sweat matting his hair, dirt under his nails. The dirt and the grime, it's so human, and Cas smells so human: earthy and raw and real, a musky warmth that Dean's body responds to without shame. Before Dean can take a moment to further map the smooth, liquid muscle under his hands Castiel pulls away and steps back, his hands coming up to pull at his own clothes, slowly revealing smooth skin, gone pale in the moonlight.

Dean watches the strips of light slide across Castiel's shoulders, the familiar dips and angles. He knows Castiel's body so well by now, months and months of learning it in the most intimate of ways. But he never gets tired of watching the angel in motion, the mesmerizing physicality of him, the streaking curve of his back, the flat stretch of his chest. Castiel's human physique is muscled and tight, a little leaner than Dean's own, but not at all fragile. Not at all broken.

The cool night air seeps in through the gaps and crevices of the cavern, and Dean shivers. He steps away from the wall, shaking the coldness from his limbs before he walks toward Castiel. He takes a moment to rake his gaze across his friend's body again, noting the dusting of dark hair on his thighs, the dark curls of his pubic hair, the ripcord muscle in his legs.

Dean's gaze pauses on Castiel's face, on the thickening beard growth along his chin. "You need to shave, dude," he murmurs, cupping his palm around Castiel's chin.

"You once told me you like the feel of my face pressed against the inside of your thigh when I don't," Castiel says, voice a grumbled tease.

Dean laughs, shaking his head. "Okay, maybe I like you scruffy," he whispers. Or maybe he just likes getting the chance to shave Cas? He remembers the first time he'd had to do it, when they were on the road and too broke to buy a razor and shaving cream. They needed to look the part of clean-shaven DEA agents, so Dean had scraped his bowie knife along the angled curves of Castiel's face, moving in long, careful strokes until he could feel the angel's smooth skin under his fingers.

"Hmmm," Castiel replies, pressing his now naked body against Dean's own.

"Or maybe I just like you," Dean says, wrapping his arms around Cas and combing his fingers through his hair, laughing as his fingers get caught in the tangled, damp curls. "But you *do* need a haircut."

"Need I also remind you of the last time we were in the backseat of the Impala," Castiel says, voice rumbling from deep in his chest. "You said you liked having something to grab onto when I—"

"Hey, hey," Dean laughs breathlessly, threading his hands through Castiel's hair and flushing at the memory. It's just that Castiel does these things with his mouth and his tongue, and Dean can't control the stuff he says during those times. "Let's just get in the water, ape man."

Dean climbs over a set of boulders as they work their way toward the deep edge of the pool. The rocks are smooth there, made so by the flow of water over time. They're a little painful against Dean's bare feet as he walks across them, but the water itself is cool, soft and gentle where it laps against the edge.

Castiel climbs in first, wading into the water slowly, the surface coming just up to his neck. Dean follows in quickly after, sucking in a deep breath at the sudden icy chill. It takes him a moment to adjust, but soon he's reveling in the silken feel of the water as it slides against his calves and his thighs, its weight pressing against his chest. He ducks under the smooth surface. The water envelopes his entire body as he submerges down into the darkness of the pool. He opens his eyes underwater and can just make out the smooth black rock wall of the pool and the crystal-lit cave floor. He stays under until he needs to breathe, pushing to the surface in time for Castiel to wrap his arms around him and pull him back under with him.

They kiss for long moments under the surface of the pool, and soon enough Dean's world feels defined by the taste and feel of Castiel's lips, the roaring rush of water against his ears as they grab at each other underwater, grappling for purchase against the slick, slip-slide of wet skin. They kiss until the pressure in their ears becomes too painful and the need for oxygen wins out. They surface together, gasping for air and grinning like school children. Dean floats on his back for a while, eyes closed and mind completely blank, feeling weightless and more relaxed than he's been in a long while.

Water laps at his face, and Dean opens his eyes, tilting his head slightly to see Cas floating next to him. Dean smiles, moving his right arm so that it brushes against Castiel's own. They float side by side for a long time, arms spread wide, eyes landing on the patch of starlit sky that can be seen through the break

in the ceiling.

After a while, Dean hears Castiel shift in the water, and then he feels him press against his side. Dean inhales deeply and turns his head a little until Castiel's warm breath brushes his cheek. The water is cold, but Castiel's skin still radiates heat as Dean presses against him. Castiel turns Dean around until they're both facing each other, treading water.

"I can't believe this place," Dean says, breaking the silence for the first time in a long while. He feels heavy in the water, like he might drop to the bottom, but Castiel's hands rest against his hips, long fingers stretching around Dean's middle to hold him in place.

"We were fortunate to find it," Castiel says, licking water from his lips.

"At least it's better than the last time we found ourselves neck deep in water. In Paraty, and then again on Easter Island," Dean mumbles, recalling the anxiousness of those times, how he almost lost Castiel. "Now we're doing it in style though, eh?"

"Yes, in style," Castiel swims closer, gently tugging at Dean's waist, and Dean yelps as he's suddenly pulled underwater with him again.

"You dick!" Dean splutters out when he resurfaces, coughing water and laughing as Castiel draws them closer, entwining their legs together in the water.

"Do you remember the dream we shared?" Castiel whispers, his voice a gentle, low tease as it presses right up against Dean's ear.

"Which one, dude?" Dean says, watching the rivulets of water drip down Castiel's neck, falling from his mop of dark, wet hair.

"When you first came to me," Castiel reminds him. "When I was lost under the weight of the souls."

"At the lake," Dean says, stopping before he says, *our place*.

"It was the first time we swam together," Castiel says quietly.

Dean nods, a picture of them swimming in the lake playing across his memory. It was also the first time he got an inkling that Castiel maybe wasn't gone, that the souls hadn't extinguished him completely under the identity of their new God. In the dream, Castiel had called the lake his sanctuary. Something inside Dean's belly twists, the memory of what he'd almost lost too much to dwell on.

Probably sensing Dean's discomfort, Castiel presses his hand against Dean's shoulderblade in a reassuring touch, as he pulls them both through the water to rest against the ledge of the rock wall near the waterfall. Dean watches Castiel relax against a large boulder, his naked body outlined by the moonlight. Something about him is so violently beautiful in this light, so terrifying in the way he seems at home in the shadowy, alien landscape of the cavern, a being of shadow and light. *Castiel*.

Dean shakes his head free of those thoughts, until all he sees is *Cas*, his nerdy angel best friend, who's

died and risen for him too many times to count. Dean notices how the tension has eased from Castiel's body. Water laps gently against the angel's torso, and his chest moves in and out in deep, even breaths. He seems relaxed, at peace, and Dean doesn't hesitate to swim toward him, wanting to share it.

Dean presses up against the length of Castiel, the angel's body sliding hot and lithe and wet against his own. He skims his hands up Castiel's hips to curve around his waist. He leans in and presses a kiss to the hollow of Castiel's throat, buries his face against Castiel's neck and closes his eyes, lost to the steady fall of water and the slow calming rhythm of his friend's breathing.

It's crazy intimate, the two of them alone in this water-filled cavern. The pool laps at Dean's own chest and thighs, as his mouth traces the line of Castiel's jaw before he lets his teeth tug at the angel's lower lip.

Castiel slides them into a kiss, and this is it, Dean thinks. This is what, this is *who*, I want. He feels the truth of it simmering inside, the force of it so raw it takes his breath away. Castiel runs his fingertips to chase water over Dean's muscles, and their cocks nudge, align, thrust together.

Dean groans, mouth dropping open in a yelp when Castiel reaches down and picks Dean up out of the water like he weighs nothing, turning them around and pressing Dean against the wall before drawing close.

"Fuck, Cas," Dean breathes, digging his fingernails into Castiel's shoulders as he lifts his hips and circles his legs around Castiel's slim waist. They float together near the surface of the pool, Castiel bearing Dean's weight as he holds him up. Cas licks at Dean's neck, sucks on his earlobe, humming all throaty and satisfied as he grinds them together.

They shift and surge above the water, but Dean can't concentrate on anything but the slick heat of Castiel's mouth, the velvet-rough curl of Castiel's tongue as it touches his own. Dean reaches a hand between them to jack their cocks until they're coming together, the shock of it pumping through Dean's veins. The sound of splashing water as they sink down into the pool mixes with the blood rushing through his ears as he meets Castiel's eyes.

"Come here, Dean," Castiel says, pushing Dean under the waterfall's spray. The cold is shocking at first, but Dean tips his head back and lets the water sluice down his front, sliding across his shoulders. Shaking the water from his face, Dean pulls Castiel with him under the falls, his front to Castiel's back. They slide together, chest to spine, and Castiel closes his eyes against the cool water as it showers down over the both of them.



Slowly they begin to wash each other, the pressure of the falls like a deep massage into Dean's sore muscles. Castiel turns around, pins Dean to the rock wall behind the falls, stroking his hands over Dean's skin, and Dean lets himself be bathed, relaxing under Castiel's familiar touch. Not able to keep his hands to himself, after a time Dean begins to gently wash Cas in the spray of the waterfall, letting his fingers dig into the smooth grooves of his torso to caress his muscles and to trace the droplets as they stream down his body.

Dean works his hands methodically over Castiel, rubbing at his shoulders, the narrow swell of his hips. He kneads into the pressure points along his neck, shoulders, arms, and back as Castiel relaxes in his arms. Cas grunts, making a soft, grateful noise as Dean's tongue flicks out, lapping at the water along Castiel's shoulder.

Castiel's skin is sweet beneath the flow of water as Dean licks along his jugular, scrapes his teeth over the angel's stubbled chin, over the pale, vulnerable column of Castiel's throat. Castiel's fingers curl into Dean's short, wet hair, tilting his head back as he returns the favor, licking and nipping at his Dean's ear, whispering, "We'll get through this."

Castiel's long fingers skim along Dean's skin in contrast to the pounding water, and in that moment, Dean believes.

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They dry off in front of the fire, bodies tangled together as they watch the light dance across the cave walls. The fire pops and crackles, and Dean runs his hands along Castiel's belly, fingers smoothing along the trail of hair below his navel. He drags the rough pads of his fingers slowly over the soft skin there, lingering in the warm dip of his hips. His face presses against Castiel's chest, mapping the pattern of his breathing. Dean stares into the fire, watching the flames lick at the wood.

Castiel runs his hands through Dean's hair, massaging his scalp with each stroke. "I've been a warrior all my long existence," he whispers into the quiet. Dean doesn't say anything, just rests his palm against Castiel's hip, squeezing gently.

Castiel continues, words a low whisper, "But with you, here, I am something more, something more than the battles I fought, the destruction I reigned down, the things I've killed. I'm more than an angel."

"Cas," Dean says, his voice coming out as a rough croak. He raises his head, and Castiel brings them closer, bodies sliding together.

"My love," Castiel says, and Dean lets his eyes slip closed as Castiel trails kisses under his chin and down his neck, his warm body pressing close, his miles of slick, naked skin glowing in the firelight. Castiel's fingers skirt across Dean's nipples, and Dean arches, gripping at the curve of Castiel's back. Dean's body is quaking, pent-up desire and something else, every nerve ending sparking to life at the feel of Castiel's skin on his.

Castiel soon has Dean on his back, and the angel hums against Dean's skin and trails the tip of his tongue into the grooves of Dean's neck, just tasting. He takes his time, running his mouth over the entirety of Dean's body, and Dean wonders if this is what it's like to be worshipped. Castiel whispers holy words into the soft skin of Dean's belly, Hebrew and Latin and Enochian. His fingers plot sigils along the ridge of each rib, as if every part of Dean is worthy of such attention. He bites delicately across Dean's hips, marking him in the way he likes to do sometimes. His lips trace the shape of Dean's belly, his long kisses spill across Dean's thighs, and his hot breath falls against the curve of Dean's cock.

"You bring me such joy, Dean Winchester," Castiel says in the moments after, when they're curled together again, breathing softly.

"Ah shucks, Cas," Dean says, trying to laugh it off, not wanting to admit how much the words pull at him.

"Let me take care of you," Castiel whispers. "Let me know you."

"Cas," Dean says, because this is too much. "You already know me."

"Then let me love you," the angel whispers, and Dean closes his eyes, because there's something inside of him that just won't stop wanting that.

In the dark cave, the firelight casts long shadows across Castiel's body as he crawls on top of Dean. Through the opening in the cave ceiling, Dean can still see a piece of the sky, its billion plus stars swimming overhead. It feels right that maybe Cas is one of the fallen ones, a source of incomparable heat and light covering Dean's body like a shield, sending his blood singing, his world spinning. God, Dean never wants this feeling to end.

"Cas," Dean says, but his voice is more breath than anything else.

"Shhh," Castiel whispers against his ear.

Dean feels drunk on the heat of the fire and on Castiel's mouth. He pulls Castiel closer until they're wrapped around each other, tangled in each other. They're quiet together for a long moment, and Dean becomes aware of Castiel's cock pressed against his thigh, hard and hot, and Dean's body responds, aching, on fire.

"Cas, I..." he begins, his voice cracking a little.

"What is it, Dean?" Castiel asks gently, turning so that his lips brush against Dean's neck.

"Want you," Dean whispers.

Castiel trails a hand down Dean's chest, across his belly, before resting it against Dean's hardening cock, circling his fingers around the base and stroking gently. "What do you want, Dean?" he asks, pressing his mouth to Dean's ear, his tongue trailing along the shell, teasing the lobe with his teeth. "Tell me," he says softly, warm breath falling softly.



"I want you, Cas. So damn much," Dean confesses, his voice sounding too rough and raw. Heat flushes his skin, hotter than the fire. "I want to feel you inside of me," he whispers lowly, and something in his belly twists at the admission, a sense of shame at revealing this, at needing this.

"Dean," Castiel whispers, raising his head and studying Dean intently for a few moments, eyes gone warm and curious, and Dean wants to look away.

"Please, Cas, I—" Dean pauses, voice hoarse. He shakes his head slightly, unable to finish the thought. He sucks in several slow, steadying breaths, eventually turning his head away and toward the dying fire. He whispers, "Forget it, okay?"

It's quiet for a long time after that, and Dean concentrates on his own breathing, the sharp shallow pants slowing down.

"I want to ask you something," Castiel whispers after a time, placing a hand on Dean's bandaged shoulder.

Dean takes a breath, and then another. "Yeah Cas?"

"What is it you fear from me?" he asks quietly.

Dean takes another breath, shakier than the last few. "I don't—"

"You do," Castiel says, voice so deep and knowing that Dean turns to look back at him.

"You're so—" Dean begins, pausing just to stare at Castiel, at his face, at the craziness of what Castiel is, what Dean is, what their entire time together has been. "This is all so fucked up, man. What even makes us think we can do this—"

"Do what?" Cas says, voice gone rougher and deeper, the light in his eyes darkening. "Be what we are together? Defy Heaven *and* Hell? Stop the Apocalypse?"

"Love each other," Dean bites out forcefully, body tensing as he pulls himself out from underneath Castiel and sits up. *Goddammit.*

"Dean," Castiel says softly, reaching out a hand.

"Just don't," Dean groans, pulling away and running a hand through his wet hair. It takes him a moment to get his mind settled, body too lazy to respond to his own commands as he climbs on shaky legs to his feet. They'd laid out most of their blankets to form the rough bedroll they'd been using, but Dean finds an extra one and wraps it around himself.

He paces for a moment before going to stand in front of the fire, watching the embers glow and flicker. After a beat Dean says, "Earlier you said that being a warrior was all you'd ever known, but now you felt like something more."

"Yes," Castiel says, voice carrying across the room. "I do."

Dean nods, swallows hard. "I've been doing this thing, hunting, since I can remember. I was never a kid, Cas. I was never worth anything but the things I killed. That's all I am."

"We were only ever what our fathers made us to be," Castiel says quietly, and he stands then and walks towards Dean. He pauses in front of Dean and adds, "Until we disobeyed."

Dean looks up, frowning. "I'm still just a killer," he says, voice thick.

"You are so much more than that," Castiel says, cupping his hands around Dean's face and meeting his eyes intently. "You are a man of such wisdom, of such compassion. A man I would follow to the end."

Dean snorts, not able to pull away from Castiel's gaze. "Man, you need to get your eyes checked. You deserve better than putting that kind of faith in me, Cas. You know I'll disappoint you. And you've been disappointed enough...by your father. Your brothers."

"Dean, please," Castiel says, shaking his head.

"I ruin the things I love," Dean says, voice bitter, hurt. He knows Cas needs to hear this, so he keeps going. "You should walk away from me, for your own good."

Surprise darkens Castiel's eyes. "Why are you saying this?"

Dean pulls away finally, backing up a few steps and watching Castiel's hands drop to his side, fisting up. "I...I'm saying what you know needs saying," he whispers, voice gone cool.

"No," Castiel says, tone sharp. "You're afraid and you're saying these things when I know you don't mean them."

Dean releases a shuddering breath, wrapping the blanket around him further. He knows they can't let things get any more serious that they've gotten. Maybe it's already too late, but he has to try. "We can't do this anymore," he says, his words a soft rasp.

"Dean, you need to stop this," Castiel says, voice a near growl as he pushes himself into Dean's space.

"Stop what?" Dean says, meeting his eyes.

"Stop pushing me away," Castiel rumbles, pulling Dean down and pressing a dry kiss to Dean's lips.

"Cas," Dean breathes, opening his mouth to Castiel's insistent tongue. Dean digs his blunt nails into Castiel's skin, pulls him closer and claims his mouth in an even deeper kiss.

"You're worth it," Castiel mutters against his lips. "Why can't you believe that?"

"No," Dean says, pulling back and catching Castiel's eyes. "I'm not."

"Shut up, Dean," Castiel says, voice edged with deep command. "I feel regret for many things I've done. But I don't regret *you*. Finding you, befriending you, or loving you."

Dean snorts, shaking his head. "Cas, I failed you all."

Castiel shifts closer, taking Dean's face between his hands again, thumbs rubbing against the stubble on Dean's chin. His eyes are intent as he holds Dean's gaze. "Dean what I did last year...that's on me and me alone. Not on you. I made those choices, I went down that road. I lied to you, I manipulated you, and I hurt you and Sam. Stop blaming yourself for something I chose to do. Free will, remember?"

"Free will," Dean mutters, moving closer and resting his hand against Castiel's face.

Castiel takes a breath and says, "I wanted to find some way to redeem myself to you. But what does redemption even mean? Is it even possible?"

Dean swallows. He feels hollowed out. "I don't know, man."

"I don't either," Castiel admits. "Maybe all I can do is learn to live with my sins, to carry them. That is what *I* can do." Dean doesn't say anything, his throat too raw.

"But there are things you carry Dean that you should not," Castiel continues, voice low and solemn. "You're not to blame for Sam's choices. For my choices. For your father's choices."

Dean meets Castiel's eyes. "Don't go there, Cas," he whispers.

"Listen to me, " Castiel says, voice adamant. "You're not to blame."

Dean sucks in a breath. "Cas, just stop."

Castiel shakes his head, stubborn. "Not until you hear me on this. You're not to blame for what I did. I know that there are thousands of things you carry on your back, but don't carry my sins, Dean. They are for me to carry. I've earned that right, dammit."

Hearing Castiel curse shakes Dean for a moment, and he blinks, frowning. "I've done horrible things too," he whispers. "In Hell, all those souls..."

"But you must stop comparing what you did to what I did," Castiel says gently. "You broke after decades of being tortured. You're not to blame for what you did in Hell. You *cannot* be blamed for breaking, Dean. The bad decisions Sam and I made here on Earth aren't the same because the circumstances are so vastly different. Sam and I did what we did because of free will, and choice, and we have a right to carry those sins ourselves because they are *ours* to carry, ours to live with. You can't be blamed for our mistakes. *You are not to blame.*"

Dean pulls away, runs a hand over his face, scrubbing at the wetness at his eyes. "I should've done more, to protect Sammy, to stop you..."

"You're not a machine," Castiel says fiercely. "You're human. You've done enough, Dean. Please

believe me."

Dean takes in a shuddering breath. "But that doesn't change anything. Cas, I'm still. I'm fucked up." *I'm broken*, he thinks. *And I break people*.

"And I'm fallen," Castiel says, voice low. "We are what we are."

Dean closes his eyes for a moment, and then moves to settle down on the ground next to the fire, needing to fend off the chill in the air of the cave. Goosebumps cover his skin, and he's shivering.

Castiel eases down onto the ground next to him. "I can't tell you what to do," Castiel says quietly. "You must decide what it is you truly want."

Dean shakes his head. He's tired, his resolve slipping. "I'm sorry," he says.

Castiel says, "I'm sorry, too."

Dean turns, finds Castiel already looking at him, steady and close. There's so fucking much Dean wants to say. But he settles with, "There was this one summer when my dad used to take me fishing. We were staying in this small town called Blue Earth, Minnesota, with a buddy of Dad's, Pastor Jim. I was about fourteen, I think."

Castiel frowns, obviously confused by Dean's sad attempt at a diversion. "You enjoyed this?"

"Yeah," Dean says, smiling at the memory. "It was good to just do something with Dad that wasn't about monster-fighting, you know? Sam didn't like fishing, so he'd stay behind with Pastor Jim. But Dad and I, we'd just head down to Browns Lake. We never really said much to each other. We'd just go and spend time together. It was quiet. It was nice." Dean pauses, bites at his bottom lip. "He patted my back whenever I made a catch. Told me he was proud of me."

Castiel's hand closes around the meat of Dean's left calf, his thumb brushing Dean's kneecap. "Did he tell you that often?"

"Not too much," Dean says, turning to catch Castiel's eye.

"If it makes you feel any better, I've never even met my father," Castiel says, and Dean laughs softly because *yeah, ouch*.

They go quiet again, Dean picking at a string in the blanket, while Castiel watches the fire. "I can't force you to talk to me, but I wish you would," Castiel says after a time.

Dean angles his head to look at Castiel's profile, tracing the lines around his eye, the dark scruff covering his cheek and neck. "I'm afraid of losing you, Cas."

Castiel turns his head, studies Dean. His eyes are brighter than anything when he says, "No, Dean. You're afraid of loving me. It doesn't have to be one and the same."

Dean looks away, his heart pounding erratically, his fists clenching where they sit in his lap.

"Last year," Castiel continues softly, "I didn't go to you when I should have because I couldn't stand the idea of you in any more pain. I didn't want to burden you with another war, with yet more sacrifice, because you had already lost so much. You had given enough."

"Cas," Dean whispers. "I wouldn't have cared. I would have helped you."

"I know that, Dean," Castiel says, the back of his hand coming up to brush against Dean's cheek for a moment before he adds, "But I loved you too much to ask that of you."

Dean's heart stutters, and he jerks back, shaking his head. "Fuck, Cas," he growls. "You stupid sonofabitch. I'm not worthy of that kind of love, man. No way, no how."

Castiel tenses, mouth going tight and thin. "Don't be so foolish," he grinds out, voice resounding low, like a threat of violence. "I know what you're worth, Dean. I held your soul longer than I've held any human soul. I rebuilt you atom by atom. *I am the one who gripped you tight and raised you from Perdition.*"

Dean blinks, the force of Castiel's all-too-familiar words hitting him all at once. He swallows, lowers his head, runs the end of the blanket between his hands. Yes, Castiel knows him, inside and out. Down to the cells of him. He rebuilt him. And...Cas had seen what Dean had been like in Hell, broken and ruined, and beyond fucked-up. He *knows*.

Dean looks up at him, and Castiel is watching him, scowling. Dude looks pissed. Dean lets out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and says, "Okay, can we stop the heart-to-heart now, because obviously I suck at this."

Castiel tilts his head and narrows his eyes. "You are so stubborn."

Dean smirks weakly, shrugs. "I'm a Winchester."

"Yes," Castiel says, sighing. His fingers trail along the back of Dean's neck, a sweet pain along his sunburned skin. "You are that."

They go quiet again, and the fire crackles away. After a time, Castiel pulls another fleece blanket from their bedroll and spreads it around them. Dean settles closer, and Castiel wraps his arm around his shoulders, tugs him even tighter. Castiel is warm and solid, and Dean buries his face against his neck, pressing a kiss to the hollow of his throat.

"Sorry, Cas," he whispers into his skin. "For trying to break up with you. I got a lot of shit in my head, man. A lot of stuff I don't know how to process."

"You hide so much inside, Dean," Castiel says. "You deny yourself closeness with people because you fear losing them. You take on the pain of those you love because you can't bear to see them carry it themselves."

Dean shudders, burying his face in the blanket resting on Castiel's shoulder, letting the rough fabric ground him.

"I know what you've been through," Castiel says, voice so quiet Dean struggles to follow. "And there is nothing that you have done that makes me think you are not worth loving."

"Please, Cas," Dean says, voice thick and soft.

"You are not to blame for what happened to you in Hell, for what happened to you as a child, for what happened to Sam, or to me," Castiel reiterates fiercely, and Dean closes his eyes, listening.

"There is so much evil around us," Castiel continues. "You've been on a journey this year, Dean. In many ways, it is the journey of a spiritual warrior."

"What is that?" Dean whispers, frowning.

"We all have inner battles, inner demons," Castiel says, his voice heavy in a way that tells of a deep familiarity with the idea. "The conflict against evil can sometimes be a battle within. It requires great courage and forbearance to step onto the inner battlefield and strike down whatever internal demons stand on the way to sanctity."

Dean thinks about the deserts of Ante-Purgatory, of Marco and his Mom, of the things he saw on his way to Castiel. The monster he fought that looked like himself.

"Tell me what you want," Castiel says, repeating his words from earlier in the night.

Dean sucks in a breath, pulling away as he does so. He runs a hand over his face and meets Castiel's eyes, returning stare for stare. "I want you. All of you."

"And I want you," Castiel murmurs, his deep voice dropping even lower. "You're a choice that I am making. I choose you, Dean."

Castiel's gaze cuts right through him, and Dean doesn't hesitate to pull him in, to kiss him like the world is ending, and maybe it is. Maybe it is.

"I choose you too, Cas," Dean whispers.

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### *The Caves of Tu'ugamau Island*

"I was seventeen, and he was just some older guy at a townie bar," Dean says, rubbing a hand across the back of his neck. "He looked a bit like Marco, and I...well, yeah."

"Did you enjoy it?" Castiel asks lowly, fingers brushing over Dean's hand.

"Not really," Dean says, snorting as he remembers. "I was drunk off my ass and the guy was rough, an asshole really. He left me in a lot of pain. I looked like such a twink back then, you know, and these guys thought they could just take advantage..."

Castiel brushes his thumb over Dean's temple. "Afterward, what happened?"

Dean closes his eyes, biting at his bottom lip. "I was confused," he whispers. "I was afraid Dad would hear about it cuz he got around to a lot of those bars too. Ashamed too, maybe, because... well, I knew I wasn't supposed to be like that. But I just kept wanting these things, even though I knew I shouldn't."

"Dean, look at me," Castiel says, and Dean obeys, opening his eyes and meeting Castiel's unflinching gaze. "There is nothing wrong with you," the angel says, and his words are ragged-soft, angry.

"But I felt like a fucking failure, Cas," Dean chuckles, joylessly. "It felt like I couldn't even get this one thing right – knowing who I needed to be attracted to."

The darkness inside the cave is warm and heavy, and Dean doesn't protest when Cas winds them closer together, streaks of moonlight falling against the raven black of his hair.

"There is nothing wrong with you," Castiel repeats with a soft growl. "Humans wield gender and sexuality like a weapon when it is only meant to reflect my Father's love."

"Yeah, well," Dean huffs, swallowing hard at the feel of Castiel's possessive hands reaching out for him, at the sense of belonging that he sees in Castiel's eyes. Then there's the dry press of Castiel's lips against Dean's skin, down the line of Dean's neck, and across his wounded shoulder.

"What about the other times?" Castiel whispers.

Dean sighs as he looks over at Cas. "You can't ask me to be this honest with you, man," he mumbles.

"You hide too much," Castiel says quietly. "All these years, hiding from your father, your brother, from yourself. You don't need to hide from me. I've known you down to the cells of you, the very atoms. I've cradled your soul in myself, Dean."

"Jesus, Cas," Dean says, shaking his head. "Anyone ever tell you that your small talk is kind of crazy intense?"

Castiel nods. "Uriel used to tell me that I dwelled too much on weighty subjects."

"Well, Uriel was a dick," Dean sighs, chuckling. "But he was right on this point."

"We don't have to talk anymore about this," Castiel says quietly, fingers coming up to brush against Dean's cheek.

Dean's entire body aches with exhaustion, but he needs to continue, needs to explain. "Let me get this out," he says gruffly.

Castiel nods, his fingers sliding into Dean's hair then, pressing warm and gentle against his scalp. Dean tilts into the touch, settling comfortably in the space between Castiel's arms.

"There were only a few of other times," Dean says. "Nothing to write home about. Mostly forgettable drunken quickies outside of dive bars. There were a couple of times that...let's just say I did some stupid things to keep food on the table a time or two."

"And neither your father nor your brother ever knew?" Castiel asks gently.

"Nah, never," Dean says. "Although I think Sam might have had his suspicions. Especially when I came home with money he knew I didn't get from hustling pool. He never asked though. Never mentioned genders either when he saw me marked up after a late night."

"Your brother is perceptive," Castiel says, nodding.

"He was a smart-ass brat," Dean laughs.

"You raised him well," Castiel says, smiling.

Dean snorts, pressing his face against Castiel's neck and breathing in his warm, earthy scent for a moment.

"We don't have to speak about the other thing," Castiel says after a time.

Dean looks up at Cas, and there's something in the angel's gaze, something sharp and knowing, something that makes Dean's throat ache. He turns his head away and presses the side of his face against Castiel's neck again. Breathes him in deep.

"I haven't..." Dean pauses, and his breathing shudders. He licks his lips, not knowing what to say. "I haven't let...not since..."

"I know, Dean," Castiel says quietly.

"Okay, good," Dean says, angling his head back toward the angel. Castiel watches him intently, and Dean's grateful that he doesn't have to explain this part to him, grateful that Castiel already knows.

"What happened doesn't have to define you," Castiel tells him softly.

Dean runs a hand over his face, shaking his head. "I was in Hell longer than I've been alive," he says quietly. "I spent more time with Alastair than anyone in my entire existence. How fucked up is that?"

Castiel catches Dean's eyes. "But you already know that you are not his," the angel says, words deep and low and insistent, and Dean shivers at the cool steel he hears there.

Castiel leans forward and brushes his fingers across Dean's lips, tracing the swollen curve of the bottom one before he continues, "Do you understand that, Dean?"



Dean forces himself to push the memories of Hell away, and nods. "Yeah, Cas, I do," he whispers, and Castiel pulls him closer, his hand placing soft pressure at the back of Dean's neck as he guides Dean's head down and presses their mouths together. Dean's hands knot in Castiel's hair, and he's growling and shoving into the kiss. Castiel's mouth opens for him, wide and deep, hungry and wanting, and Dean wants to crawl inside and take up permanent residence.

Dean's wrapped in the close circle of Castiel's arms, tangled in his body, when he pulls back and looks down at Castiel. "I want all of you," he whispers.

"You have me." Castiel touches his palm to Dean's cheek, the cool fierce blue of his eyes lit up by the fire.

"Yeah," Dean says quietly. Then he slides his hand into Castiel's hair, leans forward, and presses his forehead to Castiel's own. Whispers, "Then let me feel you."

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The fire crackles next to them, and Dean clenches his fingers in handfuls of Castiel's hair, still damp from the pool. "Cas, God, please," he whispers, his entire body twitching as Castiel presses warm lips to Dean's perineum, his long tongue darting out to swirl around the sensitive skin there.

"Jesus, fuck," Dean chokes out, arching up, back pressing harder into the rocky floor as he spreads his legs wider. God, he wants *more*.

"Cas," Dean manages to moan out, voice haggard. "Please, Cas, please—"

Castiel's head pops up from where it's been busy between Dean's legs, and he's smiling softly as he licks his lips. "Relax, Dean, I've got you," he says, voice low and throaty, lanced through with heat and desire.

Castiel moves his hands underneath Dean, palms massaging deep into Dean's asscheeks as he lifts Dean's body higher, pushing his legs up, spreading them wider, and angling Dean in way that allows him better access. Dean can't help the sounds he's making then, soft whimpers as Castiel's tongue teases him open.

Dean bites hard at his lip and fights to keep from yelling as Castiel pulls up to lick a slow line down over Dean's cock, slurping hard and smacking wetly as he suckles at the head, lapping up the droplets of precome. Castiel's taking Dean in with so much force Dean has to fight hard not to let go. Castiel mouths at his balls and licks around them and underneath them, before sucking one and then the other into his mouth.

"Jesus Christ, Cas, please," Dean cries out, bucking up hard, his heart ready to jump out of his chest.

And then Castiel's mouth is back where it started, stroking across the sensitive skin of his crack, smearing Dean with spit, and Dean can feel it trickling down the crease between his thighs and over his

hole. *Sweet Jesus, have mercy.*

Castiel's tongue follows, lapping at the thin skin of Dean's hole and pressing inside until Dean's gasping, hot tears pricking at his eyes. He moans breathlessly, opening his legs even wider, angling his hips to bare himself completely to Castiel.

"Cas," he breathes, and Castiel squeezes Dean's thighs.

Castiel takes his time then, working Dean open first with his tongue, and then his fingers. Dean had found vaseline in the first-aid kit, and the jelly aids Castiel's fingers' path now as they skate the crease of Dean's ass, massaging the ring of muscle until the angel can slide one then two digits in with ease, working them in to his knuckle before slipping back out. He does it slowly, letting Dean adjust to the pressure of it, and Dean feels his need building with each pass against the sensitive nub of nerves deep inside. Dean rocks up, needing more, needing it faster, harder, deeper. *God, it feels good.*

Dean's slapping both of his hands on the ground by the time Castiel's long fingers begin to scissor softly inside of him, the pressure and feel almost too much. Dean pushes his ass forward when Cas shoves his fingers even deeper, stroking in and out, and *Jesus fucking Christ*, Dean's coming so hard he sees stars.

There is no real relief though; even if Dean feels frayed and run-over, he still feels needy beyond words, and Castiel's tongue is still circling his rim, working him open, pressing inside, so deep, so good. "Cas, please," Dean says, voice still hoarse with need, cracking. "More."

Castiel stretches up along the length of Dean's body, leaning in to brush his mouth over Dean's lips before settling himself between Dean's legs, keeping him spread wide. Dean watches Castiel then, catching the way the soft midnight world of the cave and the night sky cocoon him in sheets of blue. He's naked and exposed, they both are, and Dean reaches out to touch Castiel, to touch the dark heavy swell of his cock, to tangle his fingers in the curls of dark hair, to memorize his moonpale skin littered with scars, the banishing sigil, Dean's handprint.

Castiel leans closer, sliding his fingers gently inside Dean again, and then his fingers are replaced by something weightier, hotter. Dean goes still and looks up at Castiel, meeting his eyes for a long moment, breath speeding up as Castiel nudges at his hole gently.

"Ready for me?" Castiel whispers, and Dean nods because he is.

He thinks of the times before, the few other men he'd let near him, the dirty bathroom stalls, the piss-stained alleyways, his face pressed up against some wall, eating dirt and tasting blood, feeling only guilt and shame. He thinks about all the ways he'd been broken in Hell, how Alastair knew his secrets and used every one of them against Dean, the cold cut of fear and violence sharper than any knife.

"Dean," Castiel says, and Dean closes his eyes and breathes deep because this is Castiel he's opening himself up to, Castiel's fingers pressed against his hips, Castiel's weight over him, Castiel he's trusting. Six years trying to figure this thing out between them, six years of Dean not knowing how to let himself have this because he spent a lifetime trying not to. *Castiel.*

"Dean," Castiel whispers again. He takes hold of Dean's chin and tilts his face up, making him meet his gaze. "I'm right here," he says, firm, eyes bright. Dean looks at Cas, and Castiel stares at Dean, his hand coming up to cradle Dean's jaw, his thumb stroking over his chin, watching him intently. "I will stop if you don't want this."

"I know," Dean whispers. "But I want it. Want *you*. So damn much."

It's open lips and teeth and tongue then, Castiel's hands curling over Dean's jaw, the long pads of his fingers stroking at Dean's face. When Cas pulls back and looks at Dean again, his eyes dig in even deeper, pulling back layer after layer.

There's a pause then, and Dean watches the angel hover over him, slim hips pressed between Dean's thighs, waiting. Dean feels unguarded, vulnerable. Everything he tries so hard not to be. "I trust you," he whispers, and that's all Castiel needs to hear.

"Spread your legs for me," Castiel commands softly, and Dean does, going so far as to wrap his legs around Castiel's hips as Castiel mouths along the hollow of Dean's neck, winding his hand between them. One finger and then another presses back inside, and Dean moves with it, sinking into a heat and pleasure that burns and aches and pulses inside him.

When Cas moves against him, his hands come out to wrap around Dean's thighs, palms pressing down warmly. He lifts Dean's legs up and slides his body closer, and fuck, fuck yes, god *this*. Dean's breath punches out of his chest as he feels it, the slow, heavy press of Castiel. The force of it claws at Dean's heart, lodges in his chest, so sweet and so wanted and so primal that Dean's breath stutters, blood rushing to his cheeks as Castiel pushes inside.

The pressure is unbelievable, and it seems to go on forever. Dean arches forward, his body shaking as it stretches around the head of Castiel's dick. Dean has to take a breath, to pull at Castiel's hips with his hands, to guide Cas inside.

Cas feels huge, impossibly so, so much more pressure than his tongue and his fingers had been, but the sharp sting is good, welcome even, and Dean doesn't think about the last time he did this or the circumstances he'd been in. All he thinks about is Cas.

"I can take away the pain," Castiel groans as he eases further inside, hands tightening around Dean's raised legs.

"No, I want. I want to feel you, Cas," Dean pants out, digging blunt fingernails into Castiel's slick shoulderblades. "I want to feel everything."

Dean's body shifts helplessly in response to Castiel's movements, and he almost shatters completely when Castiel bottoms out, hips pressing snug against Dean's own. Dean lets out a long, low moan, turning his head to the side as he presses forward. He's so full; it's almost too much sensation at once.

Castiel fucks into Dean in a slow languorous arc, his lean hips twisting gracefully with each endless thrust. It feels so good like this, taking Castiel deep and holding him there. A beat passes and then Castiel stills inside of him, running soothing fingers over Dean's hips. He bends for Dean's mouth,

brushing his lips over Dean's own, dry and soft.

"Tell me if you need me to go slower," Castiel says, breathless.

"S'good," Dean whispers hoarsely, lifting his hips just a little higher, wanting Castiel even deeper.

"Dean," Castiel chokes out, his eyelids fluttering closed as he releases a low, guttural moan.

Castiel pulls almost all the way out, and Dean's left gasping and whimpering, before the angel presses back in, moving slow and relentless, and Dean can't help but whine at every inch taken. He arches up, desperate for more. Leaning forward, Castiel tilts them both into a better angle, and then he leans down to lick the curve of Dean's shoulder, slipping the rest of the way inside of Dean.

In the thin moonlight, Castiel's all lit up, body flushed and holy, sweat glistening on his chest and forehead as the tendons in his neck stand out in stark relief.

"Cas," Dean breathes out as he wraps his legs around Castiel's back again, urging him on with his heels.

"I'm here," Castiel whispers, voice ragged-rough.

Cas begins to put real power into his thrusts now, dragging against Dean's prostate with almost every stroke. It's a hard and insistent press that makes Dean's breath hitch and catch in his throat.

Dean hears himself whimpering, but can't stop the noises he's making, can't stop wanting more. "Cas," he says again, on a low moan, breath coming harsh and shallow.

"I'm with you." Castiel's voice is completely wrecked, but his presence is as steady and solid as ever.

Dean's unraveling fast, his heart hammering in his ribcage, his pulse throbbing in his veins. He looks down to see his own cock raring to go again, leaking sticky pools of fluid where it's lying stiff and blood-heavy on his belly.

The moments spread thin, and Cas angles his hips just right, pounding harder into Dean. The pleasure is searing, brutal and relentless. And for a time, it's all long, calculated strokes, all power and intensity, achingly perfect. Like always, Castiel's a force of nature, and not for the first time Dean suspects Castiel's body can't contain all that the angel truly is. The way light seems to pulse just under his skin, spilling out through his pores, the sheer power locked in his muscles as he moves.

Dean cries out and grabs Castiel's hips as the angel speeds up and thrusts harder, and suddenly everything drops away. All that remains is him and Cas and everything they are, have been, and will be. The thick, hard slide of Castiel's cock, the stretch and burn, is just enough to remind Dean that this is *real*, that they're here and alive, and together. Finally.

"The way you feel," Castiel says, and his voice cracks and breaks, his hips dragging, thrusting, going deep, deeper still. Dean's groaning, lost in the feel of Castiel's cock inside him.

Castiel presses closer, and the change of angle almost makes Dean lose his fucking mind. Cas is slowly losing it too though, and it's a damn beautiful sight. His sharp composure is breaking, and his eyes are full of a star-lit shine. He sets a new rhythm that's slow and deep, like the ebb of waves against a beach, the wild darkness of the ocean.

They fuck for lifetimes, maybe, Dean's mind too lost in the rhythm of it to know the pass of time. The surrounding cave bleeds away into blackness as heat rides his spine, crests low and heavy in his balls. Dean wants to come, but he wants this connection to last even longer.

Castiel's chest glistens and ripples as he moves, and Dean focuses on the play of muscles beneath the angel's skin, the hard cut of his abdomen as he thrusts. Dean tries to see as much as he can, angling his head to see where Castiel slides into him and disappears, connecting them together and moving them as one.

Like a fire igniting in his soul, his nerves spark raw and hot, and Dean groans and quakes, the building heat and pressure in his body begging for release. Just when Dean doesn't know how much more he can stand, Castiel's hand wraps around Dean's cock, pumping him as he thrusts faster and faster, and Dean completely loses it. He's gone, coming with Castiel's cock buried deep inside of him. The world shatters around them, stabbed through with light and sound, and every muscle in Dean's body spasms and ruptures.

Castiel meets his gaze then, but the angel looks too far gone himself, eyes dark and lust-blown, so completely undone, body wrecked and flayed out. A dark flush rides his skin, and his hands shake as he fits them along Dean's hips. Castiel closes his eyes, thrusts up one last time, and comes with a cry that pierces through the entire cave, shaking the very ground around them.

The fire flares bright behind them, erupting nearly to the ceiling, the entire cavern exploding into light so bright Dean has to close his eyes. When he opens them again, they lock on Castiel, and Castiel stares down at Dean, and *Holy shit. Holy fucking shit.*

Castiel *shines*.

"Fuckin' hell," Dean gasps.

Castiel's body is motionless, still locked inside of Dean's own, but his eyes are bright, gleaming with the same light that seems to be spreading over his entire body, shining through his skin with an inhuman, iridescent radiance. There's something working its way just below Castiel's skin, coiling and rolling beneath the surface, brimming with power and heat. Castiel's pores spill out ribbons of moonlight, and the light itself moves over and inside of him, through him and around him, sparking off his hair and lashes, dripping from his mouth and hands. It's everywhere.

"Cas, is that you?" Dean whispers, seeing the familiar face of Castiel's angelic true form shining just underneath Castiel's human skin.

The light around Castiel ripples, brightening for a moment. Dean reaches out to touch Castiel, and that's when it gets even weirder. Tendrils of light tangle around Dean's fingers where he presses against Castiel's arm.

"Is this some kind of weird tantric sex magic thing?" Dean breathes out, eyes traveling up the length of Castiel's body.

"No, it's just some weird me thing," Castiel says, voice echoing deep and low.

"What's happening to you?" Dean asks, concern lacing his words.

"This part of me wishes to join with you as well," Cas whispers, and then the light spreads out of him, moving over Dean's fingers and down his arms, wrapping around him like netting. Dean feels the light like a shockwave to his body, a warmth that spreads through him entirely, leaving him breathless.

It's like he's on the verge of coming again, the pleasure so intense, so immediate, he feels himself hardening. As Castiel's light flows into Dean, it fills him in a way that Dean hasn't known since he held Castiel's grace inside of him on the return trip from Purgatory. It washes over him in waves of deep sensation, of light and sound and pure feeling.

Dean feels Castiel grow hard again inside of him. The angel's strong hands clutch Dean's hips tightly as he began to rock softly. Dean groans, arching into the motion. A moment passes before Dean feels Castiel tense up and thrust hard and sharp, once, twice, and then it happens: light explodes from Castiel's back and Dean twists his head away from the brightness. When Dean looks back, his mouth drops open.

He sees Castiel's wings, more shadow than form, lifting and uncoiling heavily, unfolding across the cavern.

"Jesus," he whispers, staring at them in wonder. This close, he can see swirls of light and shadow dancing around each other. The wings are hawk-like in shape, translucent, but shining with a dark, metallic luster. They look multihued in the light of Castiel's true form, the speckled feathers a vibrant mix of blacks, blues, purples, and grays.

"You can touch them," Castiel breathes out, rolling his hips slowly and flaring his wings further to expose them for Dean.

"Fuck, yeah," Dean whispers, reaching out tentatively, not knowing what to expect. He slides his fingers up into the blue-black ether-space of the feathers, and it's like moving through the heavy air of an electrical storm, the feel of a million soft pinpricks beating against his skin, light and grace spilling across his hands as he curls his fingers into the essence of shadows.

Castiel shudders, rocking slowly into Dean. "I can feel you," he whispers, groaning as Dean combs his fingers back and forth.

"You're so fucking beautiful," Dean whispers, because Cas is simply amazing.

Castiel leans down, his wings arcing around him, reaching out to surround Dean, cocoon him. This is familiar too, the feeling of being warm and protected and surrounded. A memory hits Dean then, one of being wrapped in light and heat and a thousand songs. Of safety and flight and...

"I remember this. Jesus, Cas, I remember you," Dean whispers, because he remembers being surrounded in Castiel's light, cocooned by the darkness of his wings. He remembers being rescued. "Oh, god, Cas."

"Dean," Castiel whispers, pressing lips against Dean's forehead and smiling. "I'm glad."

Castiel's chest heaves with exertion then, wings spanning even wider, and then he arches over Dean and pulls out all the way. Dean groans at the sudden loss of his heat, but soon enough the angel's settling his body against Dean again, his cock hard and slick and leaking, the tip of it smearing wet where Dean is still open and aching for it.

This time the sliding burn inside Dean rocks him backward, and he's stretched wide and greedy with need. Castiel snaps his hips hard, pushing in and out in sharp motions, and Dean's breath punches out of him with the force of it. Dean shivers, breathless, fingers scrabbling at Castiel's shoulders, tangling in his hair, in his wings. Castiel sinks deeper, pouring his light into Dean as his pace picks up, hammering Dean's ass with a fierce, frenetic rhythm.

Moments later, Dean feels Castiel go to pieces around him.

Dean can't see for the blinding light, and the stars, and the fucking sparks filling the room when it happens. And Castiel. Jesus, Cas is *gone*, lit up and glowing, rocking into Dean with the force of a hurricane. They come together, yelling, everything rushing out of them with the crackle-snap of thunder and lightening. The earth trembles against Dean's back, and Dean wants to laugh but he can't even move his body, can't even remember how to breathe.

"Dean," Cas gasps, all broken whimpers and ragged panting as his thrusts slow down, eventually stilling completely. Dean shudders, feels every place where their skin touches, where the light flows between them. Castiel eases out of Dean gently, and Dean sucks in a deep breath, feeling Castiel's warm come slip and slide between his legs, the soreness in his body a sweetness he wants to last.

Castiel moves over him carefully, as if checking him out for injuries. There's the light touch of his dry lips to the bare skin over Dean's shoulders, his neck, his mouth.

"Cas," Dean whispers, tipping his head back as Castiel presses up under his ear and buries his face in Dean's neck, his wings spreading wide behind him.

*I love you*, Dean thinks, eyes scrunching tight. *So goddamned much*.

Castiel's lips linger against Dean's ear. He whispers, "What is it, Dean?"

"I've never..." Dean says aloud, his body still shaking in the aftermath, eyes watching the last of Castiel's true light fade away until he's just Cas again. Beautiful, non-glowy, Cas. "God, I've never felt anything like that before."

"Nor have I," Castiel says quietly.

"Wow," Dean whispers, voice shocky and awed.

"Yes," Castiel breathes out softly, a soft smile curling his lips. "You were most amazing."

The words are so soft and reverent, and Dean can't breathe, can't think. Can't. "Goddammit, Cas," he gasps out, and he's unraveling, he's losing it, he's gone too. "God help me, but I friggin' love you," he whispers, voice so low it hurts to speak. "Jesus, I love you so fucking much...I..."

"I know," Castiel whispers, rolling them closer, and laying himself gently on top of Dean. "I know, Dean."

And Dean laughs. He fucking laughs hard. "Jesus, Cas," he says breathlessly, pressing kisses along Castiel's neck and repeating himself, soft and hurried, "I love you, I love you, I love you."

*Ego dilecto meo et dilectus meus mihi*, Cas breathes into Dean's ear, pressing light kisses against the lobe, sucking it gently into his mouth before whispering, *Te amabo in aeternum*.

*"I will love you forever."*





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### *Tu'ugamau Island*

The jungle is thicker now that they are back on the southern side of the island. The mist hangs heavy in the early morning twilight, and the world is dim and murky beneath the trees, framed by jungle vines. The trees seem to dance and whisper, and the leaves are low, thick and heavy with dew. Dean has to squint, searching the shadows for anything, anyone. *Come on, Sammy.*

"Do you sense them?" Dean asks after a time, boots slicking in the soft, muddy earth as he turns to find Castiel crouching low and examining tracks on the wet ground. It had rained sometime during the night, although he and Castiel had been protected by their cave.

"No," Castiel says, heaving a heavy breath. "They must still be inside the city, protected by magic I cannot penetrate."

Dean squeezes his eyes tight, trying not to panic. It's been twenty hours since the separation, and every instinct he has is shouting at him to find his brother. *Come on, Sammy.*

"What if—" Dean stops talking, takes a breath.

"They'll find us," Castiel says, appearing at his side. He rests his hand against Dean's shoulder, and Dean falls into the touch, wrapping his arms around Castiel and pulling him close.

"Okay," Dean breathes against Castiel's neck, taking in his scent and letting it comfort him. He feels selfish for wanting to go back to how they were last night, the two of them getting lost together, just for a moment. He remembers the amazing feeling of Cas moving inside of him, buried so deep. *God.* Dean closes his eyes and reminds himself to breathe.

"Let's keep moving," Castiel says quietly after a moment, pulling away, but keeping his hand settled on Dean's arm.

Dean nods, because they're close to where they left their bags and supplies, and he knows that when they return from Lagi, Sam, Eloni, and Tuk will look for them there first. *If they return from Lagi.* Dean sighs, tries not to dwell on the possibility that they won't return. Keeping mobile helps, but it doesn't make the fear go away, that same fear that he always feels whenever he's threatened with losing someone. When he was growing up, he always thought it was a weakness, the kind of fear he felt whenever Dad left, or whenever Sammy yelled about running away. He knew that maybe there was something wrong with him, that there was a reason why everyone always left him, but...

"Dean."

Castiel's voice interrupts his thoughts. When Dean looks down, he notices that Castiel is holding on to his wrist tightly, and he's not letting go. Dean looks at him, confused. "Yeah, Cas?" he asks.

Castiel comes closer and touches Dean's face. He looks at him for a long moment, worry knitting his brows together. "It's alright."

Dean swallows, rubbing a hand over his face, his forehead damp from the mist. He takes a deep breath and whispers, "I need to say something to you before we go." He doesn't know why he's whispering. There's no else one around. But, still.

Castiel's eyes are warm, trailing over Dean's face as he runs his fingers along Dean's jawline. "Yes, of course. What is it?"

"I love you," Dean rushes out, and maybe he finds he likes saying it, finds that it feels freeing to say something he's spent so much time trying to bottle up. "I'm in love with you too," he adds for good measure, and the way Castiel looks at him then, eyes going crinkly-soft and secretly happy, helps Dean to find the rest of his words, long buried deep down. "Fuck, Cas, I still can't believe that you love me too, that you keep coming back to me. Even through everything that happened last year, I never stopped wanting to fix things between us. I hope you know that."

Castiel's gaze lingers on Dean's face for a long time, and he whispers, voice low and ragged-soft, "You amaze me. Every day, you amaze me, Dean Winchester."

"Cas, don't," Dean protests, and he knows he's blushing. And he can't help laughing at himself for it because this is all too crazy, and he feels doped-up and high as a kite, ready to confess anything, *everything*. Fuck it. He never says shit like this. But. But he *needs* to. This is Cas, this is his best friend. This is the man, the angel, that's seen him at his worst, and loved him even then. This is... Dean takes a deep breath, face heating up as he admits, "Maybe you're the goddamn love of my fucked-up life, okay?"

Castiel's eyes widen, and then Dean leans down and kisses him, because he needs to do this too. It starts off wild and hot, tongues dueling inside their mouths, the sharp bite of teeth drawing blood, their hands bruising as they grapple for purchase around the torn fabric of their jackets. Castiel's lips are warm and chapped, and Dean feels the world tilting beneath him, his heart pumping double time to keep up with the force of Castiel's presence, hot and bright and illuminated in the half-light.

When they break apart, Castiel says in a rush of breath, eyes glowing, "I feel as if I've waited my entire existence for you."

Dean's about to say something else just as sappy and chick-flick and never-gonna-live-it-down embarrassing, but he's saved from that by the sound of pounding feet rushing through the jungle, loud shouts and whistles. Dean swirls around, hands going to his weapons.

"*Dean! Cas!*"

Dean startles, his body rocketing forward with shock and relief as the sound of his brother's voice reaches him through the dense treecover. "Sammy! We're over here!" he calls out.

A moment later his tall, ridiculously *overgrown* baby brother comes crashing through the trees, breathless and looking a lot like Tarzan searching for his Jane. Tuk and Eloni come bounding through a moment later, eyes widening and mouths curling into huge smiles when they catch sight of Dean and Castiel.

"Oh my god, Dean, we've been looking for you all night!" Sam yells, rushing Dean like a linebacker and wrapping him up in his gargantuan arms. Sam squishes him breathless, but Dean doesn't mind, hugging him back as hard as he can.

Sam pulls away and shakes his head, eyes glowing wet. "You jerk, don't you ever make me do that again."

"I knew you'd find us, Sammy," Dean says, punching him on the shoulder. "Took you long enough though."

Sam rolls his eyes, then turns to glance over Dean's shoulder when he notices Castiel watching with a quiet smile. "Hey, Cas," Sam says.

"Hello, Sam," Castiel says, nodding. "We're glad you're safe."

"Come here, man," Sam says, and then reaches over and pulls Cas bodily into the kind of awkward nerd hug that sends them all laughing. Cas looks like a tiny bug squished against Sam's big frame, but there's a surprised smile working its way across the angel's face.

Dean laughs, pleased. "Been playing Indiana Jones without me, kid?" he says when Sam turns back to him. He takes in the state of Sam's wild appearance. His brother's long hair is disheveled, and there are streaks of mud on his face and shirt. The sleeves of his jacket are covered in dust and cobwebs.

"You could say that," Sam says with a big, sheepish grin. "I found our Holy Grail."

Dean shakes his head in disbelief. "Son of a bitch! Let me see it!"

When Sam turns to Tuk, the teen hands over his knapsack. "That it?" Dean asks, and he can't help his excitement as he watches Sam carefully take a burlap-wrapped object out of the bag

"Yeah," Sam says, tentatively unwrapping what actually does look like the freaking Holy Grail. The artifact is a large, golden chalice, heavily weathered by time, but intricately designed with runes and sigils that still can be seen despite its age and condition.

"Eloni says we use it in the ritual," Sam says, placing it in Dean's hand and smiling. "We wrapped it in a piece of burlap that has the spell for the combined ritual written on it."

Dean lets his fingers close around the cup, the unexpected warmth of the metal seeping into his hands. Something about it feels right, and he takes a moment to memorize the texture of the cup against his calloused fingers, the roughness of the engravings, many of which he recognizes from the stone walls of the gateway temple.

"So now what?" Dean murmurs, taking his eyes away from the chalice for a moment to glance at his team, the four of them looking battle-worn and exhausted, as they gather all around him.

Sam laughs, strained. "Head back to Easter Island? Figure out how this whole prophecy thing works? Find the False Prophet?" he offers.

Dean cocks his head toward his brother. "Sounds like we still got a lot ahead of us," he says, passing the chalice back to Sam, who carefully wraps it back in the burlap and slips it into the bag. "Think we're ready for it?"

Sam seems to think about it for a moment, then shrugs. "Have we ever been ready?"

Dean laughs quietly. "Hell no," he admits. He turns when he feels Castiel press against his side, lacing their fingers together under the fall of their jacket sleeves. Dean glances down at him, and feels his face warming at the close proximity, at the simple touch of support.

"We're going to be ready this time," Castiel says, low and rough.

A part of Dean thinks maybe Castiel is right. He smiles at him before turning to glance at everyone else again. "Okay," he says. "How about we regroup by our supplies and eat something, cuz I know I'm friggin' hungry, and then figure out next steps."

"Sounds like a plan," Sam says, smirking a little at where Dean and Cas are pressed close together, and Dean sighs, because yeah, Sam is not going to let him live this one down.

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Sam's kind of having trouble getting over this place, with the endless sky, clouds hovering in a line over the ocean, horizon a dark blue line. Seems fitting to be in a place that does seem like the actual edge of the world while they're trying to stop yet another end of the world for what –the third time, no, *fourth* time now? Not that Sam has really lost count, all too aware of that chain. He can't shake off the sense of it as a ripple that went through him and Dean to Castiel, as if they're all three cursed, and who can even say where it truly began. They're not alone in the chain.

The wind-blasted grass above the beach is a patchwork of brown and green, and in the near distance, the *Sea Goddess* floats serenely where they anchored her before they set off on their trek. A few yards away from Sam, Eloni sits on a rock overlooking a tide pool, the bag containing the chalice in her lap as she stares toward their boat and the open ocean beyond. She absently turns the bracelet on her wrist, holding her arm near her chest. Sam knows she's working over the clues they've got and trying to work out an answer. They've paused to rest, here on this beach, before continuing on to the boat for their return trip to Easter Island, and somehow none of them seem willing to leave Tu'ugamau until they're sure there's nothing more for them to do there. It's almost an electric current under Sam's skin, a sense of expectation, that the answers are on the tips of their brains, hovering just out of reach. Maybe it's this place, its closeness to ancient magic.

"Tuk, don't go too far," Eloni calls out, and Tuk, fifty yards or so down the beach, lifts his hand to reassure his mother.

Dean's kicked his boots off, rolled up his jeans, and he's sitting on a rock within arm's reach of Sam, while Cas sits on a rock near Dean. Like Eloni, Castiel's gaze is out towards the ocean. He frowns, body remaining still in a particular way that Sam often associates with Castiel. Cas adjusts the bandolier across his chest, glances up at Dean, and the frown softens as Dean catches his eye and gives Cas a spontaneous, lopsided smile. It's something Sam probably wasn't supposed to see, but Sam can't help catching how Dean's face lightens before he quickly turns away to stare down at the tide pool. There's an odd new peacefulness to Dean, a softening of his edges that Sam's only seen a few times on his brother, while Cas has lost some of the haunted expression he's been wearing the past month or so. Something's changed between them. Sam can't pinpoint what, but it doesn't matter. They're here and they're safe, for now anyway.

"At least we got the last artifact." Sam leans back, the rock he's perched himself on rough against his palms. "Score one for our side."

"Yeah, so we're at negative fifty instead of negative a bazillion, go Team Free Will." Dean rubs the back of his neck. "Or okay, maybe we're more edging into the pluses," he concedes, as if he's making a confession, as if he's afraid to even say it, and Sam definitely can't miss the way Dean sneaks a glance at Castiel right then.

Biting his lower lip to hold back a smirk, Sam watches a bird wing low over the water. Despite being two of the most screwed-up, battered, and tough people Sam's ever known, it's the funniest thing ever how much Dean and Cas sometimes act like a couple of ninth graders with a crush.

"Perhaps we're simultaneously in the negative and positive numbers," Castiel says, and again a *look* goes between him and Dean.

"Maybe we are." Dean grins widely this time, first at Cas, then at Sam, pushing his bare feet into the gritty, wet sand. "And hey, as a bonus, imagine Meg's irritation when she finds out we got to the shiny objects before anyone else. Remember the way she talked about Cthulhu like he was her own personal Jesus—"

Dean stops, going rigid.

Gripping the bag with the chalice, Eloni slides down from her rock. "Dean? What is it?"

"Meg," he says, frowning. "I was just thinking how...back during that thing with Adam, she said something about how if she couldn't stop Cthulhu or control him, then she'd at least be his head cheerleader."

Sam has that expectant feeling again, something obvious that he should be picking up on immediately but doesn't as it snags in his thoughts.

"The False Prophet," Dean says, voice a near growl.

"Wait." And then it clicks in Sam's head too. "Meg..."

"Is the False Prophet!" Eloni finishes. "Tuk!" she calls, gesturing, and Tuk starts making his way back towards them along the beach, picking his way gracefully over and around clusters of rock.

"Shit," Sam whispers.

Eloni clutches the bag holding the artifact in front of her. "The False Prophet summons the Beast..."

"And the prophet is its herald," Castiel says cautiously. He seems off in his own train of thought as he ponders the possibility.

"That can be bound to the Beast in order to destroy it," Dean finishes.

"I don't know," Sam says, shaking his head. "Maybe it's too much of a reach."

"But it adds up," Dean says quickly. "She's been dropping hints she knew what was going down as far back as Crystal Beach, and that was months ago. And besides, it's the only theory we've got right now." He bends over to pick up his boots. "Cas? You got any thoughts on this?"

"It could be Meg, yes." The angel hesitates, then adds, "Yes, it would make sense. She has been involved in the Beast's rise this entire time."

"So...what do we do now?" Tuk runs his hand through his long hair, scratching the top of his head with nervous energy.

Dean sits back down on a rock and starts pulling on his socks and boots. "We capture her."

"We can set something up at my place back on Easter Island," Eloni offers.

"No," Dean says. "Now. Before she can make any more plans, or figures out we've got the last artifact, or does something else to pave the way for The King of Tentacles to become bigger than Bono."

"Uh, right here?" Sam gestures down the beach, his stomach twitching a little. "And didn't Cas say she might be able to refuse a summons?"

"She may be able to," Castiel cuts in smoothly. "It would depend on how much power she has acquired since Crowley's demise."

Dean is utterly decisive. "I say we dial her up and see." He glances over to Eloni, his tone meaningful when he adds, "Maybe if it isn't our number that flashes up, she'll take the call..."

Eloni nods slowly. "I'll do it."

Sam has seen this kind of nervous focus in Dean before, this surety, and it usually means Dean is a hundred and fifty percent right or a hundred and fifty percent wrong, and that means Sam will jump with his brother. But there are practical considerations. "How're we going to build a devil's trap on sand? Maybe we should do it on the boat? It'll have to be concealed somehow."

Tuk crouches and scoops up a handful of small rocks from the water. "Guys..." He straightens up and holds them out, shining and wet on his palm. "I have an idea."

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They stand in a circle – or roughly in a circle – spread out and lopsided. Eloni finishes the summoning, on her knees with the small bowl half-sunk into the sand. She rises, brushing the sand off her hands while Tuk takes his place at her shoulder. Across the loose circle, Dean and Castiel face each other, with Sam next to Dean.

Sam holds his flask of holy water with the cap loosened, down at his side the way he would hold a knife, and next to him Dean does the same. They're lucky the wind has died down.

Again Sam's struck with the peace of this place, its remoteness, and yet here they are going to war as they always do, because there isn't a way to avoid it, not really. Only for a little while, and then there's always work to do. There was a time when Sam thought maybe there was a way out – even Dean maybe thought it too. But it's not a question of getting out. It's a question of finding the best of life while you're still in. He thinks of Mira, and realizes how much he misses having her with him. He's most aware of her absence when he's standing still, and at night while he's trying to sleep.

They wait.

It's three minutes, give or take, before Dean starts fidgeting, changing his grip on his flask from one hand to the other. Cas adjusts his grip on his salt-round loaded shotgun, pushing back a few strands of hair from his forehead with the side of his thumb. The seconds tick by, punctuated with the rush and hiss of the surf hitting the beach and striking the rocks, the sense of expectation becoming an even heavier weight in the air, but the energy's draining out of it.

Sam's just starting to wonder if the summoning failed, if Meg was able to avoid it like Castiel said some demons are able to do, when he blinks and Meg is suddenly there. As she scopes her audience, her lips purse in a pout.

"All right, kiddos." The wind blows her hair into her eyes and she lifts a hand to brush it away. "What do you want?" Her gaze slides over the group, landing on Castiel. "Hi, Clarence. You miss me?" She blows him a kiss. Dean rolls his eyes, and Castiel's face goes more impassive than usual, but that's it. That seems to take some of the vinegar out of Meg. She sighs impatiently. "Fine, we're playing coy today?"

*Take a step...take a step...* Sam silently wills her. There's no way, in a summoning, to determine the precise spot a demon will appear, only the general location. They're lucky she landed on the beach as close to them as she did.

"Look, cupcakes, I don't have the time." Glaring, she moves closer to Castiel and Dean. "So start talking or I'm—" Meg's body jerks to a stop.

"Gotcha," Dean crows.

The realization of what just happened hits Meg's features, creasing them ugly with fury, and she lunges at Dean, only to slam to a halt again after hitting the invisible barrier. Eloni grabs Tuk's arm and pulls him a few feet farther away from Meg. "Stay back, demon," Eloni says coldly.

Meg's eyes slide to black, taking them all in, eyes eventually landing on Dean. "Just like old times, eh, Dean-o?" She sounds almost admiring. "How?"

"Stones. Few inches below you, under all that sand," Dean answers. "Don't bother digging, you know as well as we do you can't disrupt the trap yourself."



"Well, aren't you all the cutest ever." Meg folds her arms and cocks a foot forward, heel of her shoe in the sand, her eyes going back to human. "Now. What do you mooks want? I noticed the new locale. Were you lacking beach bunnies and thought you'd get me to join in the fun?" She winks.

"Actually...we have everything we need now," Sam says, and he maybe shouldn't, but he enjoys the confusion that ghosts over Meg's features before she can hide it.

They've planned this out carefully ahead of time. Castiel keeps his shotgun trained on Meg as Dean bends to get the roll of duct tape they retrieved from the boat out of his jacket pocket, which is lying in the sand near his feet. He pulls a strip of tape free and tears it with his teeth while Meg glares.

Dean and Sam flick the caps off the holy water flasks and fling the water at Meg at the same time.

She screams, smoke rising from her skin and clothing, her eyes gone black again as she stumbles back. Before she can recover, Dean steps into the trap with her, grips her shoulder with one hand, and pushes the tape over her mouth with the other. Meg shrieks with rage through the gag and takes a swing at Dean, who jumps back. Sam's grip tightens on the flask, ready to fling more holy water, but Castiel steps in front of Dean, shotgun raised at Meg.

"We know salt rounds can't kill you, but it'll hurt like a sonofabitch," Castiel says icily.

The angel and the demon glare at each other. Meg's not teasing now.

Behind Dean and Castiel, Eloni hurries over to Dean's jacket and tears off a few more lengths of duct tape. She brings them to Dean while Cas keeps the shotgun trained on Meg.

"Don't move," Castiel says to Meg, his voice calm. "Also, if you hurt him at all, after I shoot you full of rock salt, I'll hurt you right back. And you won't enjoy it."

Sam has no idea if Cas is bluffing or not. Fighting off the zombie hordes had to have taken most of the remaining mojo out of him, but the great thing about Castiel is that he intimidates well. It might be a bluff or it might not be, but Sam figures there are very few willing to take the risk when Castiel has that note in his voice.

While Meg's glare sweeps over each of them, Dean steps into the trap again to bind her wrists together using the tape. Then he walks back out again.

"That should do it," Dean says.

Meg's eyes are a deep, shining black. She makes a snarling sound in her throat. But she's caught. Finally.

"So...what now?" Sam asks, turning to look at his brother.

Dean nods his head towards the boat. "We head back to Easter Island to put together everything we need for the final plan. And to drop off Eloni and Tuk."

"Wait, what do you mean?" Eloni says, turning from starring daggers at Meg to looking at Dean and Sam expectantly.

"You've helped us enough," Dean says on a quiet breath. "And we're grateful. So incredibly grateful. But we can't ask this last thing of you. We—"

"But we can help," Tuk protests, and Sam sees his brother's eyes soften as he stares at the kid for a heavy few seconds before looking back to Eloni.

"Your boy needs his mom safe," Dean says softly. "He needs her alive. So we can't ask you to face Cthulhu with us. Please take yourself and your son, and head back to Chile as soon as we reach Easter Island. Protect yourselves and stay safe until this is all over."

Eloni looks at all of them for a long moment, her brown eyes warm and wet. She still seems unsure, but after a moment, she nods. "It's been a privilege working with you all, gentlemen. I am honored to have made this journey with you. My son and I will do all we can from the mainland to aid you in this."

"Definitely," Tuk agrees, and smiles at them. Then he asks, worry knitting his brow, "But how will you get to R'lyeh without us?"

Sam watches as a smirk winds its way across Dean's face. He knows his brother. Too well. "What are you thinking Dean?" he asks, wary.



Dean shrugs, his smirk only widening. "I always wanted to drive a Duck."

Sam chuckles and shakes his head. It's going to be a long Apocalypse.

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**Author's Acknowledgements:** A million hugs of gratitude to my amazing artists for sticking it out for this chapter despite the crazy ups and downs of my summer, and for their patience and inspiring work here. Please make sure to leave them lots of love [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#). Special thanks go to  [dotfic](#) for penning the Meg capture scene in this episode. Thanks to my partner in crime,  [zatnikatel](#) for taking on this Beastly series with me. And love and thanks to you readers for your patience with us this summer – it's been a long and crazy ride, and I sincerely hope you all feel the story has been worth the wait. In the words of Professor Eloni Nam'ulu, I am honored to have been a part of this journey with you. ♥

## Chapter 22: The Call of Cthulhu

Authors: Swordofmymouth & Zatnikatel

**Characters/Pairing:** Dean/Castiel, Sam, OC and canon characters

**Rating:** R

**Wordcount:** ~16,000

**Warnings:** language, violence, sexuality

**Betas:** [dotfic](#), [murrone](#), and [nyoka](#)

**Art:** Chapter banner by [swordofmymouth](#) and [zatnikatel](#); digital painting by [smallworld\\_inc](#), which you can also find [here](#) (art contains spoilers for the chapter)

**Summary:** *The dreamer has stopped sleeping...*



B

*Southern Pacific Ocean*

*47°9'S 126°43'W*

The world might be about to end again.

There's a demon hogtied in the lower cabin of the wheeled barge chained to the back end of the Duck, and Dean can hear the distant, furious drumming of her heels against the hull.

It's day three of this, as they meander across the South Pacific at a leisurely four knots or so. Dean has learned how to say *bite me* in forty-seven languages, including Enochian, even if it sounds like he's coughing up a short, curly hair whenever he says it. According to Castiel that leaves roughly six thousand, four hundred and fifty three to go. Castiel has learned how to play Texas hold 'em, Omaha high, seven and five-card stud, triple draw, crazy pineapple, badugi, and razz. He's holding two hundred

seventy markers and even if it takes Dean months to give him that many blowjobs, goddammit, he'll try.

Dean can feel himself turning pink and blistering, and if he squints in at the sides of his nose he can see his skin is already peeling, but he doesn't give a shit. He's taking five from the mind-numbing boredom to feast his eyes on his significant other, stretched out on the deck in half-sleep, bare-chested and barefooted, a hand resting on his belly as he soaks up the sun.

Dean stares at Castiel from his vantage point a couple of feet higher, where he's stretched out along a rudimentary bench fashioned from a strip of ply resting atop ten squat fuel barrels stowed at the front of the barge. And nope, he doesn't give a shit about burning, or about the fact his own sweat is gluing him to the thin vinyl seat pad that just about cushions his ribs. He doesn't give a shit because all he does give a shit about right now is watching the idle pick and slide of Castiel's finger as he scratches and rubs at the perspiration glistening on his skin.

Dean tracks its aimless progress down to the dark line of hair that starts at Castiel's navel and disappears behind the open, *open!* top button of the faded old rag blues Castiel inherited from him and wears so damn low on his hips that Dean can see the sharp points of bone poking out, still bruised with the hickies he nipped into the skin there overnight en route to a serious attempt at sucking Castiel's brain out through his dick. Dean has to stop himself from reaching over to run the pad of his finger across the mole under Castiel's nipple, and he knows that if he were to drape himself over Castiel and lick a wet stripe across his tattoo, the curling script would taste of salt-spray and sea breezes. Castiel is tanned, and under the shades Dean knows there is a smattering of freckles to match his own. And he knows how Castiel feels exploding inside him, loves Castiel like he has never loved, and it makes him feel so damned dizzy and delighted that in his head he's singing REO Speed-Foreigner on a loop. And it turns out Kevin Cronin really does sing it from the heart, like Jo told him all those years ago, and not from the hair at all—

"I don't understand that reference."

Fuck, *thinking aloud*, and Dean goggles idiotically for a few seconds as Castiel does that quizzical-perplexed half-smile and pushes his shades up, so that Dean feels his heart do a delicious little skip and twirl at the gleam of blue against the tan.

"What is REO Speed-Foreigner?" Castiel asks him.

"It's code," Dean tells him, and his friend's eyes go soft and fond because he *knows*. It's the same naked affection that shone out of them back in the waterfall cave they sheltered in, when Dean bared his heart, and the memory gives Dean a little push, so that he does reach down and put his palm against Castiel's cheek. "It means I lo—"

Momentarily distracted by the bout of coughing that explodes from the cabin ahead of them, Dean glances up there to see his brother looking back at him and rolling his eyes. "Get a room," Sam says, and Dean flips him a lazy bird in response.

"Quack, quack," he mocks, and directs his gaze down again to see a blank look this time. "It's a Duck," he reminds Castiel, with a slap of his hand down on the side of the boat. "They do tours with them in

Boston. You sit there and quack at passersby." He directs his attention back towards the bow, hollers, "Are we there yet?"

As if in answer, the craft makes a grinding noise that sounds like it has a pack-a-day habit, and the engine cuts out abruptly. Dean doesn't wait for his brother to send up a white flare, he pushes up to a sit and stretches, groaning at the pull of muscles made tender by two nights of sleeping on the same thin pad he's sunbathing on now.

Castiel catches his eye again. "I could...?"

"Magic finger me?" Dean leers. "Later."

Castiel narrows his eyes in a contemplative way that sends a tendril of *gonna hit that so damn hard* slithering through Dean's belly before he slips his shades back down. Dean stands and steps over him, winces at the cranking sound coming from the cab. He whistles as he pauses to root his flashlight out of his duffel, shakes his head as his brother looks back at him. "You'll drain the battery," he cautions. "Shift over, I'll take a look."

He maneuvers himself into the cabin as Sam sidles past him with a doubtful huff.

"Maybe we should have borrowed a proper boat."

Dean is already on his knees between the front seats, and he waggles his eyebrows up at his brother. "We calling sneaking out in the middle of the night and hot-wiring the nearest set of wheels *borrowing* now?"

Tightlipped, Sam snaps, "Bobby's going to be really pissed we didn't wait for him, Dean. Mira too. Jesus, I don't even want to think about that."

Dean ignores the crestfallen expression, smirks, "You're whipped."

Sam doesn't take the bait, just fixes Dean with a hard look. "Are you sure about this?"

"Nope," Dean parries. He isn't, no point in denying it, but he isn't giving into his own niggling qualms about this messy, *bad* plan, because he knows that if he takes that sharp right into doubt, the next left will steer him into jitters and from there, it's a one-way street to anxiety and a new-build smack bang in the center of *turn-the-fuck-back-right-the-fuck-now*. "But I am sure it's our fight, not theirs," he continues, with a totally faked confidence he hopes is convincing. "And I don't want any more blood on our hands."

He turns back to the job at hand, hooks up the engine cover, and crouches to squint down at where the flashlight beam illuminates the mechanics. "Anyway, this thing's perfect," he backtracks. "It might save us a hike when we get there. And it's a Chevy engine, I know them like the back of my hand."

He hears a sharp snort from above.

"It's a Chevy engine from the fifties, Dean. Even you said we were pushing it to keep her at four knots,

especially towing the barge." The passenger seat creaks as Sam slumps down on to it. "This is the second time we've broken down, and if you can't fix it we could be stuck out here for days."

"Barge is handy for storing demons," Dean reminds him brightly. "And there's a sail isn't there? It's jerry-rigged, but it's something."

Unimpressed, Sam responds, "To use a sail you need wind. And there's nothing, not even a breeze. Not for the last half-day at least. So like I said, if you can't get this crate moving again, we're stuck."

Sam's face is worn and tired, and if he's honest, Dean knows his brother's moroseness has been gradually increasing since they snuck out of Hanga Roa. He tries to lighten the mood anyway. "As idle as a painted ship upon a painted ocean," he mocks gently.

It has something of the desired result, as Sam's lips curl into a reluctant grin, and Dean smiles himself at the memory of endlessly repeating the verses to his enthralled kid brother in so many roach motels across the lower forty-eight, while their dad slept it off in the other bed. "I fear thy skinny hand," he hisses theatrically, and he winks, but he knows Sam well enough to know there's more to this than the risk of being adrift out here on the endless sea. "Come on, what's up?" he prods.

"You mean besides the almost certain death?" Sam taps agitated fingers on his thigh. "It's just." He stops, seems to consider whatever is bothering him before he meets Dean's eyes. "I've been thinking. About how all this crap never ends, no matter what we do."

Dean sucks back the *you think too much* that's poised to race off his tongue, pulls up from the nook he's crowded into, and reaches under the seat his brother is sitting on for the box of rusty tools stowed there. "Lucky they keep these on board," he evades weakly as he brandishes a wrench.

"Or a great big red flag to the fact this piece of junk will probably start sinking any minute," Sam bats back, and he sneaks a dark look at Dean, mutinous mixed with smug. It's the look he gets when he's needling purposefully, pushing Dean to make the kind of explosive accusation that always leads to locked horns, grim stares and the usual sullen silence Dean can never stand too long before he's grabbing the car keys and hitting the nearest bar. But there's no bar in sight and Dean's hip flask is empty, and maybe he's developed more patience since his year of faux fatherhood.

Or maybe it's just resignation.

Still, Dean tries again. "Why don't you find something to do? Cards are in my pack, play a couple of rounds with Cas. It'll take your mind off things." He stops, rethinks. "Don't play him for money though, he'll clean you out."

Sam makes an unidentifiable hitching sound, followed by a sudden fist he slams into the dash.

Resignation it is then. "Okay, spit it out," Dean answers, and he braces himself.

"None of it meant anything," Sam says harshly, and he doesn't meet Dean's stare. "What I did. Lucifer. Adam. The Cage, Hell, all those years. Pain, misery, bad dreams, hallucinations...you and me both. And it stopped nothing. It achieved nothing." His voice goes tight and breathless, and he bites the tirade

back inside himself for a moment, then shakes his head slowly. "I'm sorry," he mutters. "It's just that the more I think about it, the more I realize it was meaningless, all of it. All that suffering, and we're back at square one."

Dean isn't going to deny he has thought like that himself, has laid there in the dark and felt so damned helpless as he rails against that vicious bitch called fate, and he knows Sam will probably see through it if he does. He has to clear his throat before he replies. "I don't know what to tell you, Sam," he offers carefully. "Except what I tell myself."

He rolls over onto his butt, rubs his fingers along his jaw, thinks for a moment of Michael, of the archangel's righteousness and conviction. "Michael didn't get his best tux," he says softly. "And you fought back. And it does mean something. It means something because we're here, and all of this..." He motions his head up and around them. "All of this is still here. And you can tell yourself we achieved nothing, and that it wasn't worth it, but it was. Because yeah, we could have stopped it properly first time around. If I'd suited up, and we had wasted this planet to ashes between us. Between *them*." He cocks his head, raises an eyebrow. "You think that would have been an achievement?"

Sam watches him for a long moment, and his grim expression softens, his tension draining away as his shoulders unhunch and drop down a few inches.

Dean reaches out, pats his brother's shin. "It was worth it," he reiterates. "And we're not dying this time, none of us."

He twists his head around then, looks over at Castiel, standing up now and facing the other way. The angel is studiously ignoring them as he reaches for the sky and arches his back to work out the kinks, much as Dean had done just a few minutes before. The movement is carelessly sensual, zings deliciously through Dean's balls, giving him a giddy feeling of elation and longing. "You have Mira," he continues, as he casts his eyes back up at Sam. "I have him," he concedes through a half-grin. "That has to mean something, huh? After everything?"

Sam's expression has gone amused and knowing. "*You're* whipped," he jeers mildly, knocking Dean's boot with his own. "Dude, you REO Speed-Foreignered him."

"I'm happy," Dean answers simply, and he shrugs awkwardly around the feeling of tightness in his chest. "I'm happy, Sam." And Jesus, it's too much, and even if he's well aware Sam knows Castiel is *it* for him, Dean has to break the mood before he spills any more of this chick-flick crap the way he already has to Castiel. "He completes me," he adds with a smirk, tearing his eyes away before his brother sees even more than he already has and folding himself back down into his workspace to get his mind back on the job. He breathes in oil, his eyes sharp as they range across the rods, belts and pistons that work the propeller. "And, are we there yet?" he repeats, as he uses his forefinger to snag an errant valve and ram it back into what he guesses is its slot.

"We're in the ballpark, have been for an hour or so. I didn't want to wake you guys." Sam pats the outline of his phone, tucked away in his hip pocket, goes on, "I took pictures of you slobbering all over each other at the asscrack of dawn." He pauses, curls his lips into a sly smile. "Or maybe it was the asscrack of Dean. It was sweet."



Dean snorts balefully as he pushes himself up to sit again. "Whatever. Anyhoo, that should do it."

Sam is rustling the map open, folds it out on the console and clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth as he looks ahead, through the windshield. "You think it'll just appear or something?" he wonders. "Only I don't see anything."

Dean's gaze has flicked over to where the shabby sports duffel they're using to tote some of the older, more battered weaponry is stowed in the corner of the small cabin. "Don't these places always just loom up out of the mist?" he suggests, as he leans across to snag the bag and pull it up close.

"I don't see any mist either," Sam reports, as Dean unzips the bag and pokes through their jumbled assortment of borrowed ordnance until his hand falls on the burlap sacking in which Eloni Nam'ulu reverently wrapped the sword and the chalice.

He lifts it out and places it on the deck, unfolds the thick cloth, and eyes the neat script that covers it, incantations translated from the carved stone tablets at Lagi and inscribed into a rough-cut yard of fabric from the ancient Temple of Malama itself *to appease the gods* for taking the chalice, according to Eloni. There are protective sigils too, sigils that will conceal the presence of the relics should R'lyeh be home to any more of the undead warriors that guarded the lost city on Tu'ugamau.

"Have you practiced it today?"

Dean glances up to see that Sam is looking down at him and wearing a smug expression. His brother has a paper copy of the ritual proper, carefully crafted by Eloni using a combination of the Lagi text and runes from *The Necronomicon*, and Sam has been studying it diligently, lips moving as he imprints it on his brain. But *fuck*, Dean never has been able to memorize the haphazard syntax and prosody of spellwork with the same ease, and he scowls at the reminder. "You know me and all that bell, book, and candle crap," he mutters. "I'll write it on my hand when we get there."

Sam grins. "And yet you can remember the Ancient Mariner and any number of sappy REO Speed-Foreigner songs. Maybe you're a poet at heart."

Dean grunts dismissively, turns back to the treasures. He runs a fingertip along the ornate hilt of the sword, grasps it and raises its tarnished, age-weathered blade up in front of him, testing its weight. "The Michael sword," he marvels as he studies the sigil, so like Castiel's own Enochian C, engraved just below the cross guard. The reference takes Dean back to John Winchester's lock-up, and the cunning, self-satisfied smirk on Zachariah's face when he laid their destiny out for them. He shivers at the memory, pushes it down, focuses instead on the buzz that seems to run from the ancient metal through into his palm, as if the weapon is purring contentment at him. "This is going to work," he pledges quietly.

"We just don't know how."

Sam is still looking down at him when Dean casts his eyes up, and he gives a half-shrug. "Face it, Dean, we're flying blind through heavy fog with no instruments," he says, his voice gone as somber as it sounded a few minutes before as he motions out and ahead of them. "There's no magical island, just open water in every direction. We have the chalice from the palace, and a sword that's so old it'll

probably snap if we stick it in anything that isn't butter. And we have a spell we patched together from some prehistoric carvings and *The Necronomicon*, a book most people think is fiction because it *is* fiction."

Dean pulls a smirk from his repertoire. "But the pellet with the poison's in the chalice from the palace."

His brother's stare is flat and relentless. "The pellet with the poison's in the flagon with the dragon, Dean. The chalice from the palace holds the brew that is true."

"Same difference," Dean challenges. "Better even." He pauses a moment and thinks on it, continues, "Who'd have thunk demon blood would ever be the brew that is true..." He trails off at his brother's glower, clears his throat and detours away from that point of contention to something way more neutral. "Man, you used to love that movie. Pastor Jim had to play the video twenty-four-seven that summer."

He reaches for the engraved cup and lifts it aloft as if he's making a toast. "To the brew that is true," he declares, but in the time it takes for him to do it, his brother's expression changes to something honest and soft, something a little sad.

"Everything Eloni said was guesstimate, Dean," Sam says.

There is an underlying doubt in the words, and it clicks with Dean, the reason why Sam didn't rouse them, left him *slobbering* over Castiel. As it dawns on him, he feels his cheeks heat a little at the remembered indiscretion of whispered lust and want, of earnest promises, of the feverish, surreptitious trail of lips over skin and clumsy hands in the dark, stifled gasps and needy moans passing from mouth to mouth under cover of the engine noise, while they thought Sam had his eyes glued to the sea ahead of them. While they thought they still had time, because Dean knows his desperation to taste, and feel, and give, and his need to *tell* Castiel everything, was borne of his unspoken fear of losing what they've found, losing each other; and he thinks the angel's muted frenzy as he returned it all in kind came from Castiel's own anxiety.

And now here is the proof that his brother might think there isn't a fix for this mess, and Dean comes back with a challenge. "You seemed to be buying what she was selling at top dollar back in Pukao," he says, a little belligerently, and he keeps going before Sam can respond. "And we're out here, so maybe we just start the ritual if we're at the right spot? Maybe that's enough." He disregards the skepticism that still marks his brother's expression, nods over at the propane stove bolted to the cabin wall. "Coffee and biscuits first though."

He wraps the artifacts up again, wedges them back into the bag before maneuvering onto his knees and glancing aft again to see that Castiel is leaning on the corner of the stern and gazing out at the horizon. The sky is cloudless, the sun is already scorching, and the world is motionless and tranquil around them now the engine is stilled, apart from the occasional drumming of demon heels from the cabin underneath the barge. As he gets his foot underneath him and rises to a stand, Dean wonders idly if Meg ever gets tired.

"You think that's safe for him?" Sam queries dubiously out of nowhere, pointing past Dean. "After what happened on the beach back at Eloni's place?"

Dean follows his brother's gesture to see Castiel executing a perfect dive off the side of the craft and into the sea, and no, he damn well doesn't think that's safe. He's already cursing under his breath and striding towards the stern when Castiel's hands appear, followed by his face as he heaves himself up. He shakes his head like a dog shaking off the rain, and swipes his hair away from his eyes before he speaks.

"The soap."

"Say what?" Dean barks back in confusion. "What the hell are you doing?"

Castiel frowns. "I'm washing. I smell." He pauses a beat. "So do you."

It's pointed enough that Dean lifts his arm and inhales, and he finds himself wrinkling his nose at the rank stink of his own sweat. Sluicing down with a bucket of brine not really doing it, he acknowledges inwardly, and he's uncomfortably aware of the tacky feeling in his boxers. It doesn't seem like this is one of Castiel's fugues, so maybe he can let his guard down, and Castiel is bright-eyed as he blinks up at Dean, his eyelashes spiked black and his cheeks glistening prettily with crystalline droplets of water, so that Dean finds himself wondering what it might be like to lick that off there.

He looks back at his brother, says, "I might take a dip myself," ignoring the way his inner voice accuses him of procrastinating when there are better things to do, like go down in flames with his family beside him.

"There could be sharks," Sam warns, but he's already pointing his nose in the direction of his own armpit and wincing.

"Then I pity the sharks," Dean retorts, and he grins at the picture that pops up in his head. "Imagine Cas taking on a great white. It'd be better than Jaws."

Sam grunts. "Nearly drowning back in Paraty doesn't seem to have bothered him, that's for sure. Look at him."

The mental rewind to Castiel's slack, lifeless features as Harper worked on him makes Dean feel a little sick. He shakes it out of his mind, looks back to see that Castiel isn't hanging on the back of the Duck any more. He's front-crawling away due east of them, arms flashing pale against the blue, his progress so smooth he barely disturbs the surface.

"Cas, wait up," Dean shouts, and as he reaches to pull his t-shirt up over his head he finds himself wondering why it has taken any of them this long to succumb to the lure of the shimmering water, big, hungry fish be damned. "Sharks only feed at dusk," he throws back at his brother reassuringly.

Right then the boat bobs, the movement energetic enough to have Dean sway and paddle the air to keep his balance. The sudden jarring is accompanied by the slopping and slapping of waves against the hull, and there's a swell getting up; Dean can see it now he's staring out over the infinite Pacific.

He marks the distant, gradual undulation of the gravity waves that have been marked by their absence

since they hit the doldrums the day before, and a smaller chop too, as white crests agitate the surface nearer the Duck. And, *they've been here before*, Dean thinks out of nowhere, on a memory of the lake he and Castiel dreamed together, the sanctuary that turned into something infinitely more threatening. The recall has him abruptly tense and apprehensive with something he doesn't want to put a name to, in case the name that fits best is foreboding. But, *is it a monster?* he had asked in the dream, and even though he tries to tamp down his rising worry, his hands are shaking slightly as he puts any thought of a swim out of his head and pulls his t-shirt back on.

The boat shimmies a little as the waves grow stronger, but Dean fixes his eyes to Castiel again, still cutting away from them through the water, his dark head getting harder to see. Dean cups his mouth, hollers his friend's name.

Behind him Sam's response is sharp and quick. "Everything okay? Dean?"

And no it isn't, because *it's always water*, hadn't Castiel said that, and suddenly there is a shriek of wind that blasts cold against Dean's neck, and a shadow across the sun. He glances up to see a pall of something in the Heavens, he doesn't know what, not cloud, not smoke, not smog; more like a bruise spreading across the blue. It isn't right, he knows, it's evil hemorrhaging into the skin of the world from somewhere, and he has a *fuckin' bad*, no strike that, *horrified* feeling about this. "Start her up and bring her around," he hollers, and he crashes the side of his fist down on the edge of the boat as the motor rasps impotently for what feels like an eternity, before she finally cranks into life and they come about too damn slowly.

Dean twists, sways up the deck towards the cabin as they pitch aggressively. "Can you see him?" he demands frantically, over the sound of the engine and the increasing moan of the wind. He squints out ahead to see that the calm ocean into which Castiel dived less than two minutes before is white stripes of froth and bubble coming at them in sequence. More breakers are stacking up near the horizon, forming an energetic corduroy swell Dean has only ever seen surfing off of Hawaii.

Sam's eyes are wide, scanning the water efficiently, and he points. "There...is that him?"

Castiel is a black spot, impossibly small because the sea has turned into rapids, its surface bubbling like there are hot coals heating it to a boil, its azure sparkle gone murky and forbidding and its peaks a soapy lather. "Cas," Dean hears himself yelp out, high-pitched and terrified, because something is coming, and he doesn't know how or why he knows it, but he does. "Fuck. Faster, we need to go faster. *Fuck.*"

He staggers back out from the cabin into a squall of rain that drenches him, and a sudden, violent list sends him tumbling to the deck and sliding across it on his ass as the Duck crests a huge wave and drops down into its trough. As he flounders to get upright, water crashes down over Dean and he slips and slithers his way back to the side of the craft on his hands and knees, groping to anchor himself on one of the cleats that line the top edge of the superstructure. As the barge lurches up behind them, Dean finds his eye is suddenly caught by the bench he'd been lying on, and he sends a brief thanks out to whoever lashed the fuel tanks securely in place before he cranes his neck back to the cabin where Sam is hunched over, wrestling with the wheel.

Dean yells his brother's name as the Duck mounts another peak, but there's no reaction; his call is

snatched away, lost in the howl of the wind and the roar of the angry, unpredictable sea. He hauls up onto unsteady legs, shivering in the freezing draft, and *perfect storm*, he thinks abstractedly, because in the minute when he was flat to the boards a whirlpool has spun itself into life and they are in the middle of a slate-gray vortex that churns and heaves malevolently, its walls looming steeply, ten or fifteen feet high. *Cas*, Dean thinks through his growing nausea. *Jesus*. And then his feet are knocked out from under him again and he's flying through mist and fog, and then falling down, *down*, to belly-flop painfully against the surface of the water before plunging into its chilly depths.

Dean breathes reflexively, feels his face explode, feels the water snake lovingly into his lungs, feels the chest-crushing pressure of it, *no*, for just a second before it turns into something velvet-soft and welcoming, like it did after Castiel's grip on him loosened in the submerged crypt under the church in Paraty. Dean is drowning, and just like then he's past caring about it, and he relaxes into the peace and quiet of his own death.

The world switches off just as he feels his feet hit solid ground, and his last thought is how it makes no sense that he's traveling upwards again.

## 13

The beat-beat-beat of the tom-toms in his skull, and the drip-drip-drip of the water on his brow rouse Sam from his stupor only gradually. He doesn't open his eyes for a while after he becomes aware, just kids himself that it's his choice to lie there while the sun warms him, its red glow turning the insides of his eyelids into a tropical sunset.

*Banging, rat-a-tat-tat, knock on wood.*

Woodpecker, Sam muses, not tom-toms at all. It's one of those acorn woodpeckers that populate the forests here, and any minute now he'll hear the chuckle of its call, and if he cracks his eyes he might even see the flash of its bright red cap in the timberline bordering the beach. Because that's where he is – on the beach, not crumpled up against something hard while his head throbs and his salt-crustured clothes go from saturated to clammy to tacky as they dry on him. He's on the beach, because Jessica hauled him out of bed this morning and drove them to San Gregorio, and if he peels open his eyes, he'll see her shell-seeking while he catnaps. Only no, it isn't Jessica at all, because the tumble of hair is dark. It's Mira, and she's about to tear him, his brother and his de facto brother-in-law new and ragged ones for sneaking off on this kamikaze mission by themselves, and the distant rat-a-tat-tat isn't Woody Woodpecker at all, it's Meg's heels clattering on the hull of the barge, and—

"Fuck," Sam croaks. "Dean. Cas. *Fuck*."

He shoots bolt upright, snapping his eyes open in-the-nick-of, before his brow crashes into the seat he last remembers sitting on as he wrestled for control of the Duck. He winces as his head swims and his vision blurs, and he flops himself over into a crouch, hand flying up to his mouth as his stomach gyrates crazily. After deep-breathing for a full two minutes, he's fairly sure his guts aren't about to turn themselves inside out, and he straightens up onto his knees, turns his head as fast as he's able to without his brains leaking out his ears.

No one.

He's alone on the boat as far as he can see, and as his eyes scan beyond it he feels his jaw go slack. "Land-ho," he murmurs, and for a moment he forgets that he should be looking for his brother and his friend. He hauls himself to his feet, staggers across the deck and gazes at something that isn't possible even if they did come here looking for it, because it should be open sea he's staring at. Because it *was* open sea.

Only now it isn't.

Skull Island.

That's what it resembles, and Sam tracks his eyes up the rocky edifice at what he guesses is its center. It's some way off, rising above the treetops and wreathed in mist, its granite heights scored and deformed, its craggy brows drawn down into a glare. It looks unsettlingly similar to what Castiel described seeing in California, and Sam is hypnotized by it for a moment, can't tear his eyes away until another fusillade of annoyed drumming breaks out from the barge. He jolts back to himself and leans forward to holler his brother's name.

The silence that follows his call is deafening.

*But it's okay*, Sam tells himself, even though his stomach is curling and looping itself into a tight double knot. Dean is a strong swimmer, and this place came up from underneath them. "Probably looking for me," he reassures himself out loud, because maybe hearing the words outside of his head might make them more convincing. "Cas too."

Even though Sam was out cold for how long he doesn't know, because when he looks at his wristwatch it has stopped, it turns out he made a good job of parking the Duck. It's upright, resting on what appears to be a reef covered by about a foot of crystal-clear water in which some of their belongings are floating. Behind the barge by about twenty-five yards is the deeper blue of the sea, looking like polished glass again, no sign of the storm that whipped it to a frenzy however long ago. Ahead is swampland and forest. It's not unlike the Everglades, with banks of reeds and sedge, and gnarled trees bordering the space on all sides, their canopy thick and lush. Steam is rising up off the vegetation, bringing with it a fetid, ancient smell, and the humidity is sultry and cloying.

Sam clambers up and over the side of the Duck, splashes down, and leans over to snag his backpack from where it sits, partly submerged. He tosses it into the Duck, wades over to the left, where what looks like one of Castiel's boots is drifting, and overarms that back into their vehicle too. He scrubs his hair out of his eyes, studies the wetland up to the shingled transition that leads to the trees. There's a bundle of clothes where his eye falls, piled messily on a tangled mass of tree roots. It makes Sam think briefly and ruefully of how the boat was tossed about like they were whitewater rafting down Rogue River, and how their gear must be so much flotsam on the tide.

*But it isn't flotsam at all*, he realizes a beat later.

He experiences a moment of pristine distress as he launches himself into a run, tripping halfway there and falling to his knees in the marshy shallows, feeling jagged coral graze him through his jeans before

he's up and stumbling across the reef again. "Dean," he barks, as he flips his brother's limp body over. And, "No..." he breathes, because he has seen that same slackness of muscle, that same half-lidded, vacant stare before, in New Harmony.

Sam spares a second to scope their surroundings again, can't see Castiel anywhere, but he bellows out the angel's name anyway as he folds himself over and holds his face a millimeter above his brother's parted lips. Is he imagining the puff of cool air that brushes across his cheek?

"I swear to God, Dean, I will CPR you with tongue if you don't snap out of it," he grates out, and he pulls the limp body over onto its side and brings the flat of his hand down hard between his brother's shoulder blades, once, twice, and *thank Christ*, he thinks, when Dean surges violently to consciousness, arms jerking up off the sand as he coughs, and gasps, and sucks in air.

"Gn be sick," Dean chokes out between hacks, and he retches sloppily, before shaking his head and shuddering. His eyes widen then, as he sees that he's on land, his fingers digging into wet, sandy loam. He's surprisingly alert when he glances up at Sam and then beyond. He flips over onto his butt, swivels to look the other way and behind him, says, "Cas..." in a raw, anxious tone of voice that has Sam reaching to clamp his hand around his brother's bicep.

"We'll find him."

Sam threads his hand under Dean's arm then, helps him up onto wobbly legs as he rises himself. "He'll be fine, Dean," he states firmly, at the same time as the disquieting memory of hauling Castiel up out of the flooded vault in Paraty nags at him. He tries to disregard the fact that Castiel isn't as impervious to damage as he once was, that he might have drowned out there like before, with no one to bring him back this time. Disguising his worry as best he can, he adds, "Okay? We'll find him. We'll go look after we take five, assess the damage."

Dean stares at him like he's stunned, and then a line appears between his brows and his eyes go a little thoughtful as he walks his hand up his chest to his shoulder, fitting his palm to the handprint under his t-shirt. "He's close by, I think," he mutters distractedly, before focusing on Sam. He frowns, floats a finger up to point at Sam's head. "You're bleeding," he says, almost accusingly.

"I am?" That accounts for the dull ache in his temple then, and Sam's fingertips come way splotched red when he pats them gently above his right eye.

"First aid kit," Dean decides, and between coughs, he starts shepherding Sam over towards the Duck, stumbling and tripping through the water.

Sam lets himself be herded, knows it'll ground his brother and help him think. Sure enough, once Dean is applying butterfly stitches to the region above Sam's eye, his voice takes on a more confident note.

"He was swimming east. We'll get this thing going, see how far we can take her." Dean fixes his eyes on the mountain in the distance, voices Sam's own conclusion when he studied it earlier. "Cas said he came to lying on a mountain when he fell through that rift in Cali."

Sam glances around them skeptically. "He didn't say anything about trees. This whole place is like

some nightmare jungle rainforest straight out of Edgar Rice Burroughs, I doubt we'll get far." *Even if we can get this bucket moving*, he thinks despondently.

"Well, we'll light out on foot if we get stuck," Dean announces, and then, as if he read Sam's mind, he adds, "She'll start. Trust me." He exhales slowly, his eyes going narrow. "The way this place rose up out of nowhere just like that...you think Coolio can sense we've got his False Prophet?"

As if on cue, muffled clattering starts up. *Meg*, and Dean grimaces before casting his gaze around them critically, much as Sam had done. "We should stay frosty. There's no telling what might be here... zombies, fish-guys." He sucks in disgustedly. "Place came from under the water, it's probably fish-guy central." His voice fades away a little at the end, and his hand drifts up to rub at his scar again, so gradually Sam wonders if he even realizes he's doing it.

"Are you getting an itch?" Sam points at his brother's shoulder, tents his brows at the absent expression he gets in return. "Your spidey sense," he airquotes. "You said that in Purgatory you could sense he was close by because the handprint bothered you."

"Maybe..."

It's murmured out, barely attentive even, but actions always have spoken louder than words where Dean is concerned and the way he spins and strides up to the front of the Duck to plant himself in the driver's seat is decisive. He throws a triumphant wink back over his shoulder at Sam as the engine cranks to life with moderate willingness, slams the Duck into gear, and heads for the beach, water slop-swirling around them.

The Duck breaches the treeline with the crunch of tires on gravel and the whip-crack-away of snapping roots and branches, rocking from side to side as she forces her way through, barge in tow. Sam slides his way into shotgun, has to grip onto the door handle to stay in his seat as they jounce along.

Even just a few yards in, it's primordial, an overgrown, untouched wilderness thicker even than anything they hacked their way through on Tu'ugamau. Green-blue and purple-black colored trees soar up and in to meet each other and entwine, so that the forest forms a ceiling over their heads, and vines and hunks of curly moss are hanging down like the place put on its best bling for their visit. Everywhere there is the drip of water, vapor rising up, and the stench of the place is ancient and rotten, as if they're traversing the decaying corpse of some long-dead land. Sam supposes that in a way they are. He covers his nose, asks, "Was Purgatory anything like this?"

Dean shakes his head. "Nope. More like a Men Without Hats video." He blanches as he speaks, motions with his head. "Look at that."

Sam follows his brother's gesture to see a cluster of lurid-colored blooms, each one the size of his head. As the Duck grinds past, the huge flowers cant to follow them, leaning eagerly inwards, and when he peers inside them Sam can see the blossoms are equipped with phallic-looking stamens that whip about inside their petal shields, splashing clouds of yellow dust.

"That's either totally awesome or fuckin' disgusting," Dean decides, as he fumbles about on the dash to start the windshield wipers. "It better not be sex pollen." He shudders at Sam's look, continues, "Only



cartoon jungles look like this. Cursed ones, not enchanted ones. Place is like something out of Disney meets Day of the Triffids. Fuckin' creepy."

That's no lie, and the silence is eerie too, thick and palpable. But even if Sam expects to see eyes in the shadows, there are no sounds of life in the core of this forest, nothing but the noise they make as they travel, no obvious presence here except for them. It's alive but dead, in stasis; and age looms in about them in the shape of these primeval trees keeping vigil as they wait. *Perhaps this is what they've been waiting for*, Sam thinks, and the possibility is chilling.

He has scarcely completed the thought when his brother's hand flies up to his shoulder and he lets out a small sound. They judder to a halt and then Dean is gone, moving way faster than a man who just nearly drowned for the second time in a week has any right to, vaulting over the side of the Duck. Sam can barely track him, and swinging his head around to try has the receding ache from earlier slamming enthusiastically back into the side of his skull again, but he spots Dean's target straightaway.

Castiel is sitting on a tree root to their left, staring up and swaying a little. His perch is set back in the trees, hardly visible, and if it weren't for the odd psychic, or bodily, or whatever it is, feedback loop he has with Dean, Sam doesn't doubt they would have driven past without seeing him. He opens his door, hops down to the spongy ground and picks his way around to where his brother is already squatting in front of their friend.

Dean is talking steadily, low and serious, soothing almost. His hand is on Castiel's face, tilting the angel's head so he's looking right at Dean, and his thumb is moving carefully along Castiel's cheekbone. For all that he shies away from public displays of affection, the back-forth of Dean's thumb is tender, and his face is as close to Castiel's as a lover's would be, because that's what they are, Sam thinks; lovers, in love with each other. He hasn't ever thought of it in quite those terms and now he does the realization is almost visceral, and there is the sudden fleeting awareness that Dean and Castiel do this in the dark, alone, legs braided together and hands stroking skin, whispering to each other, things Sam will never know or share in. He caught a glimpse of them himself, last night, while he nursed the Duck along through the still waters. It makes him think of Mira again, and his heart does a little dance in his chest. *She's the one*, and he will tell his brother as soon as they are out of here, tell her the next time he sees her, because he *will* see her again, and he makes that pledge to himself vehemently.

"He's out of it," Dean says shortly as Sam hovers there behind him, and sure enough Castiel's gaze is fixed in a thousand-yard stare that sees nothing, and he's mumbling softly, slurring snatches of words like a mantra.

"Is that...?" Sam trails off as Dean nods.

"Yep, the same." Dean snaps his fingers loudly in front of Castiel's face. "Come on, Cas, come back to me, man." The angel doesn't react, doesn't even blink, and Dean exhales sharply, his expression tense and worried. "When this happened in La Grange he said it was the darkness pulling at him," he tells Sam. "The darkness at the center of the world."

*As if the place wasn't malevolent enough*, Sam thinks, and he tugs his borrowed Taurus out of the back of his jeans as his brother grips Castiel's wrist and brings the angel's hand up to press it to his shoulder, where his scar is.

Dean looks up at Sam as he spreads his other hand on Castiel's bare chest, fitting his fingers to the handprint he left there, and he shrugs self-consciously. "It helped one time before."

It takes maybe ten minutes of smalltalk, nonsense, curt orders followed by apologetic pleading and the odd whispered, heartfelt endearment Sam can see tint his brother's cheeks red, before Castiel's eyes start to wander and go hazy. From then it's another moment or two until he frowns and blinks hard.

"The dreamer has stopped sleeping," he says, as matter-of-factly as if he's telling them what day of the week it is.

There's a moment of naked relief on Dean's face before he catches himself. "We're glad you're here to tell us these things," he quips, and he slaps the angel's cheek lightly. "Can you get up?"

Castiel looks a little affronted for a few seconds. "Of course I can. Why would I not?" Then, as his eyes drift away from Dean and around them, he looks bemused. "Have we arrived?"

"Something like that," Dean tells him as he pushes up. "We're guessing Coolio sensed we have his wingdemon."

"Where's my t-shirt?" Castiel asks, staring down at himself with a mystified expression on his face. "And my boots?"

"You left in a hurry." Dean rubs his fingers at the nape of his neck as he turns to study the Duck, and Sam can see his brother's thought process pass across his face, schemes and strategies that have him chewing his lip, sighing, and scowling all in the space of a moment as Castiel rises to stand at Sam's elbow.

"Do you remember anything at all?" Sam asks him, and Castiel throws up a hand in a gesture that speaks of continuing bewilderment. "You don't remember diving off the boat?" Sam prompts. "Asking for the soap to get cleaned up?"

Castiel frowns and then gets another faraway look in his eyes before he snaps back to Sam. "Yes...I remember being in the water, waiting for Dean, and then I just had to swim away. I couldn't resist the urge, it was—"

"Calling you?" Dean is fierce and fox-eyed as he turns his attention to Castiel. "Pulling at you, like before? Is it pulling you now? When it pulled you back in La Grange, you said you thought there was a path there – are there paths here too?" He looks around him a little wildly as he speaks, and when he focuses back on Sam, his jaw is set tight even if his eyes are stark with anxiety. "We're doing this now."

Caught on his back foot, Sam is rooted to the spot for a moment as Dean stomps back towards the Duck almost angrily, and, *too fast*, Sam is thinking, as he swivels his head around them, mentally calculating their survival odds if a rift like his brother described seeing and rappelling down in California were to split the ground under the Duck. "Are there paths here?" he mutters uneasily to Castiel.

"Kali said they were everywhere," the angel replies, and he shrugs in a haphazard sort of way that isn't at all confidence-inspiring. "Since this is Cthulhu's realm, I don't doubt they are here too, all around us."

"Well, can you sense them?" Sam pushes. "Map them, maybe?" He doesn't wait for the answering apologetic headshake to complete before he jogs after his brother.

Dean is buckling on a thigh holster, has the larger bag of weapons he set aside as being slightly more likely to fire without exploding in their faces gaping open, and he nods over towards the barge as Sam climbs into the cabin, Castiel in tow.

"We got a False Prophet to gank, let's get this party st—"

"We can't do it here," Sam cuts in quickly, as he uses his foot to hook the sports bag out from under the shotgun seat, where it slid as they were buffeted by the sea. He squats to zip it, looking up and going on before Dean can protest. "Cas says there could be cracks everywhere, like the one in California – if shit happens when we do this, and he has to use up the mojo for any reason..." He stops, waits for Dean to clue in himself, and it only takes a second or two for his brother to catch up.

"This crate could be the only thing between us and a long swim."

"Yep," Sam nods. "A long swim with some big fish. So we don't want it falling down a great big hole in the ground."

Irritation, acceptance, anxiety and more irritation flit across Dean's face, and he barks out a harsh, "Fuckdammit," dips his face in his hand, and worries at the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. "But if shit happens, this is the only place that's defensible," he says finally.

"Not if it's in a rift like the one in California," Castiel confirms placidly from behind Sam, where he's lacing his boots. "And not if that rift is under this ocean. Your brother is right, Dean, we should do this a safe distance away. And then run extremely fast...if shit happens."

Dean makes a rueful huff at that as he comes out from behind his hand. "Okay, we need to turn the Duck around, get it pointed the right way to get us out of here quick if needs be," he concedes, and then his tone switches to complete authority that brooks no argument so firmly Sam fancies that it sounds like his brother's word is *law* in these parts.

"And if we're going for a hike, you need to stick close, Cas. I damn well mean it...even if you need to take a piss, you do it where we can see you. And if anything starts calling you, *pulling* you, if you're being guided by voices, you tell us. Do I make myself clear?" Dean's eyes widen then, and his voice goes quieter and meaningful, like Sam isn't even there. "Nothing is taking you away from me. Not again."

Duct tape.

Dean can wax lyrical on all the glorious wonders of duct tape if he's caught in a bar on the right night, and in the right mood, brought to the viewing public by his favorite sponsors, Jack, Jim and Johnny. And he knows that if Sam were in a talkative mood, he could feed anybody a whole bunch of trivia about duct tape. He'd explain that 1942 was the year of duct tape, and that not long after this pressure-sensitive tape made from polyethylene was born it was being utilized in World War II to fix everything from bullets to bombs. Castiel thinks it's great for making wallets, and that makes Dean smile.

Right now, pondering the origins and versatility of duct tape seems an incongruous pastime as they march steadily through the lush vegetation in the tropical jungle Team Free Will and company find themselves in. Even so, Dean smiles in what he knows is a self-satisfied sort of way as he muses on the specific purpose he likes to use it for that goes beyond car repair.

"Ahhh-maaa-thaa."

"Sam, I think she just called us motherfuckers," Dean points out, staring across at Meg as she stumbles along between them, and his brother briefly pauses from scything through the vegetation ahead of them with his machete, turns his head, and sends a withering look Dean's way.

Dean ignores him. "Silence is golden," he taunts the demon. "Duct tape is silver."

Meg glares back at Dean, her navy-blue eyes looking too-human, and it occurs to him that in another life and under a different set of circumstances, Meg would have been exactly the kind of girl he'd go for a tumble in the hay with, dark and intriguing as she is. Now that only sends his thoughts straight back to the man who has been snaking his way beside him through the brush this last quarter-mile or so, making not a sound, as though the leaves and the vines soften for his step alone; this man he loves. Castiel is tense and alert, an M-16 cradled in the crook of his arm. His aviator shades shield his eyes against the unforgiving sun, and a line of sweat gathers at the junction of his neck and shoulder. Dean knows this because he can see the slow slide of it from the corner of his vision, and he can see it because he's watching his friend like a hawk, alert to any sign something might be *off* with him.

"Actually," Castiel begins, "she just wishes you good luck."

Dean narrows his eyes as he studies Meg. Her biker chick get-up has backfired in the unrelenting humidity and she has the appearance of a wilting flower, dark hair plastered to her forehead in strings and hanks. Her mascara is running, and the devil's trap Dean Sharpied on her brow as an added precaution stands out in sharp, neat relief compared to her dishevelment.

Maybe, just maybe, there is an instant when Dean feels pity, not unlike the confused empathy he felt when he snuck up behind the meatpuppet that was once Christian Campbell, as the demon wearing him wielded its blade just like Dean once did in the Pit. And then he recalls Meg's own personal bucket list; Pastor Jim, Caleb, and he has to swallow down the lump that rises in his throat at the memory of their kindness to a mute, traumatized preschooler. Ellen, Jo, Bobby's legs, and his own brother used and abused by the demon. And that's just what they know about, but Dean is damned certain the notches on Meg's belt are too many to count.

Pity is weakness; it's time to put her out of their misery and maybe use her to do some good, and the irony of that isn't lost on Dean. "Really?" he queries shortly.

"She has only your welfare at heart, Dean," Castiel replies. "Surely you know this by now?"

Sam coughs to the side, in thinly disguised laughter.

Dean shrugs. "Hey, you never know. Stranger things have happened lately, like...oh, I don't know, apocalypses. Like how they come in pairs."

"There's no way she's going to wish us luck on feeding her to a giant inter-dimensional monster, Dean," his brother counters. "She'd sooner be a born-again Christian."

Dean snorts at that, then pulls up abruptly as they emerge from the forest into a clearing. There are ruins at its center, pitted, crumbling stone pillars strewn about messily, covered in a latticework of creeping vines, and to the right is what looks like an altar hewn from rock. Sigils and geometric shapes are carved into its sides, and flanking it are petrified wooden posts with long-rusted metal rings embedded in them. It's a sickly reminder of the stakes in Purgatory's Monster Town; of Castiel, forced to manifest and tethered there ready for torture, and the memory is appalling, cuts Dean's heart like glass and sucks the moisture from his mouth. *Never again*, he vows inside his head, and the touch of Castiel's shoulder at his right in that same second is so necessary and fundamental to Dean now that his knees almost sag from sheer relief at the angel's presence.

"This site seems appropriate," Castiel says solemnly, and he holds Dean's gaze for a moment that tells Dean he knows exactly what Dean is thinking about.

Dean clears his throat, clips out, "Showtime," as he lets his backpack slide down off of his shoulders. "Let's do this."

Sam doesn't reply, just nods once as he puts a big hand on Meg's shoulder and pushes her almost gently to her knees before shrugging the sports bag down his arm to the ground.

They're on the brink of this, finally, and anticipation is thrumming through Dean, adrenaline flooding him now that he isn't focusing on planting one boot in front of the other and not tripping onto his ass as they march. He can't stop his mind drifting to what they're facing and dwelling uneasily on the immenseness of it; the ancient, rancid presence that seeps out of the ground and the atmosphere here and eats into him, the pulse of sheer, unmitigated evil the mountain ahead of them exudes. He has butterflies in the pit of his gut, his skin is damp under his t-shirt, and his palms are slick with sweat. "We don't know what'll happen when we start this," he says, and he doesn't like how parched-dry and apprehensive his voice sounds. "But we don't go to defcon one unless I say so. The mojo is for emergencies only, Cas...if shit hits, plan A is to run for the Duck. And no stopping, no matter what happens."

"Of course," Castiel says smoothly, and Dean knows Castiel will stop if he has to, always will, and so will Sam, even if it's the difference between living and dying here. And so will he.

He reaches to drag the sports bag away from where his brother parked it, has to force the zipper open

because it's sticky with caked-on sand and salt from the storm that heralded the island's rise from its watery grave.

And the next second stretches out of all proportion, lengthening into an infinity, almost like Dean is freeze-framing his way through it one shot at a time. Over in the other corner of his brain he plays it back, the way he haphazardly wedged the fabric-wrapped artifacts back into the bag before his gaze fell on Castiel, stretching up to the sun, all sinewy strength and beauty. And as a tactical error, that moment of distraction is right up there in the pantheon.

"They're not here," he says through the bile rising in his throat, and his own disbelief makes his voice sound wrecked, makes his hands start shaking. "The sword, the cup. They're not here."

Sam is rummaging about inside his backpack, and he looks up. "That's not funny, Dean," he snaps, but there's slight note of panic in his voice.

"On the boat," Dean clarifies as he slumps down onto his butt, well aware of the cunning gleam in Meg's eyes as she glances back and forth between them all. "I didn't lock them down properly."

Sam's brow corrugates as he remembers. "That hurricane, whatever it was...we almost capsized a couple of times."

"The waves," Dean finishes for him. "They must have washed away."

Muffled cackling forces its way out from behind Meg's gag at the revelation, and *fuck that noise*. Dean gropes about inside his backpack for something he knows for sure is wedged down inside it, because he fished it out from under the seat in front of him on the prop job that flew them out of Paraty, after the kid who owned it left it behind.

"Seriously?" his brother reproves, as Dean retrieves the squirt gun and a quart-bottle of holy water Jonas Harper blessed for them.

"Yeah, seriously," Dean confirms as he carefully fills the plastic gun before aiming it at Meg. She stares at the fluorescent orange muzzle and then back at Dean, and even behind the gag he can see that she's curling her top lip up into a Presley sneer. She rolls her eyes so thoroughly it takes long seconds for the whites to go blue again.

"You're damn lucky it isn't the super-soaker with the jet pack," Dean says as he fires off a shot. The water spatters across Meg's face, and a shrill cry erupts from behind her gag as smoke follows in its wake. Her skin bubbles as she shrieks out muffled fury, and Dean shrugs at the look his brother gives him. "Don't forget what she's done to us," he retorts. "And to our friends."

Sam shakes his head, and his features relax into a disappointed expression that's almost comical as his shoulders slump. "Some of our stuff was floating in the water back on the reef, but I would have seen them if they were there," he says dispiritedly. "They're probably at the bottom of the fucking Pacific. I wonder if it's even worth..." He trails off as he pulls his hand out of his pack, holding a folded wad of sodden, dripping paper, the ritual Eloni Nam'ulu composed so carefully for them long run away into formless inky blotches. "...Doing the ritual at all," he continues faintly.

Dean finds that yes, it is possible to feel even more despondent. "I really wish she had laminated that for us," he supplies.

"Jesus Christ," is the muttered response.

Castiel clears his throat. "That's a good idea," he deadpans, in the utterly flat calm he uses when he's seriously pissed, and if he's crabby, well, Dean can't honestly blame him. "Perhaps we should all start praying for a miracle at this juncture? Since it appears we need all the help we can—"

"No, wait!" Sam jumps in.

Dean slants his eyes across, sees that Sam's face is suddenly animated, his eyes wide and calculating. It's his thinking, light bulb, *solution-pulled-out-of-his-ass* face, and Dean could hug him for it right then.

"We use the spell, the banishing spell," Sam races out, and he's already reaching back inside his pack and pulling out a plastic bag, from which he produces his journal. "The one we used to send the souls back. I got it in here, I'm sure of it." He extricates a folded piece of paper, holds it up triumphantly. "It could work. Couldn't it?"

There's no real sense to the theory, in fact it's wildly speculative, but Dean is grabbing it and holding on like it's a lifeline. "Could it?" he asks, as Castiel reaches down to pluck the paper from between Sam's fingers.

"There are no guarantees," the angel murmurs distractedly, to a triumphant snorting sound from Meg. Castiel nudges her gently with his boot, and once he has her attention his eyes go frigid and his tone takes on a vicious edge. "Don't interrupt me, please."

"I can squirt her again," Dean offers, but Castiel doesn't answer, just frowns thoughtfully as he returns to scanning the words.

"This spell is older than I am," he announces.

Dean has no idea if that's good or bad, says, "Yeah, it's magic with a *k* at the end," as the angel tilts his head in his usual quizzical way.

"You're sure it's the one you used the last time?"

"It's the one Death left us," Sam points out. "It stands to reason a spell that can pack a bunch of monster souls back to Purgatory has the power to send the Beast back where it came from, doesn't it?" He waits for a response, face still lit up, looks meaningfully from Castiel to Dean. "Especially if Michael is doing it?"

And suddenly the notion doesn't seem as crazed as it did, in fact it seems entirely logical, and Dean takes a deep breath and wills the tremor out of his hands as he remembers reading the words from the book in Bobby's study when he thought Castiel was lost to him. "If we have been selfish and cruel, it's

you who will banish us," he breathes.

Sam nods vigorously. "Like Eloni said. Like Death said." He's confident, assured. "Michael slew the dragon, Dean. And you're the one true vessel, didn't he tell you that? Hell, Zachariah even said you were the Michael sword. So maybe we don't need the actual sword, or the cup and the ritual. Maybe we just need *you*."

The idea of it sends a thrill of excitement and a simultaneous surge of panic shivering through Dean as he glances at Castiel. "Cas?" he prods cautiously.

"The spell wasn't intended for this..." Castiel bends himself down to his haunches, fixes Dean with bright eyes, bright with hope maybe. "But old magic..." He pauses a beat, and a smile plays across his lips. "Magic with a *k* at the end, is still magic, and the principle of the spell should hold if it is cast in the right way."

"Like chaos magick?" Sam says, and the angel nods in agreement.

That goes right over Dean's head, oscillating as he is between feeling relieved and anxious. "Care to clarify for the slow child?" he asks.

"It's the idea that the belief is what's important in a magical operation," Castiel says. "You drew this on your hand the last time, yes?" At Dean's nod, he continues, low and confidential. "The spell as you were given it dictates a certain way to use it, but when you wrote it on your hand you broke the traditional rules. Your belief created a magic of its own. We'll have to do the same in order to use this again to try to send the Beast back. So, we sacrifice the False Prophet, but it's our belief as we sacrifice her that is of utmost importance. Dean, are you listening to me?"

Throughout Castiel's explanation of spellwork and chaos magick, Dean has let his eyes drift over to watch the shape of Meg's mouth beneath the duct tape as it moves. It looks like a minnow beneath a line of silver, and he can tell she's hurling obscenities. Castiel's voice runs in the background and it sounds assured, but the more Dean thinks about it, the more he knows that despite all their research, and fact-finding, and meticulous gathering of artifacts, none of them knows what the fuck they're doing. It's always been faith, and luck, and a whole shit-load of duct tape.

"I'm enthralled," he mutters. "Continue."

"Because I can stop if this bores you," Castiel chides him, and is that his trademark fond exasperation, or is a note of testiness creeping into his voice again?

Back in the moment, Dean groans inwardly. He knows it isn't the time or place but he takes a minute to reflect on the fact that he thought they had a while to go before they reached *that* stage of their relationship – that part where they annoy each other for no meaningful reason. And then comes the ennui. The silence, the cold dinners, the nights on the couch, and now there's the secret fear it could happen with Castiel if they live through this, *which they damn well will*, and Dean doesn't want that.

"No, I want you to keep going, and don't stop until I say stop," Dean says, and he infuses his voice with the stern edge of command. Castiel's eyes scorch right through Dean as he responds to it, like Dean



knew he would, because deep down Castiel is a soldier, always a soldier, and something about the snapped order pulls a string in him that he responds to, instinctual, sexual, magnetic.

*How do you keep a relationship from going stale?* Dean thinks, and then has his answer – keep the interest. And how does one do that? By doing something unexpected. If Castiel were a chick, he'd buy him flowers, but Castiel's not a chick. So he'll have to do something better.

Dean's eyes fall on Meg. "You'll have to do," he says, chipper, and he turns to snatch the written spell from Castiel's hand.

"Dean, we need that—"

"Actually, Meg needs it," Dean says smartly, "and please, keep talking about chaos magick, Sam's really digging it." Which isn't so far from the truth, because Sam is sitting there with his machete in his hand, covered in plant guts and chlorophyll from bushwacking for the last thirty minutes or so, but he looks entranced. Or it could be exhaustion or concussion, Dean isn't sure.

"Chaos magick varies from individual to individual, as each one takes inspiration from many faiths... and many identify with symbols that evoke chaos, humor, or trickster archetypes..."

*Gabriel would be so pleased*, Dean thinks, with a hollow sort of amusement, as he leans over towards Meg and catches the edge of the silver duct tape with a nail. He feels the rough scrim poking at his fingers, and meets her black eyes once with a grin.

"...Austin Osman Spare is credited with a large amount of influence..."

Dean strips the tape away in one quick motion of his wrist. Meg's lipstick is smeared in every direction, giving her a clownish appearance, but he doesn't wait to appreciate it as she sucks in a shrieking breath. Her lungs fill with it in an attempt to launch a string of insults in their direction or maybe even summon Cthulhu herself, but Dean doesn't give her the chance. He crumples the paper with the spell in his hand and shoves it into her open mouth, slapping the duct tape back over it as she gags, her eyes so narrow they form black slits in her face.

Castiel's voice is fading into the background as Dean swipes perspiration away from his brow and turns to look at his brother, who had sat opposite him in Bobby's study, tapped his temple, *it's up here*, and smirked as he recited it all back to Dean, word-perfect.

"Play it again, Sam," he says, with a flourish that comes from nowhere, skirts perilously close to lunacy, and is partly inspired by the fear he's been tamping down since he came around, spitting salt water and with his brother's hand slamming into his upper back.

And, *mercifully*, Castiel stops his relentless information download on the ins-and-outs of chaos magick; and even better, it appears those long motel nights watching old black-and-white movies haven't gone to waste, because he blinks and a light comes into his eyes as his mouth, the mouth Dean loves to part and explore with his tongue, makes shapes around a new, updated version of one of his favorite phrases.

"I understand that reference."

Sam shakes his head. "You're damn lucky I remember this," he reproves before he begins the spell, albeit uncertainly, and then pauses. "Wait, Dean, don't we need her blood—"

"Nope," Dean tells him, "because my belief is creating a magic of its own, right the fuck now. And so is yours, Cas's too."

Forcing a weak grin, Sam says, "Tell me, I'm begging you to tell me, that you *aren't* going to enjoy feeding Meg to mega-monster?"

Dean awards Sam a smile he knows splits his face, then directs it at Castiel, ramping it up to eleven as he does. It's the sort of smile that turns Castiel's dial up to fever-pitch when they're alone and the angel is writhing and moaning underneath him, and the blue gaze goes laser-like in response.

"The end of the world isn't without its fringe benefits, Dean," Castiel concedes tolerantly, "but I maintain that your sense of fun is abnormally twisted."

"Me?" Dean scoffs. "I wasn't the one who suggested using a crane to feed her to Cthulhu. That was Bobby. When I called him, he said he wanted to hook her up and drop her in like he was feeding a pet snake."

He wastes no more time, yanks Meg to her feet, and she sways, dizzy and dehydrated beneath the sun and the humidity that has their clothes clinging to their backs and creeping into every uncomfortable crease of sweat-drenched skin. Dean takes brief but rewarding satisfaction in the wild look that creeps into Meg's eyes as her gaze darts from one brother to the other, and then finally settles on Castiel with a look of desperate appeal.

Castiel shrugs.

"Cue the music," Dean announces with a grin. "And don't stop believing."

### B

At some point, Meg's knees buckle and she sinks gracelessly down to her knees on the damp, stinking jungle earth, where the broken stones of ancient relics are scattered all around them. The setting is fitting, something primal and forgotten in the air and the ground, and in the background of it all is the steady recitation of Sam's voice as he intones the rune on a loop, solitary until Castiel picks up the incantation alongside him.

The moment their voices merge the effect is alchemical, and Dean concentrates, finds that he's joining in almost reflexively, that he can recall the words in a way he wasn't able to on that long evening in Bobby's study when he repeated them to himself ad nauseum but couldn't imprint them in his brain, where they needed to be. *It's an omen*, he thinks abstractedly, *a good one*. He fists his hands so tight he feels his nails digging into his palms, and *believes* like he never has before, believes that he is the Michael sword and that his willpower and the words that ring out around him will be enough, while he

quashes down the memory of how he believed so hard the last time but Castiel still slipped through his fingers like air and tumbled into the abyss.

Bewitched by the ritual, Meg seethes and groans behind her mask of duct tape, her eyes switching frenziedly between navy and obsidian-black as the feathers of a crow, as though fear itself has spun her demonic compass out of sync. Her fists clench and her fingers fan out as she strains against the ragged edges of rope binding her.

Dean's stomach does an uncomfortable flip as the ground suddenly vibrates and drops a few inches under his feet. *Shit is happening*, he thinks, and the sick feeling of dread he has been holding tight to crashes through the barrier to freedom.

He stumbles back, keeps his wits about him sufficiently to hoist his backpack up onto his shoulder, reaches out with his free hand to snag the back of Sam's t-shirt and drag him along in tandem. Castiel's hand tags Dean's shirt in turn, and in a line they shuffle backwards as the shaking increases in time with their voices. Where Sam falters to keep up with the uneven convulsion of the ground, Castiel strives for more volume, pounding the ancient syllables home until Dean realizes he can perceive a radiance from the corners of his peripheral vision. Castiel is glowing like phosphorus with the force of his words, and it chills Dean with a heartstopping reminder of the last time they used this spell and why he'd be happy to never hear it again.

*This is usually when the shit hits the fan*, Dean thinks, and he has a gut feeling that if they survive this he'll feel pissed off that he's right on the mark every damn time. In the event, they're twenty yards further back down the hacked-out trail that marks their route when a discordant whining sound starts up, accompanied by the crunch of timber splitting, the wail of trees ripping loose from their moorings, and the crack of jungle vines snapping. The cacophony of sound fills Dean's ears, deafening him for a few moments, until the shaking abruptly stops. Everything falls silent and Dean can hear the harsh, worried breathing of his companions as they stand and stare back at Meg in the center of the clearing, where she writhes in her bonds.

Sam sees it first.

"Look!" he hisses, and points.

In the darkness of the jungle brush there is a winnowing shape that Dean thinks might be a vine twirling in place, like a living tornado. There seems no end to it, no beginning either, and it moves with oiled speed, punching through fleshy leaves and crushing smaller trees beneath its rolling wake. And now it's closer, Dean can see what his brother spotted first – it's no vine. It's thick and padded on every side with membranous suction cups.

Dean makes a sound he knows he will deny making later.

The tentacle snakes towards Meg with *intent*, a shadow that seems to gather and deepen the darkness with it, and then it bursts with speed. Leaves rip in its wake and Meg scoots back on her ass, heels digging frantically into the soil in a final desperate act to save herself.

The tentacle slaps against her ankle and she shrieks and kicks out. It loops around her calves and then

tugs her back with it, to where the ground heaves and quakes, the earth splitting apart to create a dark, jagged mouth that yawns open. It drags her through as though she were no more than a hog-tied calf at a rodeo, and then the landscape stops its dance and there is an abrupt, resounding silence.

No one moves. No one breathes.

"That's it?" Sam croaks after a stretched-out moment. "It can't be that easy. At what point have we ever just done the job, gone home, had a beer and gone to bed?" He goggles at Dean, repeats, "It can't be that easy."

"Don't fuckin' hex us," Dean growls, as he smacks his brow with his open palm and hopes that it *is* that easy, that there will be a seedy motel room, a couple of beers, and a warm, willing and rock-hard body pressed against him and moving inside him in the near future. Because why the fuck can't they just, for once, have the Big Rock Candy Mountain apocalypse? Is that too much to ask?

And sure enough it is, as the silence breaks with a distant, ominous rumbling that seems to emanate from under the ground. Dean fancies that it's like the sound of a thousand-mile long worm tunneling its way through the earth, and it sends the hair along the back of his neck standing straight up. He trades uncertain glances with his brother and his other.

Sam raises the Taurus at nothing at all, as if he does it for the comfort alone.

Castiel grimaces. "Weren't we supposed to run if shit happened?"

As the rumble dies away, there is another reverberation that strikes Dean as familiar. He gapes. "Was that a burp? Did Coolio just belch?"

"Cthulhu doesn't belch, Dean," Sam insists, without looking away from the knife-edge slash in the ground.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Dean snaps back acidly, "I didn't know you graduated with a masters in monster digestion, but..."

He trails off, distracted by the sound of a scream, and then Castiel is tugging at his wrist.

"Dean, weren't we supposed to run if shit happened?" the angel echoes himself, but Dean isn't really focusing on Castiel, preoccupied as he is by the fact the scream is rising in volume, and *shouldn't that be the other way around?* But no, apparently not, because in the next instant Meg comes cannon-balling back out of the crack into which she just vanished.

It's like a swan dive in reverse, one part comical and one part horrific, as she streaks back out with lightning speed, arcing through the air and face-planting without grace into the thick jungle leaves and grasses. She slides to a stop five feet away from where they're standing, and Dean winces at the impact, looks left of himself to see twin stupefied expressions he knows are a mirror of his own astonishment fixed on Meg as if she might explode next.

She doesn't explode.

"Apparently," Dean says, "not only does the big guy belch, but he also vomits."

Meg is covered in a viscous black gloop that looks like old motor oil, and she screams from behind her duct tape seal, eyes open wide and startlingly vivid, a ring of hazel captured in blue-gray. Dean looks down and thinks out of nowhere that he can't remember ever noticing that she had pretty eyes.

"Hey, she's got pretty eyes," Sam blurts out.

Dean looks at his brother and bites his tongue on any number of demon-lover jokes that spring to mind, as Castiel makes a perplexed huffing sound and steps closer to where Meg slumps.

"That's because she's not a demon any more," the angel says.

"What?!" Dean hears himself squawk, but Castiel doesn't spare him a glance as he crouches to his knees, grips an edge of the duct tape plastered over Meg's mouth, and rips it away with about as much ceremony as Dean had earlier. Globbs of the black liquid spatter on nearby leaves and Meg heaves in a gasp that rakes down into her lungs as her bound hands reach up in imitation of prayer and catch at Castiel's sleeve.

"God," she wheezes. "God saved me. That's what happened, don't you see? Don't you get it? God gave me a second chance!"

Castiel wrenches out of the grasp of her fingers with his lips pulled back from his teeth in disgust, and Meg attempts to follow his backward pace, dragging herself after him, the haughty air and condescending manner evaporated into thin air.

It's pathetic, deeply unsettling, and it occurs to Dean that the last thing they need on this trip is civilian baggage. "Is she the host now?" he barks. "This can't be for real."

"I assure you, this is very real," Castiel tells him. "But she isn't the host. She's Meg – just not demon Meg."

"This is your fault," Dean accuses, and points to Sam.

"How is this my fault?" his brother protests, aghast.

"Just before she went in, you said she'd rather be a born-again Christian!"

Sam smacks his hand to his face, but the sound is lost in Meg's sobbing as she attempts to prostrate herself at Castiel's feet. She's reciting prayers and invoking the name of Jesus Christ on a loop, apparently in every language she knows, and Castiel stumbles back from her again. "Your prayers won't be heard," he says, with something Dean thinks sounds like desperation. "You have no soul to save. You know this."

He pulls a knife from his boot with a quick jerk of his hand, hunkers down into the thick jungle floor beside the woman, and Meg cries out in terror and struggles to cover her head. Dean can only stare at

the exchange with a dual sensation of distaste and pity. This is Meg? High-riding, *get-out-the-way-imma-cut-a-bitch* Meg? She cowers before Castiel's knife now, and the angel's face is a study in quiet agony that reminds Dean of how far Castiel has come; that he now has a full range of emotion at his disposal, and with it all the hardship of difficult decisions and the conflict they evoke. Like this one, and he's raising the knife, its blade glinting as he unexpectedly saws through Meg's duct-tape bracelet to cut her free.

"You trust her?" Sam gawks.

"No," Castiel says without emotion, as Meg tears the slashed strips of tape off her wrists in between sobs. "But I'm in no position to judge her."

Dean damn well disagrees with that, and argues the case too. "Are you serious? She's a killer...she has no soul." In his side vision, he can see the stony face his brother makes at the reference, but he plows on. "It doesn't matter if she's de-clawed, she'd kill us in a heartbeat."

But how many people Meg has or hasn't killed becomes a small and distant matter, as a new sound shakes the ground beneath their feet, and suddenly the only body count Dean is worried about is their own.

This time, the din is permanent and everywhere, like the earth has become a great drum and something is beating it with force, sending the trees shaking and the vines swinging on their limbs. It's like a boombox turned all the way up so it shakes the membranes of Dean's heart, and for once Sam is the one gripping him by the arm and hauling him backwards, yelling, "Weren't we supposed to run if shit happened?" because it's his turn to do that now.

Dean twists out of his brother's grasp, shouting for Castiel as the angel hangs back, trying to help Meg up onto her feet. He makes a wild grab, fists a handful of Castiel's t-shirt and drags him close as trees start timbering down under the force of the steady and persistent vibration, and new webs of cracks funnel out from the main fault line to zig and zag wildly around them.

"Shit is happening, Cas," Dean roars when Castiel tries to break free and make his way back to the woman as she crashes to the ground again. "Run. And that's a fuckin' order."

## B

The island is rocking and rolling around them as energetically as if it ate three bowls of Wheaties after it woke up, and Dean pounds his boots into the soil and tries to ignore how the trees shimmy and leap violently up and down. He can hear harsh, panting breath, chances flicking a glance over to see his brother next to him, face grim and jaw locked, arms and legs pumping. Beyond Sam, Castiel is loping effortlessly along like he's on the hunt, and it is *sonot* the time to feel turned on by that, but men think about sex every seven seconds, so Dean can't help it.

The trail having been cleared by Sam's industrious application of the machete, it takes far less time to get back to where they started from than it did to cut through on the outward journey, but it still seems like too long a sprint.

The Duck is nestled in the fleshy vegetation where they left it, and where before it had seemed a somewhat reliable and indefatigable machine when it wasn't coughing up its lungs or cutting out entirely, Dean thinks now that it looks small, miniature even, like a toy from his old G.I. Joe set. They hotfoot towards it over the rich and rotting earth beneath their feet, hands everywhere to help and lift and steady, and Dean tunes his ears backwards to pick out the sound of Meg sobbing close behind them as she finally catches up. She's muttering prayers in what sounds like Latin, praying maybe, and as Dean finds himself pondering abstractedly on how it is she can actually run in those heels Castiel snaps at her in Enochian. Dean is certain that he just told her to shut the fuck up.

They reach the Duck and Sam doesn't even try for the door, just vaults over the side with the springheel-jack bounciness of a guy with eight-foot-long legs. Dean clambers up after him as he starts the engine, thinks, *thank fuckin' Chrysler* as the responding rev grumbles through the noise of the land disintegrating around them. He turns to reach for Castiel, and Meg tumbles in after them. There's no time to argue about space or loyalty as Dean screams himself hoarse for Sam to *get us the fuck out of here*.

Sam isn't waiting. The Duck pitches forward while Meg clamors on and on, her knuckles white as she hangs onto the side of the vehicle, and Dean shuts his mind to the sound of her terror. Castiel is crouched there close to him, an uncomfortable jostle of hips and elbows, and under ordinary circumstances this would give rise to all kinds of delicious juxtapositions to be taken advantage of, but Dean can't look away from the crevices and fissures that are opening up the surface behind them, ripping the island into pieces the way one might rip wet newspaper into shreds.

It's time for plan B, and Dean puts his lips close to Castiel's ear, speaks clearly and urgently. "Defcon one. You're cleared for take-off, buddy."

Castiel swings his head around and Dean can see it in his eyes before he replies, some mix of embarrassment and frustration. "I've tried already. I'm – not working. That thing is blocking me somehow."

His voice is almost lost in the fury that surrounds them, but the words are still like a punch to Dean's gut. *They aren't getting out of this*.

Wind is howling up out of the cracks like tornadoes, the force of the air moving the jungle trees so they gyrate frantically, like giant egg-beaters whisking the sky. Their leaves tear off and billow away into the blue before showering down, and it's like they're driving through a ticker tape parade Cthulhu laid on just for them. Sam dodges larger trees and grinds them right over skinnier ones, forces the Duck through wild hairpin turns that threaten to tip it over as the vehicle labors its way over the injured land, dragging its barge behind it like a broken limb. Dean can see black smoke belching out from under the hood, knows he'll see the yellow glow of flames any minute now, but Sam doesn't ease off.

Dean feels the vise-tight grip of Castiel's arms around his chest, drawing him further into the Duck and close to him. He looks around, meets eyes that are staring fear back at him. *Castiel is scared*, he thinks, scared of losing him in this wild getaway-that-isn't, scared of the thing waking up beneath the earth. Dean knows that should terrify him, but he swallows it down, puts his hand against the angel's cheek. The words are right there on the tip of his tongue but he damn well won't say them, won't accept this,

won't give into this, won't ever let Castiel know he thinks this might be the end of them.

*It's rising up*, he thinks, as he turns to look behind them again. He stares, agog, and he couldn't look away if he wanted to, even though he can feel Castiel's lips soft, and warm, and desperate against his ear, *I love you, Dean. I always have.*







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In the distance the surface erupts, and then nothing is distant anymore. But if those startling rips, sending rock flying like glass shattering into a million slivers, are terrifying and gargantuan, the next vibration reduces them to no more than a sneeze on the Richter scale. The earth heaves and detonates outwards, in an almighty blast that turns the crust into immense shards careening into the sky, and all the terrain they've covered since they staggered away from the clearing is blown apart in an instant as the fracture yawns wide enough to engulf all the ground from here to there.

Dean has time to think there is something gray and dark, like an endless shadow in the deep, and the

gray and the dark is moving, is watching him; and he remembers hearing that when you look into the abyss, the abyss also looks into you.

The Duck goes vertical. One second the tires are biting into the soil and the next there is no soil left to bite into, and Dean feels his sense of orientation blown to smithereens as they start to flip upside-down. There is no time to scream – all he feels is his angel's hand come up over his eyes, as though the last thing Castiel can offer him is the mercy of seeing nothing of this horror at all. It blinds Dean to the shape of shadows that rise up to meet them, blinds him to the tentacle that snaps like a lasso in the air and furls about the vehicle, swathing them in warm, wet, spongy darkness.

### B

**Authors' notes:** The poem Dean quotes is *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The movie dialogue is from *The Court Jester*.

## Episode 23: Achilles' Last Stand

Authors: Swordofmymouth & Zatnikatel

**Characters/Pairing:** Dean/Castiel, Sam, OC and canon characters

**Rating:** NC-17

**Wordcount:** ~15,000

**Warnings:** language, violence, sexuality, suggested dubcon

**Betas:** [dotfic](#) and [murrone](#)

**Art:** Chapter banner by [swordofmymouth](#) and [zatnikatel](#); digital illustration by [quantum\\_witch](#), which you can also find [here](#) (art contains spoilers for the chapter).

**Summary:** *"There are things out there...bad things."*



B

Castiel awakens to a sound.

It's a quiet sound, modest, as though someone is trying to muffle it, and immediately after he hears it, all falls silent again.

Silent except for faint out-breaths a short distance away, and for a moment Castiel is confused, can't ascertain where he is or who is with him there. He pores through a flood of memories unique to him: the Host, angels as he once was, nestlings comfortable with each other and their effortless comradeship, forged in countless battles. But they never breathed, not like this.

He listens, his own near-human breath bated, until he hears the other sound again. With it he discards his past, because this is the *now* and he knows the sound he hears is Meg weeping. Her stifled, hitching

sobs are strangely lulling, and he keeps his eyes closed, drifts back into half-sleep. He imagines that he is in his bed at Bobby's house, and that if he turns over he will come to rest against the warm curve of Dean's back, that he will nuzzle the nape of Dean's neck and Dean will grunt in his sleep and push instinctively into him.

*Dean isn't here.*

The realization that he can't sense Dean nearby jolts Castiel back to the present again. He's lying on something uncomfortable, that digs into his back...his rucksack, he realizes. He snaps his eyes open to black, pushes up onto his elbows, pats his hand cautiously around him. Rough woodgrain meets his touch, and as his eyes become accustomed to the darkness he can see a greenish, phosphorescent glow stretching up above him, reminiscent of the strange light in the chimney-crevice he ascended with Claire Novak. He backtracks, remembers being surrounded by something soft, and alive, and malevolent, remembers how it pulled at him even while it repelled him, remembers the world turning upside-down and spinning madly as they fell. His ears pop and he swears the sound they make must be audible, a sign of the rapid change in pressure that signals they are leagues beneath the surface of the world.

*Dean, where is Dean?*

Separation anxiety clutches at Castiel, the same ache and need he always feels when Dean isn't in close proximity. He reaches back into the recesses of himself, into those old places where his dying grace still lingers like a fog, and he tests it, tries to take what he wants from the elements, from time and dimension and space, tries to shape it into force of will and intent that will take him to wherever Dean is. It fizzles uselessly, as it did on the surface after the Beast awoke and Castiel thought to beat his wings and take to the sky with the Winchesters clutched tight to him while *shit happened* all around them. Here, what's left of his grace is dormant when he needs it most, and in a flash of insight he thinks he understands why Meg sobs, can empathize with her tears. While he can imagine the size and extent of her loss, her demonhood scattered and gone in the wind, swallowed up in the belly of the Beast, he can't imagine what it would be like to do it alone.

Meg has no one.

He has Dean.

If he can find him.

*Dean.* Again, it aches through Castiel, a mixture of longing and fear. He can't help forming the name on his tongue, needing to hear himself say it here in the darkness, and the sounds of distress stop abruptly. "Meg?" he fishes cautiously.

"There are things out there," she says softly, after a beat of silence. "Bad things. One of them was in here, I killed it. I warded the truck."

*Bad things.* There is an irony in it, Castiel supposes. "When you say bad things, I assume you mean things that are worse than you?" he remarks, as he sits up and casts his eyes about him properly.

"Things that are worse than *us*," she replies after a second or two, and maybe the old acid is creeping back into her tone. "You're no angel, angel."

Touché, but there is no time for this, because now that Castiel's vision is sufficiently acclimatized it falls on a long, bulky shape at the cabin end of the truck bed, and he finds he is frozen in place by the ghastly possibility that flits through his mind. "What you killed," he croaks. "Are you sure it was—"

"One of those mutant fish-zombies. Your boyfriend and his brother aren't here."

The relief is like balm but Castiel has no time to take comfort in it, as he vaguely sees a missile arc through the darkness towards him. Something heavy clunks down onto his lap, and he startles, manages to bite back a curse, and puts his hand there before he can stop himself. Round, wet, icy-cold. It gives when he presses on it, and it feels disturbingly like—

"I cut its head off with Sam's machete."

"Dean would say you got your groove back," Castiel rasps out, as he tosses the evidence of her defensive expertise over his shoulder, and the name has his chest squeeze his heart tight again. "Have you heard anything that might—"

"Nothing. I couldn't even make out which one of you was here with me until you woke. I thought you were dead."

Castiel hears the rustle of fabric, can just barely pick out the figure moving inside the cabin. She sucks in a noise that suggests extreme discomfort, but he puts her out of his mind, lets it fill it with grim resolve instead. He needs his sword, and he sets his jaw, concentrates as he reaches inside himself for his grace again. It barely flickers, muted into submission by this realm and the thing that rules here, and Castiel can't help the harsh sound of frustration he makes. *Dean*.

He shrugs off his pack, pushes up to his knees, and when he sees that the barge is still chained to the Duck he throws up a prayer out of habit, even though he isn't sure if he believes any more. He crabs his way over the stern of the Duck, pops the hatch in the deck of the barge, and drops down into the cargo hold. The larger weapons duffel is where Dean left it before they set off on their trek, dumped beside the mattress the demon had been occupying during the voyage, and Castiel hoists it up and out, pulling himself back out behind it.

He eases the duffel up and over into the Duck, scanning the darkness beyond the sides of the craft, and alert to any sounds of movement, slithers his way after the bag and pats about inside it, finding a flashlight he sets down on the deck next to him. He roots through the jumbled weaponry again, until his fingers fall on the flare gun Jonas Harper's friend thoughtfully provided, and then he pokes further, locates the cartridge-packed bandolier that goes with it.

"You say this vehicle is warded?" he directs over towards the top end of the Duck.

After a sniff, Meg answers, "Standard devil's trap and a few others, just to be sure. There haven't been any more of those guys climbing in here, so I think it's working."

There is a thigh holster in the bag too, and Castiel straps it on, fills its slots with two lethally sharp knives and one of the guns. "You seem somewhat calmer," he observes as he works. "You have Sam's machete still? We may need it out there."

He hears the metallic clink of its blade tapping against something. "It's amazing how shock, blood loss and intense pain focus the mind," she says randomly, before adding, "My leg is broken."

*And, time, there is no time for this.*

There is a baseball bat in the bag, and Castiel tugs it out, crawls over to where she is sitting, stopping briefly to hoist the headless body up and over the side of the Duck. He snaps on the flashlight, looks into a shell-shocked, moon-pale face.

"Looks like you're on your own, Clarence," she says, curling her lips into a feeble smile before she casts her eyes down.

Castiel doesn't respond, shines the beam over her leg. Blood is congealing underneath it, tacky and dark, and just below her knee the limb diverts into a slight angle at a wound through which the pearly, splintered ends of snapped bone protrude.

"It's a compound fracture," she murmurs distantly. "If we ever get out of this sewer, I'm looking at plates, rods, pins. I'll limp for the rest of my life, assuming gangrene doesn't set in and they take the leg off."

Castiel meets her gaze and she shrugs. "My last meatpuppet was a nurse." She watches him for a moment, licks her lips, and her tone turns harder. "Come on, choose the moral high road. You owe me for taking care of Crowley for you."

It's clear what she's asking. "Ending your misery might be the moral high road," Castiel parries brusquely. "And you destroyed Crowley for your own gain. It was purely personal, there was no altruism in the gesture."

Her lips pull tight. "Are you telling me it wouldn't have been even a little bit personal if you'd ganked the bastard?"

Castiel knows he can't claim that with any degree of credibility, so he bypasses the question. "In any case, I can't fix it," he says. "My grace is blocked here." He doesn't dwell on whether he would if he could, or whether he would hold onto whatever is left of himself in case he needed it for Dean. He lays the flashlight down, notices abstractedly that its beam is playing across sigils daubed on the wooden decking in what must be the woman's own blood. He lays the baseball bat alongside her leg, rises to his knees to unbuckle his belt. "Are you wearing one of these?" he asks.

Her eyes widen and she smirks a little, like the demon in her always used to, and Castiel can't help acknowledging that there is something admirable in her bravado.

"I'll need it to secure the splint," he clarifies.

She grimaces, straightens up slightly and mimics him, tugging her own belt out of its loops and handing it over.

Castiel sets it down on the deck, slips his bowie out of his boot and uses it to slice off a strip of the leather at the end of the belt. He hands it to her and her eyebrows tent curiously.

"You'll need to bite down on something while I try to set this," he says.

"I doubt it's settable, but you have at it." She snorts then. "I guess this is my penance," she jokes, a little defiantly, and after swallowing hard she lifts the leather strip to her mouth, fastens her teeth to it.

"Ready?" Castiel asks her, and she rolls her eyes.

Her frame locks up tight as he puts his hands on her leg. He doesn't look at her, ignores the way her hands flap at his, ignores the strangled whining. He is gentle but thorough as he straightens the limb, lifting it slightly to run the belts underneath it and around the bat, above and below the break. It's inadequate at best, he knows, but he can do no more for her. When he's finished she's still and quiet, and her oblivion is a relief because it means he can leave.

He crawls back to where he propped his rucksack, feels about inside it. Water, two bottles, and he retrieves one, stands and picks his way back to where the unconscious demon – *woman*, he corrects himself – is slumped. He places the bottle on her lap before he makes his way back to the duffel, hefts it, and drops it over the side of the Duck. He snags the flare gun and lowers himself overboard, to the surface.

There is solid rock below him, faint impressions of craggy walls surrounding the Duck. Castiel pauses to listen for any sounds, but he can't hear them or sense anything. He raises the flare gun over his head, pulls the trigger, and pink light explodes to reveal an endless, empty cavern stretching up into the sky and continuing on into the distance here at ground level. It's a mirror image of the crack in Mendocino, magnified exponentially, and Dean and Sam are lost in it somewhere. Castiel breathes deeply for a moment, closes his eyes and pushes his hand up inside his t-shirt to his scar. It worked before, in the other rift, and he concentrates. And there it is, the barest tingle of heat, like a tiny electric shock, and he gasps with the sheer relief of it.

"Dean," he breathes out into the darkness again, and it strengthens his resolve like he knew it would.

He bends to pull a machete out of the bag, hoists it up on his shoulder, and steals forward into the darkness.

## B

Dean comes round with a college marching band playing Sousa music in his head, and this time is even worse than every other time he's done it because Bobby's dog is snuffling at his face, dolloping drool on him, and *Jesus*, that can't be healthy because the damn mutt probably just finished licking its butt clean after its morning dump.

"Fuck off, Cheney," he manages, and he flails a hand up to grab the dog's collar and heave it away.

And...fabric, too-long hair, slick, gluey flesh under his questing palm, and that isn't the sour blast of dog-breath, it's the fetid stench of rotting marine life, *danger-Will-Robinson*.

Dean snaps fully awake and looks up into the soft glow of golden eyes surrounded by shimmering scales, a lipless mouth bared over fangs, and *fuck, fish-guy*. They share a frozen moment of mutual *huh?!* and then Dean bucks with all his might.

The mutant is taken unawares and bounces up off him to land on its back right beside him, where only Castiel should lie, and Dean flips himself up and over as adroitly as he can with a headache the size of Texas slowing him down, straddling the thing before it can recover. He fumbles the Glock he commandeered from the duffel out of his waistband, curses as the thing's hand streaks up lightning-fast to smash it from his grasp. He doesn't have any other weapons on him that he can reach without leaving himself unprotected, but he can improvise and does, pinning the hybrid in place with a hand wrapped around its throat while he pats the other around wildly, searching for something, *anything*. His fingers fall on what feels like a football-sized rock and he grasps it, raises it above his head and slams it down, once, twice, three times, and then once more with feeling while the thing jerks weakly under him.

The creature falls still, and Dean flops back over onto his ass, squinting into the dim light of what appears to be a cave as he tries to quieten his breathing. It's silent, no sign of any more of the mutants. "Cas?" he whispers. "Sam? You there?"

He waits, poised and listening, but there's no answer. Worry squirms its queasy way through the pit of his belly as he eases off his pack and fishes out his penlight, training the faint beam briefly across the body at his side. It's wearing a safari vest with what looks like the corner of a billfold poking out of the top pocket, and Dean eases his fingers in there gingerly, pulls out a slim leather wallet and shakes it open to see a Louisiana driver's license. Edward Robicheaux, the kayaker who was taken near Crystal Beach, he recalls. "Sorry, Ed," he croaks. "But thanks for the camera, buddy."

He slides the wallet back where he found it, lifts up his makeshift weapon, finds he was correct and it is in fact a football-sized rock. It's splattered with blood, gray matter and hair, but as of now it's his lucky rock, and he's keeping the damn thing. His gun is several feet away, and he reaches for it before pushing up to a wobbly stand, and *fuck*, a noise, the scrape of a boot, and he spins around so fast he loses his balance and starts to poleaxe, only to be caught and steadied by hands gripping firmly at his forearms.

"Dean," his brother rasps out. "Thank God."

One of Sam's palms lands against Dean's cheek, taps it, and the other hand stays fixed around his wrist, starts pulling at him. "You okay?" Sam asks breathlessly, as he hustles Dean along.

"Yeah, but Cas—"

"Then start running. It's like Helm's Deep down here."

Dean doesn't need telling twice.



The place is a labyrinth of shafts that spiral down and drop to nowhere and nooks, cracks and larger tunnels that branch out of the main cavern and coil away into the distance. It's a jumble, a complicated snarl of paths, roads, escape routes perhaps, though Castiel doubts that.

He moves stealthily through the maze, machete extended and ready, listening for the slightest sound, his eyes scanning as keenly as they can in this dim light without his grace to sharpen his senses. He detours carefully around boulders, vast spherical limestone and granite formations and stalagmites that could be hiding an ambush, maneuvers cautiously into apertures that lead nowhere but loop back into the main system, squeezes himself past jagged pustules that suppurate foul-smelling liquid. This place is the next level on from where he fell with Claire Novak, he supposes, and he recalls how that place felt alive, felt oppressive, felt as if it was sentient and observing his every move.

He ponders the memory, slows to press his hand flat to the damp wall, and lets the duffel slide down to the ground as he leans in to examine the rock more closely. It glitters with something he assumes is calcite crystals, but it exudes heat and its surface is less hard than he expected. There is *give* there, and he can feel a far-off vibration, feel pits in the rock like pores in skin, slimy fluid that feels like a film of sweat. He gazes at the way his palm glistens moist with it, drifts for a moment on the notion that this might be interstitial fluid, that it might perhaps bathe the internal organs of this cavity with nutrients, that the intricate network of channels might be the island's lymphatic system. He touches the rock again, feels the hum of it, finds that its warmth is somehow comforting, welcoming, that it is like reconciliation. *Solace* he thinks hazily. *Sustenance*.

Castiel senses them before he sees them, a blur of dimly lit motion in his peripheral vision, and he acts purely on instinct, whirling just before the first one reaches for him, bringing the machete up in a scything arc that separates its head from its body with surgical precision.

He backs away warily as they advance, light on his feet, knees bent for fast propulsion into his next move. Even in this huge space they make him feel claustrophobic as they close in, forming a semicircle around him like they did in Rhode Island. They sway from side to side on their feet and Castiel notes abstractedly that their shoes are long-lost and their toes are elongated and as webbed as their fingers are when they point at him.

He means to destroy them, and destroy them he will. But their noise, their incessant, maddening *jabber*, is somehow soothing, enthralling. It isn't hostile at all, it's welcoming; it speaks of familiarity, of home, of peace.

"No," Castiel hears himself plead once only, ineffectually, the word followed by a shudder and a chill that turns his blood to ice.

But then, suddenly, his foreboding is draining away. He opens himself to their conversation, their dialect bleeding into him, becoming ever more clear in his head, so that any moment now it won't be eerie, formless nonsense at all, it will be a tribute, a call, poetry; a song he joins in with because he knows the words by heart and always has. He smiles, drops his flare gun and his blade, and reaches out with a—

—dull, solid thwack of body on body it ends, tearing Castiel back to the now so violently it dazes him for a moment, so that his eyes can barely track the brawl that is going on around him. He can hear the crunch of fists, harsh grunts of effort, muttered oaths, shouts, and animal shrieks; can see the flash of pale metal as another hand swings the machete he can vaguely remember slipping from his grasp. A gun blats loudly, the noise echoing up into the chasm and the flash illuminating swift-moving silhouettes, and the single blast is followed almost immediately by a barrage, as irrational fury erupts all around him. The flare gun ignites brightly, the cartridge ejecting and burying itself in the midriff of one of their assailants, where it sparks and combusts, the flames leaping out to catch other figures close by and shrouding them in fire.

Still disoriented, Castiel stumbles backward and starts to sink to the ground, only to be gripped at the scruff and hauled upright again. He finds himself staring into Dean's eyes, and even in the poor light he can see they are shining with a basic, atavistic fear.

"Don't pow-wow with them, you fuckin' idiot," Dean hollers at him. "Run."

Castiel points back in the direction from which he came. "The Duck," he manages. "It's warded."

Dean nods. "We're right behind you."

Castiel runs, hears footfalls pounding along behind him as they race through blackness, and he knows the ground is uneven, knows their pace is reckless, and that one slip could be the end for all of them. With every last particle of faith left in him, he prays – and suddenly there she is, sanctuary in the shape of a half-century old hybrid boat-truck, and they variously vault and clamber in over the sides, landing in a panting, cursing heap of exhausted limbs.

After a moment where Castiel sucks in a breath of dizzy relief, someone he thinks is Dean unthreads himself from their tangle and crabs back to the side to peek over.

"Are you sure this place is safe?"

It is Dean, his question hissed out urgently. "Meg warded it," Castiel responds wearily as he sits up, Sam flopping over onto his back next to him, an arm coming up to cover his face as he groans out the exertion.

"She's here?" Dean whispers.

"Her leg is broken." Castiel gestures towards the other end of the vehicle, to where the woman is still lying. It crosses his mind she could be dead but he's too worn out to check. "Badly broken," he adds. "I can't fix it, my grace is inhibited down here too."

Sam finally sits up next to him, bends his legs and rests his forehead on his knees, asks, "What are they doing?"

"Just milling about as far as I can see," Dean reports, his voice a little louder and more confident now it doesn't seem like an attack is imminent. "You got the flare gun?"

"Yeah, I managed to grab the bag too." Sam leans across to where the duffel is spilling its contents out over the deck, sends the weapon skittering across the wood.

The gun sounds, starbursts lighting up the space again, and Castiel rises to his knees behind Dean's shoulder, sees the thronging figures roughly thirty yards away. They don't seem to be doing anything but waiting, and the notion fills him with the same confusing mix of unease and comfort he felt as they surrounded him out there, before...the thought fades away to nothing. His recall is nebulous and unsure, his memories incoherent and disjointed. He turns away from them, closes his ears to their distant murmur, but still it buzzes in the back of his mind.

The sharp jab of an elbow into his ribs has him jump, swiveling his head around fast, to where Dean is sitting next to him now, apparently satisfied the mutants won't venture closer. He has a flashlight set next to him, illuminating the gloom, and he's biting his lip.

"We need to figure out a plan," he says, casual, but *not*, and Castiel thinks he might be doing it for Sam's benefit, because when he glances over Sam is slumped in the kind of dejected huddle that signals resignation.

"We still have the False Prophet," Dean goes on, "so maybe we just give it another shot." He chuckles then, but in the yellow glow that lights him Castiel can see his eyes are flat and humorless. "So which one of you guys wasn't believing hard enough up there? Because I believed so damn hard it hurt."

"I believed," Sam offers after a brief hush, and he throws up a tired hand. "At least I think I did."

Another nudge at Castiel's side. "Then you're it, Cas."

Castiel frowns, thinks his way back to the ritual, swallows. His head is cloudy again, and he sees Dean's expression soften.

"You okay?" Dean lays his hand on Castiel's cheek again, traces the skin under Castiel's eye with his thumb. His eyes flit over to his brother briefly before he leans in and nuzzles Castiel's lips with his. "We're getting out of here," he murmurs. "We are." He pulls away, rubs at his stomach, and scowls his way into a detour. "I'm fuckin' starving. I wish we had one of your pies."

He launches himself onto all fours, disappears over the stern into the barge for a few minutes before clambering into the Duck again. "Bagels," he announces, as he returns to Castiel's side, and he presses one into Castiel's hand, tosses another over to Sam. "Stale, but better than nothing." After sinking his teeth in to take a mouthful of the bread, he continues. "We rest now. Think about where to go from here after that. Clear heads make better plans. It'll come together. Sam, you're first watch."

He sounds optimistic, confident, and Castiel looks from him over to Sam, who scrubs a hand through his hair, and motions towards the fuel tanks.

"At least we have gas."

Gas, yes, but their food and water will run out in the next few days, and Castiel suspects they won't be

driving out of here any time soon. He casts his eyes towards the woman a few feet away, looks down to the bottle of water on her lap, finds himself thinking bleakly that it might be a waste of their resources given her chances.

"Shoo-dobe-rof-ay-tase, what does that even mean?" Dean grumbles out abruptly as he shoves the rest of the food in his mouth.

Castiel is at a loss for a moment until Sam shrugs. "It's what those things were chanting when we found you out there."

Dean yawns widely as he turns in and settles himself down on Castiel's shoulder. "It's what they were saying to you last time they hypnotized you like that, in Rhode Island. Bobby said so, remember?"

It strikes something somewhere inside Castiel, and unbidden he finds he's folding his arms protectively across his chest. "I don't know, I don't – remember. Was I? Hypnotized?" His mind churns confusion, and his voice cracks, although he doesn't know why. "I don't know what that means, I don't. I'm...*not*."

Dean is straightening now, body going taut as he comes alert again, and he points a look over at Sam and back. "It's alright, Cas," he reassures gently. "It was just a spell. Rest. Okay? We'll figure it out."

He slides his arm around Castiel's belly, pulls him over and into his warmth, and Castiel sinks into it gratefully.

"Pseudoprophetes."

It's quiet, and her voice might even be regretful when she says it.

Castiel feels Dean shift next to him, his interest piqued. "Come again?"

Meg is moving slowly, unscrewing the cap of the water bottle Castiel left on her thigh and raising it to her lips to gulp a mouthful. "Pseudoprophetes," she repeats after wiping her chin. "Not shoodobe – whatever it was you said. It means—"

"False Prophet," Sam finishes. "Of course. Pseudo, that's Ancient Greek." He huffs. "Bobby wrote it down phonetically, remember?"

"Yeah, and fish lips, hard to understand," Dean sighs ruefully. He clucks his tongue as he studies Meg, and it sounds loud in the hush. "How's the leg?" he asks diplomatically.

Castiel knows Dean's concern makes no difference, that they are going to kill the woman, the *pseudoprophetes*, because it will save the world. And he isn't sure if he believes it will, if the chaos magic principle will work, because he didn't believe it would the first time, back in the jungle. He realizes this in a fraction of a second during which he can hear them in his head as if they never left, the *souls*, whispering and plotting, mocking him; and he remembers how he railed against them for turning him into something he was never meant to be, and—

"It's not me," she cuts in simply, from far away. "The False Prophet."

Castiel sits up slowly, and his body feels heavy, weighed down with knowledge, because the murk is lifting and he is seeing the truth of the buried *thing* in his memory as the cloud that obstructs it from view drifts away. He can hear Dean's response, terse and dismissive background noise, but his mind is clear now, painfully sharp, and the clarity sends cold coursing through him. He wants to curl up and whimper, and there isn't enough oxygen in the fast, shallow breaths he's taking, because—

"Not this time." She keeps going, quiet but firm. "The first time, yes. For Lucifer. But not this time. I didn't help prepare the way for the Beast this time round, it was—"

"Me."

Castiel doesn't recognize his own voice, is amazed he even manages to get the word out past the dryness in his throat, the nausea swirling through his gut, and the fear, the guilt. "Me," he gasps again, in dread and sheer wonder. "It's me. It always was."

There is fear in Dean's expression when he twists around to look at Castiel, bewilderment too, and his eyes are suddenly too big for his face. He reaches out to Castiel, but there can be no comfort for this, not really, and it suffocates Castiel, makes him giddy with horror and disgust at himself.

"No..."

Castiel can hear someone saying it, over and over, *no-no-no-no*, but Dean's lips aren't moving, Dean is just staring at him, his mouth slack.

"No," Castiel cries, because it's *his* denial, breathless and reedy with devastation. "No, no, no, no," he cries, and he's shuffling away, rapidly, his boot heels skidding on the wood, his head shaking, *no*, as Dean crawls after him, pulls him back and into his arms. Over Dean's shoulder Castiel can see Sam, his face appalled, a hand pressed to his head, and he hears Dean gruff above him, throwing a jumble of sharp words back at his brother, *...need to be with him, talk some sense into him*.

Sam nods swiftly, doesn't speak, and Castiel feels himself being heaved up and chivvied over the stern of the Duck and down through the hatch Dean only recently disappeared through to forage for food. *Balthazar*, he's thinking, out of the blue; and only now does he comprehend what his dream-brother meant when he told him, *the one who begins it is the one who must end it*, and only now does he understand the sorrow and pity in Balthazar's eyes. "I'm damned, Dean," he chokes out into the dark. "I'm damned, and I'm afraid, afraid to go back there, I'm—"

The blow isn't particularly hard but the sound of Dean's hand on Castiel's cheek is loud as a pistol shot, and when the cargo hold lamp snaps on Dean's eyes are fierce, even if his palm is gentle when he touches it to Castiel's face again.

Castiel swallows through the throbbing sting of it, and, "I began it, Dean," he whispers, and he hears his own deranged laugh as he thinks suddenly of that small kernel of suspicion that has nagged at him, that small part of him that knew this and always has. "I am the False Prophet...when I freed the souls I began it, and my miracles prepared the way. And you have to destroy me, you—"

Dean pulls back and hits him again, harder, with his fist this time. His knuckles slam into Castiel's jaw, sharp and unforgiving, and Castiel tastes blood as he loses his balance and crashes into the wall. His slide down it is halted by Dean's fingers twisting in the fabric of his t-shirt, and Dean is up close now, his eyes already wet and red, his expression stricken and too young for more loss.

"How dare you," Dean chides him hoarsely, "how fuckin' *dare* you say that to me. I'm in love with you. How dare you think I can do that to you..."

There is blind fury and numb shock in his gaze as he trails off, and Castiel knows the same desperation and horror, felt it himself in an alleyway in Cicero at that moment when he knew he would do anything to keep Dean, *anything*. He puts his hand on Dean's cheek now, wipes the pad of his thumb through Dean's tears. "The one who begins it is the one who will end it," he says, suddenly calm and controlled, because he has accepted it. "I began it. And Michael shall bind together the False Prophet and the Beast, and he shall hurl them for all eternity into the Lake of Fire."

Dean makes a small, unintelligible sound from far back in his throat, and it seems that if he can't stop Castiel with a beating, he will stop him with his mouth. He falls in and swallows down Castiel's words, his hands clamped to the sides of Castiel's head, fingers twining themselves in Castiel's hair as he tumbles them down onto the mattress. He covers Castiel with his body, grinding down onto him, and Castiel gives himself up to it, swept along in this passion Dean is using to build a wall between them and what must happen.

Suddenly there is naked skin, so much of it, smooth and hot, and damp breath panting out softly, *mine, always mine*, as greedy hands touch and map and cling; and suddenly there are lips and teeth and tongue on Castiel, rough and frantic, *never let go of you, never*. Suddenly there are spit-slick fingers working inside him, and then the hard press and the first agonizing, forced thrust of Dean, rigid and burning hot as he splits Castiel apart; and Castiel welcomes the ferocity of it and loves it with all of his heart, snapping his hips up instinctively to meet Dean. A whiteout of pleasure explodes inside him, cauterizing the pain, and Castiel gasps at the sensation, pulls Dean in again and again to slam into that same spot, savage enough to bruise and scar him deep inside just as Dean scarred his skin. It feels like he is taking what's his, finally, and all the while Dean sobs out his grief, *Cas-Cas-Cas*, biting frantically at the skin of Castiel's neck, until his muscles lock in spasm and he pours himself into Castiel at last, *love you, love you, always, I love you*, while Castiel clenches around him and spills across their bellies.



It is over in bare moments, but Castiel will have the memory of this at least, and he wraps his legs around Dean and holds him there in the empty ache and despair of afterwards, stroking Dean's back as Dean shatters in his embrace, his tears tracking warm, wet tributaries along Castiel's chest.

"I'm afraid, Dean," Castiel whispers, as Dean's breath finally evens out and his body grows heavy with exhaustion. "I'm afraid of damnation. But I would have stayed tethered to my post down there willingly to spare you this."

Dean isn't asleep yet, and he rouses slightly. His fingers move restlessly in Castiel's hair, and his lips mouth tenderly at Castiel's throat. "Sssshh," he breathes. "Don't be afraid, Cas. Ssshhh. I got you."

### B

Meg is making small noises of discomfort, but even though Sam is staring right at her, he's seeing through her.

He's thinking of penance, reparation, atonement. He thinks maybe he has atoned – or at least he thought he had. He thought Castiel had too, that the angel's atonement might be the knowledge that his own hands were used to commit sins and crimes that he never would have consented to, even if he did choose his path himself. Like Sam had, and they have both suffered for their pride and misdeeds. But it isn't enough, or so it seems.

"Maybe it's divine justice," he says out loud.

Meg clears her throat, interrupting his reverie, and when he focuses on her she gives a listless shrug. "The wrath of God is a hungry animal with a big appetite," she says faintly. "The big kahuna can't just overlook violations of His law...it would bring moral confusion upon His creation." She pauses to drink from her bottle of water. "Bible study," she adds then. "Know thine enemy."

Sam studies her. "Not your enemy any more, though."

His tone is skeptical enough that she smirks at him. "Nope. And there's nothing so zealous as a convert."

"But you have no soul," Sam reminds her, and damn, but he knows the difference that makes, remembers the thing he was and its moral nihilism; its lack of any real purpose other than the impulse to destroy anything that got in its way.

"Maybe I'll grow one," she wheezes, and she shifts slightly, sucks in a breath of pain.

A few feet away is the first aid kit Dean used to dress the cut on Sam's head, and Sam isn't the soulless void he once was even if she is, so he leans across to snag it, crawls over to her. The machete he was using to beat the jungle into submission is resting next to her thigh and he eyes it dubiously. After a mildly derisive roll of her eyes, she pushes it over in his direction, and he skitters it well away from her reach.

There is a bottle of Bactine in the kit, painkillers too, and he shakes out two, glances at her waxy, drawn face and shakes out two more, offers them over. She takes them wordlessly, washes them down with a gulp of water from her bottle, braces herself as he brandishes the antiseptic. He pauses, can't help wincing as he looks down at her leg, and he wonders if it's even worth putting her through this.

As if she read his mind, she says, "It's worth it."

Her eyes are oddly dark again when he meets them, so that he wonders if the demon is simply dormant, inhibited like Castiel's grace.

"It's worth it," she repeats. "We have an escape route. End him, and you end this. You save the world, and we get out of here." Her lips go thin. "I'll be needing my leg for that."

There's a minute when she stares at Sam as if she's daring him to refuse, but he unscrews the cap of the bottle, pours the liquid over the gash, and she bites into her knuckles as she whimpers through the sting of it. He sits back on his heels, gives her some time.

"To think I used to find pain such a turn-on," she chokes out eventually, and her smile is like a snarl.

There are gauze pads in the kit, and Sam places a couple over the jagged ends of bone, tapes them in place. It's a rudimentary dressing, but it might help keep the wound clean.

He isn't sure how much time has passed. He crawls back to his post, rises to his knees and peers over



the side of the Duck to where the creatures still wander around aimlessly, no closer than they were when his brother disappeared into the gloom, pushing Castiel ahead of him. Sam finds himself suddenly thinking of Castiel diving into the sea, and how the storm whipped the water into a frenzy as this place rose from the deep; remembers how his brother concluded that the Beast must know they had his False Prophet. And Dean was right, in the cruelest possible way.

Sam sighs, flops back down onto his ass, pulls his knees up and hugs them as he eyes the ex-demon. "What were you going to do with him?" he asks her after a moment. "Back when you were bartering Adam for him?"

She shrugs. "Use him to control the Beast. Or to end it, if it didn't play nice. When you have the thing that can help lock it back in its cell, you're holding all the cards."

Sam swallows. "What happens if we don't play our hand?"

"You're so predictable." She *tsks*. "You know what happens, what this is. It's bigger than him. It's bigger than whatever your brother has going on with him. You don't do this, the Earth dies screaming. It's probably happening up there right now. Is he worth that? After what he did to you?"

Sam regards her for a moment. "This is never going to be about revenge for me," he says softly. "*Never*. And it's not my decision to make anyway."

She cants her head, doesn't answer him, and they fall quiet for a few strained minutes until Sam pushes up and twists around again, fixing his gaze over the back of the Duck into the barge, to the seam of soft light seeping up around the hatch. He chews his lip. It's been deathly quiet for what seems like a long while after the brief turmoil of raised, overwrought voices and sheer distress that had him pressing his hands to his ears to give them some privacy.

Sam debates what to do next, finally gives in and slides himself up and over the stern to slip his fingers in the latch and lift the hatch cover up a few inches. His eyes flash over a tangle of naked limbs, half covered with a blanket and discarded clothing; the back of Dean's head, his brother's face hidden in Castiel's neck, and Castiel's eyes closed, one arm wrapped protectively around Dean.

"Jesus, Cas," Sam mutters wearily, through the awful, hollow sadness he feels. He lowers the hatch as stealthily as he can, glances back at Meg. "Is there another way?" he asks.

"Not that I know of," she says, "and I would tell you if there was, Sam." She smiles, but Sam thinks there isn't any real pleasure in it. "I always had a soft spot for Clarence," she muses. "But...the one who began it has to end it. That's the way it works."

## B

Dean wakes slowly, out of a dream of a cottage in the Ozarks, aged by weather and time, and the woman who told him he shone so brightly she could see him for miles. *Beware little boy, for your journey is just beginning*, she tells him, and then light lasers out of her eyes because she isn't Sula at all, she is the gatekeeper angel on his granite throne at the borders of Purgatory. His sword bleeds flame as

his words ring out, *there are rules you have to follow...use the same door for going in and going out...the Balance depends on it*, but even as he is speaking, his face is blurring and running together, like a painting out in the rain, into something harder, narrow-sculpted, and beaky. *Death*, who lifts one skinny eyebrow into a supercilious curve and hisses *play your role*, like it means something.

Dean blinks himself fully awake with a wince, because he knows it does mean something, that it all does.

He's draped across Castiel, his cheeks tight with the salt of dried-on tears, and his eyes lethargic with weeping. His nose is stuffy with it, and there is a tight band of pressure around his brow, the headache he came round with out in the caverns still lurking. He lifts his head up cautiously, studies Castiel's face, gone soft and oddly innocent in repose. There is a black bruise starting to blossom on Castiel's jaw, where Dean's fist landed, and Dean can still taste Castiel's blood on his tongue. A wave of tenderness wells up inside him, and he tips his head down, kisses the scar he left on Castiel's chest, before he slides his way out from under Castiel's arm in tiny increments, watching for every twitch of muscle and flicker of eyelid, careful not to wake his friend.

Once up, Dean dresses swiftly and silently, and as he pulls on his jeans, his finger catches on a crumpled edge of paper poking out of his back pocket. He pulls it out, unfolds it, marvels that he even still has it as he reads the words.

He watches Castiel sleep for another moment, like he knows Castiel has watched him sleep; and this is the last time he will do it, the last time he will wake up to this.

"I love you," he whispers. "And I wanted more time for us."

He gazes at Castiel for another long moment, and then he climbs stealthily out of the hull to speak with his brother.

### B

Dean lifts a cautionary finger to his lips as he eases silently into the Duck and pads over to where Sam is keeping vigil.

"I want to let him sleep," he mutters as he lowers himself to the deck. He doesn't meet Sam's look, and Sam can see that his brother's eyes are swollen and bleary, his face drawn in lines of stress and hopelessness. He looks worn out, Sam thinks. He looks stunned. He looks suddenly older, and it cuts Sam to the quick to see it and know the reason.

After a minute of sitting shoulder to shoulder with Sam, legs sprawled out carelessly ahead of him, Dean clears his throat. "I guess it wasn't Meg who flashed up on Coolio's radar."

"I guess not," Sam agrees quietly.

"The spell was right on the mark...we just got the mark wrong," Dean says then. "And I guess Cas

really didn't believe in it. Subconsciously anyway. Fuck, I wasn't even serious when I said that, it was just a bad joke."

Dean's voice is hoarse, and Sam unscrews his bottle of water, offers it to his brother. "So you think it's true?" he broaches carefully, as Dean drinks long and deep.

"Yeah, I think it's true. Fits doesn't it? He says he began it all when he freed the souls and then worked all the damn miracles, says it prepared the way for the Beast." Dean takes another gulp, wipes his mouth and sidetracks. "Must be why Crowley went after the Novak kid, why he thought her blood might work to raise Hastur. She's Cas's blood. Theoretically, anyway. And he wore her for a while."

Sam glances across to where Meg's head is lolling drowsily on her chest. "It's why she wanted to trade him for Adam," he says, low and confidential. "She said she thought she might be able to use him to control Cthulhu."

Dean shakes his head. "It was right there in front of us, all along, all the clues. Even Cas had a gut feeling it all led back to him. Jesus."

He dips his head in his hand, and Sam steels himself to ask the question he doesn't want to ask, the question he has been practicing in his head since soon after the hatch closed down behind Dean, trying out different permutations on his tongue. But it comes down to cold, hard confrontation in the end, because there is no real point in trying to sugarcoat any of this even if it makes him feel ill to think of it. "Dean. What are we going to do?"

His brother sighs out for long seconds, his face still shielded, and he doesn't answer Sam's question. "I love him," he says instead, his voice brittle. "I love him, Sammy. Isn't that just the dumbest fuckin' thing? That I've been thinking about a future with him? No more hunting, a home maybe? Where I could tinker with cars, and he could grow a garden and bake pies, and maybe Claire might visit with him if she wanted to. And me and him would sit on the porch swing and be grumpy old guys together once the rest of his grace wore off."

Dean chokes out the last few words, swipes angrily at his eyes, and Sam feels the burn of tears starting himself, has to blink hard. "I'm so sorry, Dean," he whispers, and he knows it sounds damned inadequate, because it is damned inadequate.

Next to him, Dean is taking shuddering breaths, fighting for control. Sam can feel that his brother is shaking, feel the tremors through the press of Dean's shoulder, and he reaches across, grips Dean's upper arm, holds onto it.

"You should have seen him down there, Sammy," Dean murmurs, and it's a wistful-sounding tangent Sam didn't expect. "He was ugly as fuckin' sin, but – man, he was beautiful too. Like he was made of light or something. Things like him don't belong in places like that."

Sam slants his eyes left to see Dean biting down savagely on his bottom lip, and his brother clears his throat decisively.

"But. We have to save the world," Dean says, and his voice is steadier, slower. "No one wants the

Apocalypse on their rap sheet, right?"

"Right," Sam answers softly, and even if Castiel's panic-stricken denials are ringing through his brain, he knows the angel would never, will never, shirk from this last act of atonement.

Dean is shifting now, moving around to sit in front of Sam, his back to the woman as if he doesn't want her to see their faces as they talk. "And the mother of all prophecies said the one who began it has to end it, right?" He leans forward a little as he speaks, slides his hand into his back pocket, and pulls out a slip of folded paper.

Sam nods. "Meg said it too." After a second or two, and for all the comfort it will provide, he adds, "she said if there was another way she'd tell us, and I don't think she was lying."

Dean is unfolding the paper as Sam speaks, and he swerves the conversation again. "I had this weird dream as I was waking. And I thought about it some, and then I found this. I kept it, don't really know why. Maybe I was just supposed to."

He's squinting at the paper in the dim light, shaking his head in what looks like wonder, as if he's just now seeing something and is amazed it has taken him this long. "It's my fortune," he elaborates, so quiet his voice is almost inaudible. "From that crazy underwater palace, remember? An enlightened individual is one who knows his own true value."

Dean looks up and smiles at Sam then, and although the one-eighty turn he just made seems incongruous, there is something momentous in the smile, Sam thinks; something outside of the significance of preparing to destroy someone he loves. It's calculated but it's melancholy, the kind of smile that means Dean's mind is made up and Sam isn't going to like what he hears, the kind of smile that's so damn sorry for what Dean is about to say that it makes Sam protest even before his brother utters the words.

"Dean, no, don't—"

"It isn't him," Dean says simply.

Sam freezes statue-still on the outside, stares dumbly at his brother, and Dean's eyes are unblinking, shining with the sincerity that comes from knowing he's right.

"I began all of it, Sam," he says, glacially calm. "Down in the Pit, when I broke the first seal. And I never ended it like I was supposed to."

Inside Sam all is chaos as his heart skips a beat and then speeds up rapidly. "But Dean, that was then. It was Cas who began this."

"No, hear me out." Dean shakes his head, raises a hand, tells Sam slowly and assuredly, so that every word will sink in and be wholly convincing. "I am the Righteous Man." He pauses, blinks his incredulity at the notion, and gives a soft huff before he goes on. "And remember what Death said before we broke Cas out of Purgatory? How only I can do it, and I need to play my role?"

Sam can see the hawk-like black-clad figure in his mind's eye now, hear his clipped admonishments. "Like you were supposed to the last time..." he echoes the memory, in a gasp that sounds parched and frantic because it is.

His brother nods. "And I never did that, Sam. You did. And it never ended. It just played out different, like Death said. And it always will. Until I stop it."

Dean pauses for a moment, like he's waiting for Sam to catch up, but *it makes no sense*, Sam thinks, because they're following set rules with a set outcome, and this is an exact algorithm, not an approximate one. He shakes his head, persists even though there's a whisper of doubt that winds silky around the words, because the rules already went out the window when they lost the relics and the ritual that went with them. "You can't stop it, Dean. It won't work because you're not the False Prophet. Remember what Eloni told you and Cas back at the temple, about how—"

"How the second beast comes out of the earth?" Dean cuts in softly. "I came out of the earth, Sam, remember? I dug my way out of my own grave."

When he replies, Sam's voice has recovered enough to sound almost aggressive, like he really does believe what he's saying. "Dean, come on. It doesn't even mean the earth literally. It means..." He trails off and Dean cocks his head, knows where he was going with it.

"The underworld," he picks up. "Bible calls it the lower parts of the earth. Been there, done that. Him and me both. And the other stuff she said? About being given the power to give breath to the image of the first Beast? Well maybe I did that when I brought his False Prophet back from Purgatory."

At last, a *maybe*, and Sam doesn't let himself think about his friend. He thinks about his brother, and he seizes on the shred of doubt and holds on tight. "Maybe isn't good enough," he hisses. "You're not the one. It'll know."

"It'll work, I know it will," Dean counters, with the sort of gentleness Sam has seen him use when he speaks to the bereaved. "It'll work because I fit the profile for this gig close enough. It'll work because I screwed up the balance when I left Purgatory through the wrong door. It'll work because I carried Cas's grace inside me and I wear his mark, and that thing won't know the difference. And most of all, it'll work because this whole mess started with me when I broke the first seal, and when we do this spell we're both going to believe it ends with me." Dean's tone goes lower, and earnest. "You have to trust me to do it this time, Sam. You have to believe that I'm strong enough, believe that I'm the one, so the spell will work." He cocks his head, raises an eyebrow almost playfully, but there is meaning in it too. "You didn't think I was the one before."

It's incomprehensible to Sam even though his brother is taking his time and choosing his words deliberately, and raw protest finally scratches out of him. "No. If this works, if we bind you to that thing, you end up back in the Pit, and I—"

"I can't send Cas there," Dean interrupts him softly. "I won't do that to him. And it's time I end this, for once and for all. Like Death said."

Sam tugs his eyes away, clamps them shut. He feels numb inside. "But Cas isn't strong enough to get

you back now," he chokes out.

He feels the light pressure of his brother's hand on his shoulder, and it slides up and around to the back of Sam's neck, as Dean pulls him in so that Sam is just inches away.

"I know that, Sam," Dean says. "But you're still letting go of me. Like I let go of you. You *will* believe I'm the one, and you *will* bind me to that monster. And I will drag it to Hell, and after I do that, there are no deals. You hear me? You live your life, for me. And take care of Cas for me." At the name, Dean's eyes go unguarded and grief-stricken, his composure lost for a second before he swallows hard. "He's not going to handle this, Sammy. Watch over him for me?"

There is a frozen hush when Sam thinks he might have *options*, that he might simply resist, that he might be able to talk Dean round. But even as he thinks it his mouth is saying the only word it really can, through the horror that swells his throat, even though all he wants to do is press his head against something cool and think of anything but the Lake of Fire.

"Yes."

Dean smiles, nods just slightly. "And you watch over yourself this time, okay? Not like last time. This time you handle it."

In the next moment, Sam is breathing Dean in, held tight in Dean's embrace like he has been so many times on this journey of theirs. He is safe in the arms of his brother, whose journey on this road will end in flames just like it started in flames, the blaze that burned their mother a foreshadowing of the Hell they both know, because the experience of fire is a thing that binds them, that makes them family. And Castiel is family too, and now he is going to understand what fire can take from you, feel the burn it leaves behind, seared into the heart; and he will know how so small a flame can make an eternity spent burning in Hell's inferno seem miniscule in comparison.

Dean is pulling away now, even though Sam doesn't want to let go, and he slides back to where he was before, at Sam's side. "Maybe after we gank this fucker, Cas will get the mojo back, beam you both up out of here," he says quietly.

Sam is scrubbing at his eyes with the heels of his hands. "Maybe," he mutters, even though he isn't sure if he really cares about getting out, but then he thinks of what Meg said before Dean emerged through the hatch. "From what Meg said, it sounds like it all resets after we do it, and we're up in the world again."

"Like after Stull," Dean muses. "It was like nothing ever happened there." He nudges Sam in the ribs. "Or we could always find a bike with a basket in the front, set Cas in it and you can pedal back home."

There is an instant of silence then, before Dean laughs. It's muffled, stunned laughter, with an undertone of hysteria, and Sam doesn't even register joining in but he finds that he is, snickering so hard that he can't draw breath. Dean doubles over, leaning heavily on him, and before they're done gasping like fish there are fresh tears in their eyes. It's bitter, Sam thinks, but sweet too, and he has a second of clarity when he realizes that these are the things he will miss that he can't share with Castiel or anyone else; these simple human moments of brotherhood, through shared memories of watching

E.T. in a motel room in Kentucky, while Dean draped an arm around his shoulders and pulled the blankets up around them both as John slept it off in the next bed. Who would ever care so much for Sam? He thinks of Mira but that's not quite the same. Dean has been mother, father, brother; and there are plenty of brothers in the world who don't bother with each other. Blood doesn't obligate people to care or to love. Dean didn't have to tail him all these years, didn't have to check up on him at Stanford or stand between their father's wrath and Sam's desperate bid for independence. Who would ever do so much for so little in return?

Sam comes out of the thought to find their laughter has died away, and a hush fills the air, deep and endless, until Dean breaks it.

"We'll need to defuse him."

He's suddenly businesslike, because he's in the zone already, Sam realizes; working out a strategy, as if this is a hunt and not his own sacrifice. And Sam responds with no hesitation because he can do this too, he can pretend they're planning to end some fugly out in the backwoods of nowhere if it'll get them both through this. "But if he's blocked—"

"Remember Grant's Pass?" Dean cuts in. "As soon as the Mother croaked, he went nuclear. This thing is blocking him now, but once we start doing this it could wear off and he might power up. You know what he's like...I don't want him jumping in front of this bullet." Dean exhales thoughtfully, reaches up to pull at his bottom lip, and then his eyes go wide. "I got it. I can..." His voice trails away then, as a creak sounds, and his vision tracks past Sam.

Sam follows his brother's gaze to the barge, where Castiel is emerging from the hatch, his hair wildly disheveled. His eyes dart between the both of them before his stare settles on Dean, and his head cants a little as he just *looks* for a moment.

"We use the same spell," he says softly, and Dean nods.

Sam sees the angel swallow then, and he climbs over the stern and into the Duck, squats beside the weapons duffel. He stays quiet as he fishes about inside it, placing some of its contents next to him, pulling out the small zip pouch Sam knows is Dean's gun cleaning kit. When he settles himself down, Sam can see he has arranged a selection of revolvers there on the deck. He crosses his legs, leans forward to reach for one of them, and starts taking it apart.

"We do it when he's ready," Dean breathes out. "Out there...not in the Duck, just in case you need her. We'll have to hope those fish-things don't follow us." He waits out a heartbeat. "Can you do this, Sam? Can you help me bring this home? Can you handle it?"

There are a thousand things Sam wants to say, and one thing only. *No*. He doesn't say it, doesn't tell Dean he loves him and will miss him, because Dean knows. "I can handle it," he says.

He glances to his right and meets his brother's gaze, as the familiar sounds of Castiel breaking down a gun, with a simple clack of metal and spring as he pulls the barrel out, echo around them. Dean reaches up, surreptitious, snags the cord around his neck and pulls it over his head. The amulet, and he presses it into Sam's hand. "Don't let him see that," he breathes out. "He might guess what's really going down

if he does."

Sam closes his fingers around the metal, still warm with his brother's body heat, and he wants to scream that he lied, that he can't do what Dean asks. Instead, he nods just once, and slips his own head through the cord, guiding the amulet down under his t-shirt as Dean pushes up, crosses to sit next to Castiel, picks up the next gun in the line and starts to strip it down.

### B

How many rituals and spells does he know? Sam lost count long ago, and the truth is that those long-ago spells and exorcisms don't matter. Not compared to this one, this final one that Sam holds inside his head and is prepared to recite from memory. But as significant as it is, it's only one part of this ritual. The most important part is the *lie*. He must not only be like a holy priest exorcising evil for the sake of the world and his family; he must be an actor putting on a tragedy mask. And he will hide his dismay and his heartbreak, and he can do this, because he made a promise to his brother and he will keep it this time.

He must do it, because he has no choice, and he supposes that there is irony in the fact he pulled one brother into Hell with him at Stull and now he will send the other there. He wonders if it would be easier if he knew how to be like Lucifer, and he spends the time leading up to this considering that other angel who went with him into the cage, like soldiers walking side by side into the trenches. He looks at the fallen angel from every angle of his memory and there is even a dreadful twinge of recognition from the present, as though even thinking about Lucifer is to call his attention, to pray to him. The monster he left rotting in the cage beside Michael was an angel once, answered prayers once; and perhaps the morning star hears his name and *listens*, staring up from fathoms away and setting his sights on Sam.

*How do I do this?* Sam pleads in desperation. *How do I break my heart and watch Castiel's break, too?*  
*How do I do this? How?*

Sam wonders if he imagines the low groan of wind that sounds like a tired sigh. He waits. He listens for that still, small voice that he's always being told is a divine, helpful presence, but there is none. Lucifer doesn't answer, though Sam imagines he catches the scent of sulfur on the air and that somewhere in a burning place, a weary soldier folds his arms and nods in Sam's direction, a quiet acknowledgment; one veteran to another.

Sam is so used to being in that role of youngest, second-in-command, last in line, demon-blood boy, the one his father told his elder brother to kill if he couldn't be saved. But the world and the role he has always occupied in it is slowly eroding, and he knows now, knows what Dean has always known – that evil is easy. Doing the *right* thing, the *righteous* thing? It'll make his stint in the cage look like a walk in the park. Compared to the heartbreak he knows will follow this, it is.

Dean carried that for all his years.

Now they're down to the last seconds of it and Sam will do this last thing his brother asks of him, and carry the heartbreak for him.



Castiel is another matter, and as if to push that knife in even deeper and twist it in the wound, in the instant he thinks it Sam hears the angel's voice, quiet and firm.

"I'm ready."

"Good luck, Clarence."

It's the one response Sam didn't expect, and he has almost forgotten Meg was even there, propped up in the cabin. He sees Castiel's eyes flick away from Dean and towards her, and he pushes up, steps over Sam's legs to make his way over to where she slumps, and squats down in front of her.

"Now you've found God, perhaps you might consider praying for me," he remarks.

She snorts. "Why not? After all, God's just waiting for my call."

Castiel makes a soft huff of what might be weary amusement, before he murmurs something quiet, in what sounds like Latin, and reaches to touch her brow. When his hand falls away, Sam can see a smudge of gunpowder residue there, the cross he knows accompanies a blessing forming a dark smear over her newly human eyes.

Her features twist wryly. "Well, that was pointless. Soulless, remember?"

"Second chances are rare," Castiel sidetracks neutrally. "Don't waste yours."

Dean is ranging up beside Sam, machete in one hand, and he glances at his watch. "Coming up to noon," he murmurs distractedly, and then he clears his throat, addresses the woman. "We're taking this elsewhere in case we need the Duck to get out of here." He nods over to the milling crowd of mutants. "Make some noise so they think we're still here. Holler if they figure out we're not and they follow us."

He leans down to rummage in the weapons bag, hooks out a Beretta and sends it skittering over the deck towards her. "You might want to save yourself a bullet in case this goes wrong," he says.

### B

Day is a subjective experience in the dark, deep belly of the earth. Sam can see Dean count time as they walk away from the Duck, glancing at the luminous glow of his watch, and knows his brother is thinking the exact same thing as him – *high noon*.

As they pick their way into the darkness, Meg starts singing. It's Ten Green Bottles, laced with sarcasm, and even if Sam knows she's doing it to fool the hybrids into thinking they're still on board the vehicle, it grates on his last nerve and he finds himself wondering if anyone would notice if he casually tipped her off a jagged ledge.

They play the beams of their flashlights out ahead of them as they walk, but in the event it's only a few minutes before they reach the end of the hike. One-hundred or so yards ahead, the crevice they are in

stops dead, falling away into an abyss that stretches ahead and up, up, *up*, into a cavernous vault, gnarled and jagged with stalactites.

Sam edges forward cautiously, peers over and down to see a turmoil of white-capped water far, far below. He tips his head back to stare up then, finds a few seconds to marvel that the darkness isn't total black, that his eyes have acclimatized to this subterranean nightmare they are caught in sufficiently for him to see that there are deeper shades and shadows of jet and onyx and obsidian in the great halls of this earth. He thinks abstractedly that if they ever make it to the surface again, he will be as blind as a mole and the sun will be too bright.

"Don't forget to turn the vehicle around before you leave," Castiel murmurs. He gives a sloppy half-shrug when Sam glances at him, but even though he's breathing slowly, the sharp glitter in his eyes gives the lie to his composure. "The guns are all clean and in the bag," he says, and he pulls out his cell phone. He clears his throat as he looks at Sam. "Sam," he begins, "You've been kinder than I ever deserved. I would like to have done better, and to have done more for you."

Sam schools his features, sets his jaw, and starts the lie, soft and convincing. "It's called regret, Cas. It's a human thing."

"So I'm learning. But I fear the lesson is over, and this is as far as I've gotten." Castiel shifts on his feet, offers Sam his phone. "Would you take this for me?" he ventures, a little hesitantly. "There's a saved text message in the outbox...will you make sure it gets sent?"

Sam nods, takes the phone, and the plastic is still warm from his friend's grasp.

"Good luck, Sam," Castiel murmurs. "Take care of your brother for me."

The irony of the request is appalling, and as Castiel turns to walk away, stumbling a little on the uneven rock, Sam husks out his own remorse at what he's about to do. "I'm sorry, Cas. I'm so sorry."

Castiel half-turns, his reply barely audible. "It'll be alright, Sam."

*But it won't*, Sam thinks. *It won't at all*. He slants his eyes over to his brother. Dean's face is hard-bitten and drawn as he watches Castiel drift over towards the edge of the drop, and he looks thinner than usual. As he stands there watching, Sam feels an involuntary shiver go through him. Death should have a more final tone to it, a deeper strain on them, he knows. And it is distressing, but what makes it so is survival, and knowing he and Castiel might have to carry on in this existence without Dean for so much longer. Death is easy – they've had practice. This could be an ordinary day, with the all-too-present knowledge that one slip up and one fugly on top of its game could be the end of one or all of them, and he and his brother have acted out this scene a thousand times before, never verbally but with their eyes, *watch yourself, okay?* ever since their youth.

It's fresh in Sam's memory suddenly, the first frost-bitter winter morning after he found out what roamed the night, when Dean drove him to his newest school. The background play of the radio and the rattle of the heater had been so mundane and nondescript, but nothing was mundane and nondescript any more. *It's the family business*, Dean had said, and he had given Sam a long look, with regret and apology in his eyes, before Sam opened the door and hopped out to make his way to class, desperate to

run back and cling to his safe, alive brother even while he wanted to run from him and everything he represented.

This time Sam is dropping Dean off, and if the spell works he doesn't know when he will see him again, *if* he will see him again.

Dean swallows thickly and holds out a discreet hand. His eyes are glazed. "I hope I don't ever see you on the flipside, brother," he whispers. "Remember what Joshua said, back in the garden...do it right this time, and when your number's called you'll be heading upstairs. You hear me?"

Sam nods but he doesn't want to. He takes Dean's hand, shielding the action from Castiel as he hovers nearby. A simple shake, a heartbroken locomotion of bone and muscle and calloused hands, shared DNA, accompanied by something Sam wanted to tell his brother on the other side of all of this. "Mira...she's the one, Dean. I'm going to tell her when I get back. And I'll be alright."

Dean smiles at him, sighs once and deeply, and then Sam's hand is released and his brother sets his flashlight down on the ground and makes his way over to Castiel.

Castiel's phone is solid in Sam's other hand, and he grips the plastic tight, takes a steadying breath before flipping it open. The message is there in the outbox, Castiel's own lie. *I'm going to look after your father now, Claire. I will be at peace. Be well, and happy. Your mother also. I hope you both can finally forgive me.*

Sam turns the phone off and puts it in his pocket. He can hear the low rumble of Castiel talking to Dean, and then his voice cracks on Dean's name and is lost, as Dean makes a ragged sound of distress and pulls him into a kiss, walking him back to the wall while Castiel's fingers knead at the back of his head. Sam looks down, focuses on his boots, because it feels wrong to watch them like this, to witness the pain of their final moments together.

After a moment he hears the shuffling of feet, and when he turns back Castiel and Dean are standing apart. Dean is swiping a hand across his eyes and Castiel's face is gleaming wet but he's nodding, squaring his shoulders back, ready and waiting like the soldier he is. "Now," he says.

A long moment ekes out before Dean chokes back a reply. "I can't look at you and do this, Cas. Please."

Castiel's eyes widen and he dips his head fractionally before he walks past them to gaze out over the abyss with his back to them, loose scree tripping over and tumbling into the darkness before his feet. Dean catches Sam's eyes and allows a small nod himself, and Sam clears his throat and begins. A second later Dean picks it up, forcing out the words stiltedly, but in reality this all hinges on Sam, he knows. He's the main thrust of power in this, because one meandering diversion away from the belief that it's *Dean* will end this. *Can you help me bring this home?* Dean asked, and yes, Sam will do it, and one day he might even find out what home is; not just all the good memories bundled in a car, but a place where he can hold all the things he loves together and safe, and never have them burned away.

Their voices begin small and then rise in cadence, and their brotherhood is evident in a flawless harmony as their voices interlock over the words. And Dean tugs his t-shirt up over his head as he speaks the incantation, lets it fall messily to the ground, bends to pull his ka-bar from his boot. He

doesn't flinch and his hand is rock steady and mechanical as he cuts the banishing sigil he learned from Castiel into his chest, just as he etched it into Castiel's outside the warehouse in Van Nuys. He's methodical in this last betrayal, his brow creasing in concentration while blood beads out of the slashes and trickles down his abdomen, and all the while Sam says the words along with his brother and doesn't have time to think about the tears that drip hot down his face. He knows he weeps and he can see that Dean's face is finally starting to crumple too, but he can't buckle under this sorrow. There is a job to do, and Sam will honor his brother and bring them home. He will *believe*.

Their voices continue in unison, and in the limitless space of the cavern they sound like a Gregorian chant. Dean stares at Sam in the darkness as though he's looking for reassurance, and Sam gives it to him with a tight nod, before Dean fixes his eyes back on Castiel. And it's so much worse to watch the wistful, desolate loss in a doomed man who is not yet gone to his grave; to see how Dean studies Castiel as though he's locking the angel's image in his memory, even when that image is no more than a shadowed silhouette, his back turned away from Dean in the last moments.

And these are the last moments, Sam can feel it; can feel a buzzing sensation that thrums in the air and all around them, somehow more purposeful than the great pounding vibrations that led them into the Beast's vaults even though it's finer and more delicate. And Dean can feel it too, Sam knows, because his brother's eyes are blinking rapidly and he's dropping the ka-bar and making a fist around the blade of the machete, cutting open his palm with a wince. Blood drips thick from his fingers and he takes a breath, and *keep talking*, Sam tells himself.

And suddenly, there is light.

The light is diffuse but growing in intensity by degrees, so that Sam looks around for the source before his eyes finally settle on his brother with mute surprise. Phosphorus is coalescing from the atmosphere and outlining Dean in brightness, and it doesn't escape his notice. He runs his bloody hand over his shoulder as though he can cast its shine away, but it doesn't retreat. He continues to glow, steady and strong, reciting the words with a hint of wonder; and then he's rising, up an inch, and then another, until his boots lose contact with the rock, and even though Sam is keeping time with the spell his hands rise to his cheeks.

Without warning, Dean's mouth snaps closed, and this is the moment that Sam feared, the moment when they could no longer keep up the sham that this chaos magic they are weaving is made for Castiel. It has been for Dean, always for Dean; and he hovers a foot above the ground now, his arms outflung, the blade of the machete reflecting the light that surrounds him and the fingers of his free hand splayed and strumming the air.

Castiel hears the dissonance, notices that Sam's voice is alone and the chorus is gone. He whips around, gasps when he sees Dean rising rapidly above him, two feet, now three, now four, five, six; and in the blink of an eye Castiel understands, and his face contracts in helpless fright.

"Dean, no!"

Sam sees the effort play across Castiel's face, takes a breath as Castiel's eyes flash weak quicksilver and the air around him ripples as his wings unfurl, ripped from him on an agonized cry and insubstantial compared to the last time Sam saw them. He runs forward with his hands reaching out, as though he

will tear Dean from the air, and in that moment Sam sees Dean's mouth open, his lips forming silent words, *I love you*.

And then Dean slams his bloody palm into the sigil on his chest.

*Keep talking*, Sam tells himself, even though he can hear his voice dry up and falter, even though his eyes are stinging. He's prepared for a supernova of light and power, even prepared to see both Castiel and his brother swept away to God knows where. But Castiel isn't the angel he was before and his desperate effort to gather and direct what grace he can down here only underlines his limitations. He doesn't zap himself and Dean into the ether. Instead he arches back as a muted blast, like the shockwave from a distant explosion, bends and billows from his epicenter much as it had when Meg used the sigil to neutralize him in Madisonville. And *keep talking*, Sam tells himself, and he does, driving the words of the spell out of his mouth like he's firing bullets straight into all of their hearts. Everything happens in slow motion, Castiel folding in on himself now, his legs buckling as his grace is blown from him; and Dean rising above them all with a terrified shout as light fills the cavern above, erupting from his skin, his eyes, his molecules and atoms.

"You want some of this, you sonofabitch?" Dean is hollering. "I'll take you...I'll take all of you, is that all you got?"

There's an answering howl from the depths of the abyss that curdles Sam's blood, and still he keeps talking, still he *believes*, as the walls, the ground, all the solid matter of this cavern shift, heaving with a deep breath in, because this place isn't dead rock at all, it's sentient and animated.

It is alive.

It is the Beast.

In that instant, Sam recalls hearing the story of a fisherman who took his small boat out onto ocean waters and found himself floating over a sandbar where none should be. And it wasn't a sandbar at all — his boat had drifted over the top of a surfacing whale. Sam knows what that feels like now; the confusing moment of utter disbelief and bewilderment as the entire world and universe reorients, followed by the dawning realization that something a thousand times larger and more infinite than him is all around them.

And still Sam says the words, and still he believes in his brother.

The walls bulge out like boils standing proud of the skin of this place, swelling to form protuberances that grow rapidly, flexing and reaching, snakelike now, tentacles like the one they saw on the surface, and at their center Sam can see the rock start to crumble, tectonic stress building and fracturing the surface. Boulders and great slabs of granite split away, arcing through the air gracefully and crashing down around them before they smash apart and smaller debris skitters past to tumble into the deep. Sam feels a stinging fusillade of stones rain down onto his head, lifts a hand up to shield himself, and still he says the words and believes in his brother, even while Castiel falls to his knees, his arms up and imploring, and his cries frantic.

Sam launches himself forward, unbalanced and clumsy as their ledge shifts and roils under his boots,

until he feels Castiel's t-shirt beneath his fingers. He's vaguely aware of Meg screaming in the distance, and he has a moment of unexpected regret that he doesn't know where she has gone to, but the thought is lost in a rushing like the noise of a roller coaster, a subway train, a jet airliner, as the Beast explodes out of the bedrock in an atomic eruption of fire, its limbs thrashing like giant serpents; and still Sam says the words, and still he believes in his brother.

It is silhouetted in the flames that have set it ablaze as it looms over them, a horned, dome-headed colossus formed of rippling bands of muscle, leathery bat-like wings flapping. It smacks a massive fist down onto the ledge in its fury, its talons scoring fissures in the rock, and the force sends Sam crashing down onto his butt. He scrabbles himself as far as he can from its grasp, dragging Castiel along even as the angel squirms and tries to wriggle free, and still Sam says the words, and still he believes in his brother.

Through the smoke and scarlet glow of the inferno, he can see the Beast throw its head back and snap its mouth open, see gleaming fangs in there, and it roars, a deep bass threat that rises into a screech of rage. The sound is unearthly, piercing Sam's eardrums, sending blinding pain zinging through his head and making his heart stutter as if he's a child again and this is the monster in his closet, the thing that will reshape his reality; and still he says the words, and still he believes in his brother. And *it's working*, somehow he knows, and pure grief tears and rips through him because he knows what it means for this spell to be working.

Blinking grit and tears from his eyes, Sam peers up to see Dean floating so high now that he is as tiny as a child's doll. But there is the flash of the machete swiping and thrusting as Dean is buffeted and smashed back and forth by the crazed twist and whirl of the creature's limbs, until its hand swoops to snatch him up and dash him against its own chest; and Sam wants to stop, wants to scream Dean's name, but still he says the words and still he believes in his brother. He can smell the acrid stench of his own hair as it singes, breathes in smoldering air that scorches his lungs as he pulls Castiel to him. He thinks of his mother, rendered into smoke fumes and charred bones at the moment this all started for them, and now Dean at the end of it all; and still he chokes out the words, and still he believes in his brother.

Castiel screams, fists flying, and he struggles like a wild animal in Sam's arms, but Sam keeps his grip on the angel and squints up through the murky, sooty smog that hangs in the air, morbid fascination and curiosity compelling him to watch until the end. What sounds like the creature's death throes are transmitted in its shrieks, in the crunch and crack of its limbs against the rock, in the clatter of rubble, and in the tremors that quake through this place; and still Sam whispers the words, and still he believes in his brother.

Fire is licking up all around and above them now, as if a backdraft has set the conflagration to consuming itself, and it's so hot that Sam's skin feels as if it might melt off his bones. The creature's rage still thunders and its wailing still resounds, and if Dean is still alive up there, Sam can't see him. But he thinks he sees faces in the inferno, faces that flex and metamorphose, faces from a thousand hunts past, faces belonging to people he once knew who are dead forever and can never come back from death. He thinks he sees his parents, Jess, Caleb, Pastor Jim; he thinks he sees Madison, Ellen and Jo. He thinks he sees Samuel Campbell, Christian, Gwen; he even thinks he sees Zachariah, Gabriel, Balthazar, and a thousand more tortured, screaming people he couldn't save from Fate, sometimes because they didn't want to be saved.

Sam grapples with Castiel and longs for water, cool, clear water, and still he believes in his brother, but he knows his voice is lost now, that his lips move but no sound is coming out of his mouth. He finds himself dazedly thinking of the ocean at Crystal Beach, of how Kali pulled him from the depths, remembers that moment when everything suspended for him. And he thinks he understands now, thinks he understands everything about the blackness that came for them, because it's like being underwater.

Fire and the wails of long-dead ghosts press down on them from above. There is only one way out.

Sam learned how to drown once. He can do it again, and suddenly he isn't scared any more.

He takes a breath. There's no time to warn Castiel, and Sam hopes and prays that he will understand. He's abstractedly thankful that Castiel lacks his extra thirty pounds of muscle, but even if he has a physical advantage over the weakened angel, that doesn't make it easy. Castiel is wiry and whip-fast as he flails and fights and sobs, but from somewhere Sam finds the presence of mind to wrestle him into a choke-hold that sends him flopping limp within seconds.

And with a final burst of adrenaline, Sam wraps the angel in a bear hug and rolls them off the cliff together, into the darkness, and into the deep.

B

# Episode 24: Redemption

## Authors: Swordofmynouth & Zatnikatel

**Characters/Pairing:** Dean/Castiel, Sam, OC and canon characters

**Rating:** R (this part)

**Wordcount:** ~85,000

**Warnings:** language, violence, sexuality

**Betas:** [dotfic](#) and [murron](#)

**Art:** Chapter banners by [zatnikatel](#); digital paintings by [quantum\\_witch](#), [Mobius-9](#), and [Rinienne](#), which you can also find [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#) (NB: art contains *major* spoilers for the chapter)

**Summary:** *"Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows..."*



13

*Lawrence, Kansas*

*1978*

Michael.

*Michael*, and his brother's presence sears through Castiel's senses like electricity, corrodes his waning grace like acid, disorients him with a mix of joy and sheer terror as he lurches up off of...a bed he doesn't recall being placed on.

His vessel's heart is beating a rapid tattoo in his chest, and the moonlight flooding in through the windows of the room he is in casts his face an eerie, icy, washed-out blue as he stares up, wide-eyed with his own confusion, at his reflection in a large mirror positioned above the bed.



*Michael*, and his magnetic pull tugs at every elementary particle of Castiel's being with its rightness and its promise of succor, even while its wrongness appalls him, because Michael shouldn't be here. And if he is...the notion fills Castiel with a complicated, hectic desperation he doesn't quite understand, has him choking out Dean's name as he claws at his equilibrium and heaves it back to steady himself.

There is no reply to his cry; the room is quiet, uninhabited but for him. He filters through his grace tentatively, searches for some sign of Dean here, and not for the first time he regrets that the sigils he inscribed on his friend's ribs cloak him so thoroughly. He fumbles in his pocket for the cell phone Dean gave him, snaps it open. There is nothing, no signal, and he shakes it, mutters a curse under his breath at the lack of response. But still there is his brother's low, sibilant, wrathful murmur, *I'll see you soon, Dean*, cutting through the insistent clamor of six billion human souls, and it's enough, gives Castiel a point in time and space, a location.

For one fraction of a second he considers the fact his brother already knows he's here, and that their kinship won't stop Michael from meting out judgment and justice for Castiel's treachery. And then, *Dean*, he thinks, and with that thought he beats his wings and he's there, staring through the wreckage of a solid wall into the eyes of the man he last saw gasping his way back to life in Mary Winchester's arms, and seeing his brother gaze back at him.

"So it's true." Michael tilts his head, regards Castiel thoughtfully, and he sounds almost reasonable in his distaste at Castiel's perfidy as he continues. "I didn't want to believe Zachariah."

Castiel tamps down his discomfort and his own anguish, spares a moment to scan their surroundings. As he slants his eyes back, Michael curls John Winchester's lips up into a subtle smile.

"He is safe. As is his brother. I sent them back."

Michael is standing next to Mary Winchester, where her curled body forms a golden-haired comma on the floor, and he inclines his head and contemplates her. "She won't remember this," he says quietly. "She will birth both of her sons."

Castiel feels a surge of despair. "This isn't right," he tries, but he can hear the way his own hopelessness makes his voice hollow. "Please." He puts a hand out, palm up, and he implores. "Please let her be. Let *Dean* be. This can't be what our Father really wants."

Michael looks up, focuses on Castiel slowly. His stare is grave, it doesn't waver, and Castiel already knows this particular battle is lost.

"Whether this is what our Father wants or intended is not of import, Castiel, not any more," Michael offers. "It's too late to turn back. Lucifer walks, and he must be stopped for the sake of all souls."

Even though his brother's tone is firm with what Castiel knows is both logic and Michael's belief that this is right, it is underpinned with what Castiel thinks might be kindness as he goes on.

"There is no other option, despite your new-found appreciation for free will. All roads lead to the same destination." Michael pauses a beat then, and all the while Castiel can feel the tendrils of his brother's

grace vibrating through him, weaving their way into his superconsciousness, tapping his every unspoken thought and feeling. "And that one...your Dean. He is the Righteous Man, the one who began it, and you know the prophecy. The one who began it must end it, or it will never end."

Michael sinks to his knees then, reaches out a slow, considerate hand, places it on Mary Winchester's lower belly. "I can feel him inside her," he murmurs, almost dreamily. "Can you feel him, Castiel? Can you already feel the pull of him?" He looks up, and his eyes gleam critically as he examines Castiel. "He is my vessel. He is me. This is why you serve him, Castiel, why you cleave to him. This is why you love him."

There is a sudden, somber clarity that comes from Michael's conclusion, a simple resolve that springs up inside Castiel in place of the confusion that has always clouded any analysis of the motives that drive him where Dean Winchester is concerned. It positions itself like a barrier between him and his brother, between their shared past, millennia of fealty, respect, and fraternal devotion. Castiel knows that Michael senses it, can feel his brother's flash of outrage and dismay as he pushes up fluidly and draws closer.

Castiel shuffles backwards as Michael approaches, but he will say this even if he knows he won't survive the admission. "I do love him. But that isn't why."

He comes up against a solid surface, allows himself a swift glance behind him to see he has backed into the Impala, swivels back to see Michael so close now that Jimmy Novak's face is reflected in John Winchester's eyes. If there is an instant when Castiel knows he can still run from this, it's gone even before he completes the thought, as he feels his grace tethered and confined here by the archangel.

"Do you think I won't do what has to be done, Castiel?" his brother asks, on a faint sigh that exudes sorrow. "Do you think I won't end you for your duplicity? Even if I don't want to?"

Castiel swallows. "I know you better than that," he answers softly, and he can feel it starting already, can feel himself being dispersed, the strands of him being unlaced and unknitted, pulled apart, as Michael exorcises him; can feel himself weakening, crumpling onto the hood of the car as his brother looms closer and ponders him though the methane glow that seeps out through his vessel's pores.

"Or I could make you forget your human," Michael says, not unkindly. "I could send you back to him with no memory of what you feel for him."

Through the fire of his own immolation, Castiel can feel the metal skin of the Impala start to bubble and boil under his fingertips as he scrabbles at it, this last piece of Dean. He clings to it as it runs liquid under him and fuses with his vessel's melting flesh and his own dying grace. "Since you can't change who Dean is, you can't change what I feel for him," he gasps. "I am for him...the road I travel will always lead me to him, no matter how many obstacles you lay in my path, and I will always protect him."

He gives up then, gives himself up to the hazy agony and ecstasy of his own termination, but through it he catches Michael's last, faint words, *then perhaps you can best keep him safe for me, brother—*

—Castiel's arrival is abrupt and sickening, sends him reeling, until he is grasped and steadied, one hand

pressed on his chest to stop his collapse, and voices he never expected to hear again saying his name.

"You sonofabitch," Dean is declaring, part relief and part triumph, and his eyes are bright and intense as he stares at Castiel. "You made it."

Castiel blinks slowly at his friend, hears himself croak out, "I did?" He can taste the copper of blood in his mouth, and he holds up his hand and studies it, tries to collect his thoughts past the disquieting suspicion that something important he can't recall just happened. "I'm very surprised," he concedes, and then it goes dark.

## B

### *Southern Pacific Ocean Present day*

Meg can taste something on the tip of her tongue, something strong and sour, something that makes her lips pucker involuntarily. But she can't focus for long enough to work out what it is because the ocean is roaring beside her as it ebbs and flows, and fuck anyone who ever thought the sound of it was restful, because its constant crash-slosh at the periphery of her mind is mind-numbingly repetitive.

Beneath the steady rhythm of the endless tide, she hears another sound that keeps time with it; ragged exhales as someone nearby wheezes out a strangled, hopeless cry, catches their breath, and does it again, over and over. Meg listens to the sound for what might be a long time before it occurs to her to backtrack her brain and figure out why she's here, but the memory of her fall into the abyss after Sam and Castiel is little more than windswept screaming as she plunged endlessly, from what seemed like the top of the universe to the bottom, until she hit the freezing-cold shock of water and everything went black.

She opens her eyes a crack, and everything is scorching daylight after the eternal midnight of the cavern. Sam is a few feet away, the long, dark bulk of his body laid out across the beach in a way that looks almost relaxed. And there is that sound of water again, and Meg becomes aware that her legs feel cold, that the water is lapping at her feet and seeping up her jeans as far as her thighs. Seawater, because where there is beach there is sea, and there is that confirmation of surf swooshing across sand again.

Meg finds herself musing hazily that there was a time – hundreds of years long – when she couldn't even touch the ocean. Too pure, and in the instant she thinks it she recalls another *fall*, and with it comes the realization that she is sucking in air she actually needs to live now, and the taste in her mouth is salt. Sand crusts her eyes, and every blink is an irritating sweep of lids over grit. Everything hurts too, and an incredible arc and throb of pain dominates where her splinted leg is immersed in brine; but the physical pain is lost in the revelation of a deeper ache, and she can't hold back her soft gasp of grief at the knowledge she is an empty husk, that the comforting, velvet-soft blackness that pulsed at her center is gone, that she is cleansed, sanitized. Weak and vulnerable too, and without the gift of demon-power at her disposal she becomes part of the catastrophe, part of the disaster. Now she shares the misfortune with them all, and she does it bitterly as she heaves herself up out of the sand and onto her elbows at the same time as Sam stirs, rousing himself to consciousness with a groan bitten off between

his teeth.

Meg twists, scans the horizon. Along the tide line is the broken wreckage of their ill-fated expedition; assorted bags, pieces of the Duck, firearms washed ashore. When she turns back to look in the other direction, Sam is lurching to his feet on a choked cry and digging footprints into the sand. Beyond him is a huddled figure, and for a moment Meg thinks she sees the shape of massive sails extending out behind it, but they aren't sails, they're...

*Oh*, she thinks, with breathless surprise, and in the next second they're gone and from here on in she'll pretend she didn't just totally fangirl over Castiel's wings. She pulls herself together, ignores the fact that she has never run into a set of them before now, even while she mentally fistbumps herself for finally catching a glimpse after she turned mortal, because to witness grace is to burn. It's what they do, the function they serve – to burn the lower demonic orders out from every molecule.



But the wings are gone now, tucked back into invisibility, and in their absence Meg's eyes widen and she takes in the whole of the scene and the extent of the disaster. A body further on up the beach lies just above the seaweed line, where someone – where Castiel – has dragged it out of the reach of the greedy water. Castiel sits cross-legged with Dean's head in his lap, bent over his lover with his arms cradling him. He rocks back and forth, and the sound Meg heard comes from him; a breathless, featureless animal scream, as he shakes and pours out his heart into the salty air.

Meg listens to him for a moment and thinks there ought to be something profound in the revelation that the sound an angel makes in grief is no different from the infinite victims she has tortured. It's one thing to be trapped in a human body, she considers, but to *feel* it, to truly inhabit that ephemeral humanity – oh, that's the punishment, that's the hurt, and she marvels that something so powerful and above it all can be grounded and forced to feel so much without relief. As Castiel does now.

Another wave laps at her feet and she hauls herself further away from the water. Her fingers scrape on shells and tangle in seaweed until they trip over a long piece of driftwood, jagged and brittle. She thrusts it into the ground, bites into her tongue until blood wells to the surface and fills her mouth, as she uses it to lever herself up onto her knee, and then her one good foot, her broken leg dragging useless behind her.

She hobbles along in Sam's wake as he walks unevenly to Castiel, and she can hear the sounds of the angel's inarticulate breathing. Alongside the sounds of Castiel's labored gasping and the slumped shape of Sam, silhouetted against the burning sun, is the silent presence of the corpse between them. Meg is close enough to see Dean's body in more detail now, and she finds that she's recalling him in the way someone who never paid much attention to him might; a caricature of the youth he was, not the reality of the man he became. His name evokes a series of images, of false machismo and half-assed bravado, cheap food at roadside diners, bad music; but beneath it all, an untamable spirit with a liking for band shirts and denim, and his father's leather jacket. A healthy if emotionally stunted youth.

What Meg sees now is a shadow of the man that was. Whatever happened to him after he slid the gun over to her in the Duck and walked away has burned his skin to raw and blistered, melted through to gleaming bone along his arms and down his torso. There are gaping rips in his flesh, and the rack of his ribs protrudes through his open chest like the keys of a piano, blood seeping languidly all around them. Dark hollows have gone purple beneath his eyes, but for all that, his face is oddly serene, the thick fringe of lashes on his cheeks peaceful. Meg muses that from the neck up, he looks as if he crashed out to sleep off his hangover after one hell of a party, that he might wake up again at any moment.

He never will.

Castiel knows it. He sways and shivers, but when he hears their approach he snaps to attention, pulling his gaze away from the body in his arms and looking up as Sam's shadow falls across him. His face has all the contour and shape of a crumpled sheet of paper, but his eyes blaze electric blue in the morning light. "Help me, Sam," he whispers, parched and desperate. "You have to help me. We'll start from the beginning, and—"

"What is that, Cas?" Sam says, strained but gentle.

"The spell...if we just do it again, if we go back to the beginning and fix it, and—"

"Cas."

"—remember, Sam, Sumerian phonetics can be difficult to the untrained speaker but I can help you through the difficult passages...there must have been a word we tripped up on—"

"Cas."

"—but when we get it right this time, and we *will* get it right, I know we will...then we can do it—"

"No, Cas."

"—together, we'll do it together. And if it doesn't work there's always Enochian, there are so many rituals, so we should start while it's early and then—"

"Cas!"

Sam's switch from gentle to sharp breaks through the trance, and Meg steels herself for the result.

"My name is not part of the spell, Sam," Castiel finally acknowledges him, terse. He doesn't pause for breath, begins to recite the spell himself instead, and even from a couple of yards away Meg feels an uneasy twinge in her split flesh, in the atmosphere, and in the sand underfoot. The spell has the power to shake the world, even in broad daylight, and she winces, waiting to see what will happen next.

"Stop that," Sam snaps.

Castiel does not stop that. He keeps going, racing through the words in the ancient language, and Meg hears herself moan deep in her throat. "*Make it stop*," she hisses, and she isn't sure if it's the scorching heat of Castiel's grief that she is begging to have relief from or the power of the spell itself, but it seems that Sam can't bear it either because he leans down and slaps Castiel across the face.

Almost before the sound of the blow dies away, there is an explosion of movement as Castiel bolts upright from his seated position, leaving Dean unguarded on the sand. Meg finds her gaze pulled to the body again, studying the way Dean's head tilts up to the sky, his mouth canting open, his lips cracked from the salt. *Dean's worries are over*, she thinks. Dean has bitten the dust, bought the farm, gone to the big room downstairs, and he's not coming back this time because she has a gut feeling that not all of the angels and all of the spells can put this Winchester back together again.

Sam doesn't move an inch as Castiel rises to meet him and there is the faint suggestion of the slap on the angel's cheek, the red tingling through his pale skin. His eyes have gone from grieving to feral.

"You should have let me go with him," he says, his voice reverberating from his throat in a deep, bone-shaking growl. "If you're not going to help me, you should have let me die with him. I thought you were his *brother*, Sam."

If there was a single pressure point Castiel could hit on to make Sam explode, this is it, Meg knows, and she assesses Sam's face, the clench of his jaw as he leans further over Castiel, a charge that threatens violence building between them.

Meg can stitch together countless moments when her life intersected with the Winchesters, and during all of them she didn't fully appreciate the effect Dean's presence had, whether it was on John or Sam, and now on the angel. Without the general apathy of her demonhood blinding her, she observes, with insight and sudden, unexpected sadness, everything that Dean had been, the various roles he had filled.

He was a keystone, a linchpin, the point upon which a fulcrum turns, the central hub without which things disintegrate and fall apart, and it can't be more clear than in the tableau that plays out as she watches.

She limps closer, curious to see what happens despite herself, the foot of her crippled leg furrowing a snaking trail in the sand.

"For Dean's sake, I'll pretend I didn't hear that," Sam says, icy cold.

"For Dean's sake you should have tried harder to reach him," Castiel yells.

And that's it – there is a flurry of motion so rapid that Meg's brain has to sprint to catch up with it; the sudden fast pull of punches as both men lurch into each other with flying fists and bared teeth, their eyes gone dark with anger and hurt, wolves howling on the empty stretch of beach with Dean's body a mute testament between them.

Knuckles trade off against their faces, and where they shuffle in their tight boxing ring, their feet dance dangerously close to the corpse. Meg sinks to her knees, swallowing a screech of pain as she reaches for Dean's body, and she can't say what impulse causes her to lean forward to pull it to safety. This man was squirting holy water in her face not that long ago, and taking no small delight in the burning of her skin.

"Soldiers deserve better," she mutters, as she threads her hands under his arms and pulls him up and away from the fray, and she tells herself that is the whole of it. They shared the same rack once upon a time, in another land, and this man looked down at her with something like understanding and pity as he unstrapped her from Crowley's torture table after the demon inside Christian Campbell smoked and died. They might have been on different sides of a war, but when life has passed, the boundaries of enemy and friend are no longer so clearly defined. They seem small and trivial when she stares down at the empty vessel that was once meant for Michael.

Above her are the thud of impact and the sound of thick grunts as Sam breaks Castiel's nose and gore comes flooding down the angel's face; the answering gasp and cry from Castiel as he sends several punches into Sam's kidneys so that Sam buckles over, heaving in air. He erupts back up, clamping his fingers to Castiel's arm and swinging him around violently, into a chokehold that binds them to each other. Both of them are breathing hard, like cattle in a stampede.

"My brother is dead and you broke my fucking wall, and you think I'm going to deal with this all by myself?" Sam hollers, his face creased ugly with fury. "You fucker! You selfish fucking bastard! It's real easy to die and leave the mess for the living, but you aren't doing this the easy way, Cas. You're doing this with me. We're doing this *together*."

Sam lets him go and Castiel stumbles a few feet away, to where the sand is splotted with blood from a split on Sam's cheek, and from Castiel's own broken nose. He reaches up and fingers the break with a hiss, before he shifts the bone back into place with an audible crack. The two men breathe hard and fast in tandem as they regard each other with an awkward, nervous silence, the tension too thick to break with words alone until Castiel finally does, leaning with his hands on his knees and spitting blood into the ground.

"I should be thanking you. You saved me from Hell," he croaks, in what Meg assumes is the closest he can manage to an apology.

Sam exhales a long, steadying breath, but his reply is dull and exhausted. "Yeah. I guess I did, in a way."

"But you left my soul behind, Sam."

For the first time in a long time, Castiel's voice regresses back into his angelic monotone and the contrast highlights just how far his journey has taken him to all levels of human and angel and back again. He turns and looks down at Meg, where she has dragged Dean a few yards from their altercation. His stare is empty and desolate as he rests it on Dean and hunkers down opposite, his hair wild and messy, and clogged with sand, blood oozing from his nose and from a split in his eyebrow. Meg studies him in silence until he lifts his gaze to her, his lips pressed into a thin, angry line.

"Thank you," he whispers.

His gratitude makes her uncomfortable, and she looks away and down at the dead body between them both.

"There's some magic left, you know," Castiel adds dryly.

He reaches across the corpse that divides them and before Meg can react, his fingers are pressed to the sore and bruised calf of her broken leg. His touch sends fireworks through her nerves and she can't look at what he is doing, opens her mouth to scream – but then the agony shuts off abruptly, as if it was never there, as if all her nerve endings were silenced at once. She opens her eyes and the swollen, deformed limb is recognizable again; the rent in the skin where the broken bone pushed through healed over and the pain gone with it. She replays the angel's last words, and her eyes narrow as she looks from her leg to Dean Winchester's lax, dead features and ravaged body, and then back to Castiel once more.

"Magic enough to fix him, to—"

"No," Castiel cuts her off, biting the word out as if it hurts. "Not enough to do what matters most. His soul is gone where I can no longer follow, and without his soul he would not be fixed. It would not be him, and I..." His voice dies for a second before he swallows. "I would not do that to him. Or his brother."

Meg thinks she sees something in his eyes as he speaks, a flash of something that might be guilt, but she isn't sure. Movement from above is a distraction as Sam kneels down beside them, cutting a dark shadow over his brother, and by the time she looks back to Castiel he has collapsed in on himself, shoulders brushing Sam's. He doesn't seem to care or mind, regardless of the fight from seconds ago. All the animosity is forgotten, and Sam sets a hand on Dean's shoulder, withdrawing into his own private thoughts for a few moments before he swipes a hand across his eyes and speaks.

"You have any mojo left to take us back, Cas?" he asks. "I thought you were—"



"Running on empty?" the angel says with a weary bitterness. "I know. It cost me to fix her leg, but if we wait long enough, I can take us home."

"What the hell went wrong anyway?" Meg asks Sam, after brief silence has passed, but Sam's eyes are vacant, and he doesn't answer her.

### B

Castiel stays with Dean.

Several times Sam attempts to get him to leave the body, and Meg grows tired of the pleading and Castiel's mute obstinacy, and wanders down to the tideline, where she finds several unopened water bottles and a pack of sodden bagels washed up on the shore. She lines them up in a row, wades into the lapping surf to fish out what looks like a fabric bag so she can carry the provisions more easily. Her hand closes around something solid concealed within it, and she picks at the coarse material, peers inside it to see the dull luster of old metal. She barks out a dry, mirthless laugh as she drops the water bottles and food in beside it, and makes her way back to their makeshift camp.

Sam is sitting with his back against a large rock, his legs sprawled out carelessly. He's staring at the sea, and he doesn't acknowledge Meg's return. She sits down a foot or so away, reaches inside the bag and retrieves the bagels and the water bottles one by one, before leaning over to drop the cloth bundle on Sam's lap. "Irony can be pretty ironic sometimes," she remarks, and when he drifts red-rimmed eyes over to focus on her, she nods down at her salvage. "The mighty sword of truth and justice. No sign of the holy grail though."

Sam casts his eyes down to examine the bag but he doesn't open it up, just shoves it off his thighs, then stretches across to scoop up one of the bottles of water. He stares over at Castiel for a moment before pushing up and ambling over, almost leisurely, to place the bottle beside the angel. He mutters words too low for Meg to hear, but Castiel shakes his head and he will not speak, not yet.

Once Sam has slumped back down in his spot, Meg unscrews the cap on one of the bottles and sets it down next to him. Ahead of them, the golden ball of the sun is sinking fast as the night closes in. The prospect of darkness is forbidding with the trees behind them whispering threats as they rustle in the breeze, and Meg finds her gaze drawn to Castiel, his head bowed and Dean Winchester still cradled in his arms. "We should burn the body," she hisses. "Leaving it intact is an invitation to trouble." She jerks a thumb back into the jungle that borders the beach. "There's no telling what could be in there still."

Sam is scratching and plucking convulsively at his chest through the fabric of his t-shirt, but he freezes, looks at her for a long moment, and Meg can almost hear the gears in his head grind as he registers what she said. He winces, his face creasing with distaste for a few seconds, distaste that might be aimed whatever could be watching from the woods, or might be a reaction to her suggestion.

Meg's eyes slant, unbidden, to the cloth-wrapped blade Sam could use to end her for once and for all, at his other hand, curled on his thigh and perilously close to the weapon. But she remembers the way he fought inside her when she wore him, the way he protested her crimes when she used his hands to

maim and murder, the way he screamed in rage and horror when she drove his fist into his brother's dazed face. Even if she knows his integrity is his strength and could be her death sentence, she also knows it is his weakness, and that it can save her. "For all we know, the body of the Righteous Man could be like a homing beacon to that thing's drones, and how you and I fight them?" she adds quickly. "We're defenseless human beings, Sam...you and me both."

He frowns and Meg thinks she can see in his eyes that he has taken the bait, thinks she can sense his tension easing by tiny increments. "We'd have to gather a heck of a lot of wood for the pyre," she continues cautiously, and she can see Sam's jaw twitching like he's chewing the inside of his mouth.

"We'd have to distract Cas," he murmurs absently, because he's going over the logistics and Meg can finally relax at his acquiescence. "Separate him from the body. Restrain him so he doesn't put out the fire."

Meg continues in this odd, uneasy truce that seems to have been reached between them in the temporary insanity of his grief. "Could he put us out of commission? He isn't fully charged...if we piss him off and he uses up any more of his juice, we could be stuck here for days." As she speaks, it suddenly occurs to her that being marooned on this godforsaken beach after burning Dean's body would be fully dependent on them surviving the inevitable distress that would follow, and it's like Sam read her mind.

"If we piss him off, being stuck here would be the least of our worries," he says. "And if he didn't kill us for it, he might not help get us home afterwards. Look at him..."

Meg slants her eyes over to the hunched figure. Castiel is gazing up at the stars now, with Dean's head in his lap. He's rocking slightly, and his fingers are stroking Dean's cheek as the song of the waves plays out beyond them. If there is a time for arguing over how to dispose of Dean, it's going to have to happen on home turf. Castiel is too raw to deal with it.

Meg gathers a small pile of driftwood and sticks from the treeline anyway, and uses it to make a bonfire, cursing as she manages to burn her fingers on a set of waxed matches she finds in one of the bags.

"What, not a girl scout, Meg?" Sam pokes acidly. "Always prepared?"

Uneasy truce is right, but Meg is diplomatic, bites her tongue and doesn't respond as she steps back from the growing blaze. They take a moment to admire the licking flames and enjoy their different perspectives on Hell that the fire reminds them of. After a moment, Meg hears the slosh of liquid and glances beside her to see Sam lifting a stainless steel flask to his lips. "Since when did you have that?" she asks.

He points dark, resigned eyes at her. "It was Dean's. I found it in the surf. It belonged to John, went with him to 'Nam."

Meg licks her lips, ventures, "Can a friend be persuaded to share?"

Sam's gaze doesn't waver. "Sure."

He passes her the flask. She spins the cap and takes a moment to quietly toast Dean Winchester before she knocks back a swig, and, "*Fuck*," she curses, spluttering brackish water.

"You didn't really think we kept alcohol in there, did you?" Sam smirks. "Holy water for the family Winchester."

Meg considers saying something snide, but rolls her eyes instead. They fall into silence then, and she sees Sam darting sharp, speculative glances Castiel's way, as if he hopes the angel will nod off in the darkness for long enough for him to pull Dean out of his grasp and set him ablaze.

But Meg knows instinctively that none of them will sleep tonight, and that Dean won't burn.

### B

She must sleep after all, because she comes round to the glow of sunrise and Sam looming over her, neurotic and babbling, hands out towards Castiel where he stands beside Dean's body.

"Let me just – I don't want Bobby to see him like this. He needs something on him, covering him."

As Meg pushes up to stand, Sam fumbles to pull his t-shirt over his head, and she's taking a moment to admire the ripple of toned muscle when something catches a glint of light in the sun. It reflects off Sam's chest and under his chin, a golden spot, and Castiel frowns and steps closer, his hand flying up to hook a finger under the amulet that hangs on a cord around Sam's neck. As he stares at its strange horns and stylized face, Sam curses, and that can't be good. Meg sighs and moves a few feet away again.

"You *knew*?" Castiel whispers, and his eyes go glassy with tears. "You *knew* he planned this?"

Sam shakes his head rapidly, fumbles out words. "No, Cas, wait a minute, there was no plan, it—"

"Don't lie to me, Sam," Castiel chokes out. "It was planned. He used the sigil against me so I wouldn't stop him. And now this...you didn't have time to take that off him, and I haven't left his body. The only reason you'd have it is if he gave it to you before he did it." He lets the amulet fall from his fingers, backs away unsteadily. "I thought he tricked you too," he mutters dully. "But you *knew* he was leaving me to walk into the fire. You kept saying the words. You let him do it. You *knew*."

Meg watches as Castiel turns toward the ocean with his hands at his head and his hair tufted between his fingers, seemingly unable to process the multitude of betrayals that descend upon him, one upon the other. Meg wonders if he's contemplating not taking them back at all; if he's considering just walking into the sea to drown himself in the dark and the deep, but finally he turns back, his eyes red and watery.

Sam colors, and he doesn't meet the angel's agonized look. He sinks down to his knees and gently lifts his brother up into the crook of his arm, slipping his t-shirt over Dean's head as it lolls against his thigh. The body is still oddly floppy, the primary flaccidity that follows death not having worn off for whatever reason, and Meg drops to her haunches and sticks out a supportive hand herself when it

threatens to slump back onto the sand.

Sam lays his brother back down, picks up the cloth-wrapped sword, and stands. When Castiel makes an inarticulate sound and lurches towards them, there is an instant when Meg wonders if he might intend casting them into the ocean to drown. But he squats and hefts Dean into his arms, eyes flashing.

In the next second, Meg feels freezing cold air blast her face.

### B

First there is the high-altitude oxygen-suck and turbulence of flight, and then there is the sudden impact of terra firma, and there never has been any warning of when to brace for landing, when to bend at the knees so the aftershock of boots smack-banging on solid ground doesn't jar its way up the spine in an uncomfortable grate and shimmy of vertebrae.

Then there is bitter cold against Sam's naked back, the vapor of warm breath in freezing air, and dogs, a mad, frenzied howling and baying, discordant noise that has Sam thinking, *hellhounds*. He swings his head around frantically to see them streaking towards him in the pinkish haze of dawn, a pack of ten or fifteen mutts of various sizes, and over their din he can hear shouting coming from the house.

"Shit," he yelps, and he backs away as Meg dodges around him adroitly and clatters up the porch steps to hammer at the door. Castiel doesn't react, seems rooted to the spot next to Sam, staring into the distance, Dean cradled limp in his arms. Sam crowds into him, pushes him closer to the porch, hisses, "Get up the steps," but he isn't sure if Castiel can really hear him at this point, blockaded behind his grief as he is.

The first of the dogs is nearing the steps now, while Meg still batters her fists on the wood and hollers for entry. It skids to a stop a couple of feet away, panting and snarling, and then it stops, cocks its head in what appears to be a more measured threat assessment, and whines.

"Cheney?" Sam gapes. It is, he's sure of it, but the dog is as skinny as a junkyard cur, its flanks hollow and its ribs visible. The rest of the pack is milling about in the lot, yipping and barking in excitement, but Cheney pads up to Sam and sidles past him, nudges its nose on Castiel's thigh, whines again, and licks Dean's hand where it hangs suspended in mid-air.

Sam tears his eyes away from that, strides the few feet it takes him to get to the door, throwing the sword onto the porch swing so he can thunder both fists on the wood. "Bobby, open up," he says hoarsely, and when he listens he can hear a soft rumble of conversation inside.

"You ain't fooling me."

The response is muffled but it's low and harsh, ramps up to controlled anger as it continues. "Whatever the fuck you are, revenant, tulpa – get off my land. House is warded and we're armed."

Beside Sam, Meg rolls her eyes. "Some welcome party."

But Sam ignores her, because none of this makes sense. He steps back, catches sight of a metallic shine on the inside of the window overlooking the porch. Corrugated aluminum, as far as he can make out in the gloom, and it looks like there are hurricane shutters secured to the inside of the frame. As Sam swings his gaze back out to scope the lot, the feeling of wrongness magnifies in the length of time it takes him to take in the frigid air, the naked trees, the patches of snow and the ice crystals gleaming on the Impala, sitting where Dean left her before they headed out of here just over three weeks ago, when it had been summer.

He turns back to Castiel, asks, "Did you bring us to the right reality?" but the angel stares through him.

Sam drops his gaze to where his brother's head is resting on Castiel's shoulder. Dean's eyelids have slipped open and his stare is fixed and unseeing, and *twelve hours*, Sam finds himself thinking. His brother has been dead for twelve hours, give or take, and even if Dean's body is still lax and floppy where it reclines in Castiel's arms, rigor mortis will set in sooner or later.

Like it had the first time he buried his brother.

And Sam has had enough, and he brings his hands up to his face, covers his eyes and thinks he might just sink down to his ass and sit on the ground until he freezes to death out here.

Or he can handle it, like Dean wanted him to.

He exhales, once, twice. "Come on," he says shortly, and he snags a handful of Castiel's t-shirt at the scruff of his neck, shepherds him down the steps much as he'd guided him up them. The dogs growl, but it seems like Cheney is the boss of them and they follow at a respectful distance as Sam steers Castiel around and onto the path that leads to the back of the property, to the autoshop and the yard full of wrecks. He's thinking logically, he tells himself, as he runs through it all in his mind. Burning his brother would be best, he knows, but he'd have to travel miles to find somewhere he can get a decent pyre going without the local fire department turning up, and—

"Uh-huh."

He wheels around at the crunch of boots on ice behind him. Meg, following along a few feet behind them, and she's eyeing him curiously and nodding.

Thinking out loud, then. Sam clears his throat. "On the other hand, burning him here is out of the question."

She quirks an eyebrow but doesn't comment.

"Well look around you," he says defensively, and he waves his hand haphazardly in the direction they came. "A lot of these junkers are probably still soused in oil and gasoline, and I don't want to burn Bobby's house down." He pauses, thinks darkly that the old bastard might at least show his face if a stray cinder set the roof alight.

*Burial then*, he thinks, and he ignores the way his heart is flopping painfully in his chest, ignores his breathlessness. "We bury him," he declares. "With a shit-ton of wards to make sure he stays put and

nothing can get to him, because fuck knows I don't want anything using his meatsuit to terrorize me if I can help it."

They're coming up to the hangar that houses Bobby's auto shop, and Sam slows Castiel to a halt. "Stay there," he orders, and Castiel dutifully obeys as Sam ponders the canoe Bobby has propped up against the siding. The craft is a two-man job, a twelve-foot long Trapper, and Sam remembers how Dean would slide it in the back of Bobby's truck and drive them to Lake Oahe to camp and fish. He thinks it'll—

*"—fight you, Sammy...it'll fight you. Don't use the reel to pull it in, you need to pump and lift the rod. Keep it tight."*

*Dean's face is all lit up there next to Sam, and he's leaning in now, so the canoe bobs a little bit from side to side. "Is he running?"*

*Sam nods, can feel the fish swimming away with the line, and Dean's hand is steady on his, his brother's fingers nimble on the drag setting.*

*"You want about four pounds on there. If he runs again just let him go, he'll get tired soon enough." A smile splits Dean's face, and it's pleasure, pride. "We'll be frying up bass for dinner, kiddo...and it'll—*

—do, and Sam smiles, thinks Dean would probably appreciate being buried like a Viking in his longship, as he heaves the canoe down.

"Viking burial. Hell, yes." But the seats will get in the way, he realizes. "Chainsaw," he tells Castiel, and he knows Bobby has one hanging up in the shop so he pushes open the door, scrabbles for the light switch. It clicks impotently, and it's still dark in there. "Change the damn light bulb, old man," Sam shouts back towards the house, and he shakes his head. "There's a fucking service pit in there," he spits at Meg, and she looks bemused. "Anyone could fall into it if there are no lights," he elaborates, and she nods slowly.

"Oh. Okay."

It's lucky he knows where the saw is, and Sam picks his way over to it and back carefully. "Last time I used this was when that tree came down, remember?" he reminisces to Castiel, and he chuckles. "Round about the time you learned to bake pie. Maybe you can bake us one after we get this done, because I'm working up a hell of an appetite."

Castiel is mute, but Meg snorts in a disbelieving way.

"What?" Sam demands, and she lifts up her hands in surrender.

"This is clearly your way of dealing, Sam," she says neutrally. "I'm saying nothing."

"You're damn right I'm dealing," he snaps. "Someone has to. I'm handling this. Is anyone else? Well?" After a moment's silence he feels vindicated. "No one is handling this like me."

Meg stares him out, and her scrutiny is measured. "No they aren't," she concedes.

"You're damn right," Sam says again. The adrenaline is buzzing in him now, so that Meg's judgmental expression doesn't really bother him. He feels almost satisfied, triumphant, feels like he's achieving something here. He's *handling it*, even if cold sweat is trickling its clammy way down his spine and he's shivering, and he pulls the starter cord with a hand that he abstractedly notices is shaking. The machine revs throatily, and the canoe seats are no match for the blade, splintering in seconds. Sam sets the chainsaw down and studies the result critically. "You think he'll fit in there, Cas?"

The angel's stare is as blank as it has been since the beach, still as blank as Dean's is, and Sam sighs out his frustration. "One fucking crisis too many and he crumples." He swivels to look at the woman again. "But not me. I'm handling this. Do you think he'll fit in there?"

She nods, very slowly. "And then some."

"But we need some sort of cover, else we might as well just throw the body in the hole as is." Sam rubs at his jaw. "Wood, I need some wood..." Lumber, from when Bobby had him and Dean fix the fence at the back of the lot the summer before last, and it's right where he remembers them stacking it, in the shed.

"I found the shovel and pick ax as well," he celebrates as he emerges with the tools and an armload of the pine planks, and he gestures at the canoe. "Can you haul that along? Just grab the mooring line."

Meg nods, even if it's a little doubtful. She bends to snag the rope, tries the load on for size, and the canoe skids along the frost and ice easily.

"Now we're talking," Sam crows, and he splays his hand out on Castiel's back, pushes the angel into motion. "We'll put him near your Christmas tree," he soothes as Castiel stumbles placidly along just ahead of him. "We dug up the ground there already, so it'll be easier to turn over now. That sound reasonable?"

Still more silence, and it's getting damned annoying. "I'm handling this," Sam chides his friend. "I'm the only one who seems to be fucking handling it. Jesus."

From a few feet further back, over the grind of the boat along the ground, Meg calls Sam's name softly and then slants her eyes back towards the house. "Movement up there."

Sam's head is throbbing, his throat is sore, and swallowing past the dryness and constriction there is getting less and less easy. There is a void in him and he wants a drink, not just beer but something that will burn and corrode his belly, and blur the sharp edges of all this before blasting him to insensibility and dreamless sleep. And he will find it, after he *handles it*, and he forces his exhaustion away. "I'm handling this first," he barks out again decisively, and his voice sounds rough and raw.

The tree is just ahead and Sam doesn't pause as he circles around Castiel, throws the pick ax down, and sets the blade of the shovel against the ground, just like he did when he and his—

—brother have been digging for a half-hour now, and Sam is as unconvinced of the success of this as

*he ever was, finds himself casting dubious looks at the tree even while Dean throws up clods of earth enthusiastically.*

*"Dean, you know that when we plant this thing it'll either die or topple over, don't you? It's the wrong time of year to do this."*

*Dean's eyes are bright, his face somehow younger and less drawn than Sam has seen it in weeks, and he's swinging the pick ax with gusto, putting his back into it and grunting with satisfaction as it spears the icy ground. "It'll work," he says cheerfully. "It's my lucky tree. I want to keep it, so does Cas." He pauses for a moment, straightens up and arches backwards with a groan, rubbing at the small of his back. He glances at his wristwatch, looks over towards the house. "Come on," he urges. "He'll be waking up soon, I want him to see it when he looks out the window."*

*His expression is secretive and pleased when he looks at Sam again, and it reminds Sam that he hovered in the doorway to Bobby's study on his way up to bed Christmas night and caught them, Castiel slumped on Dean's chest as he slept and Dean gazing at him with gentle awe, as if he was sacred. The way Castiel always stares at Dean, Sam realizes, and it hits him that it's because something happened while they were away on their Christmas tree hunt, something that has eased his brother's stress and made him laugh again, made him happy. And that is a good thing. So Sam smiles, settles the blade of the shovel against the earth and—*

*—pushes at it, putting his whole weight on it, but the ground is rock-hard permafrost because somehow it turned into winter in the last week, and Sam still hasn't puzzled his way through that riddle.*

*"Pick ax might be better," he decides, and he throws the shovel down, reaches for the other tool. He ignores the figures that are ranging closer, guns raised, ignores the way Meg stands there with her hand out to catch the flask Bobby throws her, ignores the old man's scathing *have a drink on me*, as he hefts the pick ax and slams it down into the soil. It penetrates the top few inches before it bounces back up, and, "See?" Sam cheers, "now we're getting somewhere."*

*He brings it up and around and down again, again, again, and he pays no mind to the fact that it's Mira standing alongside Bobby, pays no mind to Meg rolling up her sleeve and cutting into her arm with a blade Sam knows is consecrated silver as Mira takes her through the standard tick-list of precautionary tests. He pays no mind to the way Bobby is walking towards Castiel on slow, stiff, unwilling legs, pays no mind to the old man's choked-out denials, pays no mind to the great big, fat tears streaming down Bobby's cheeks as he reaches his hand out to lay it on Dean's face.*

*Sam pays no mind to any of this because he's handling it, burying his brother, but—*

*—there is no time for stitching wounds, and the sheet is stained with rusty brown patches of dried-in blood. The air inside the car is thick with the rank piss-shit odor of violent death, combined with the smell of Sam's own vomit, spattered down his shirt, and with the eye-watering stench of his brother's decomposing flesh, because it's hot and even with the windows open the stink of putrefaction lingers.*

*Bobby hasn't said a word since he fell to his knees beside Sam in the lake of blood Dean made as he bled out. They loaded their burden into the car in dead silence and now they sit there, staring dead ahead, mute but somehow expectant, as if they think Dean will break the hush of their loss by sitting up*



*with a grin and telling them it was a joke.*

*It isn't a joke. Sam really did see his brother torn apart, and he's clamping his hand to his nose at the smell, the smell. And maybe he said it out loud, because Bobby takes the next exit, drives them out into the sticks. They do it there, hammering together strips of the pine they stopped off at Home Depot for before Dean started to rot, and forcing his body down into the box because it is already rigid with cadaveric spasm.*

*Just before Bobby nails down the lid, Sam reaches for the amulet, and then they dig, and the soil is summer soft and breaks easily under the spike of—*

—the pick ax isn't really doing it if Sam is honest, and he throws it down with a curse, twists around and runs a shaking hand through his hair.

"Backhoe," he snaps out at Bobby as the old man shakes his head, but Bobby doesn't seem to notice him. He's talking to Castiel now, his hand on the angel's cheek instead of Dean's, and Castiel is finally focusing on Bobby, and his eyes aren't empty any more: they're aching with hurt, and shock, and disbelief, and he's weeping.

"Backhoe," Sam says again, and he smacks his fist into his opposite palm for emphasis, wonders why he never thought of it earlier. And what do you know, Bobby's mini-Terramite is parked conveniently close, complete with auger and excavator shovel, and Sam trots over there, maneuvers himself into the seat. The keys are right where Bobby always leaves them, and Sam cranks the engine, shakes his head at the labored, unproductive grind that results. The fuel gauge is on zero, and "Fucking typical," he grates out as he slides out of the machine and stalks back over to where Bobby is taking a few steps in his direction.

"Does no one maintain this fucking place any more now Dean is dead?" Sam yells as Bobby comes to a halt, and he stabs viciously back towards the auto shop. "There's no light bulb in there, and it could cause an accident. The place is crawling with wild fucking dogs, and I need to use the fucking backhoe so I can bury my brother, and the fucking needle is on empty."

Bobby's voice is calm and gentle, understanding. "We can find some gas somewhere, Sam, but why don't you let us handle this—"

"No," Sam cuts him off, in a way he knows is damned aggressive, because he sees Bobby flinch and flick his eyes over to Mira as she comes closer. "I'm handling it," he insists, even though he knows he isn't sucking in enough breath to give his voice the force it needs, even though he can feel something inside him start to give way and rip apart. "I'm handling it," he claims, even though he feels weak at the knees and everything is pressing in around him. "I'm handling it," he lies, because it has been a lie all along and he's falling forward into Bobby's arms, and Bobby is collapsing to the ground with him.

"I want to sleep," Sam hears himself choke out. "I don't want to bury my brother. I want to sleep. I want something that'll help me sleep."

Bobby's answer is gruff in Sam's ear, and his words hang suspended in the air like doom. "I'll handle this, son."

There is a shriek, far off and muffled, sobbed-out anguish that penetrates the thick, soft blanket of drugged slumber, and Sam blinks blearily. It's dark, inside and out if the moonlight seeping in through the curtains is anything to go by.

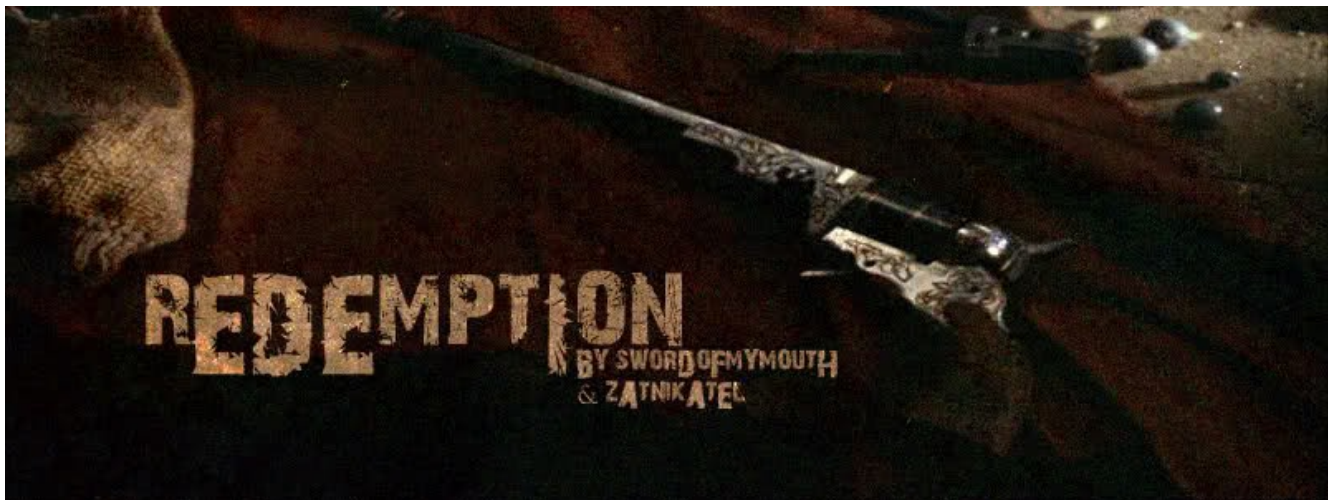
The cry sounds again, different from nightmares, and there is such sorrow and hopelessness in it that Sam can feel tears spring. *Castiel*, and Dean isn't there for the angel now. Sam sighs, starts to shift in the bed and throw off the covers, but there is a warm body stretched up behind him, an arm snaking in to wrap around him and hold him in place, keeping him safe.

"Bobby is taking care of him," Mira whispers. "Now sleep."

She kisses the back of Sam's neck and he remembers that she is the one, and there is a sort of peace in this feeling of security. He turns himself around, pulls her into him, tangles his fingers in her hair. "You're the one," he breathes against her mouth. "You're the one, and that's the last thing I said to my brother. He was happy about it. And I'll be alright."

She kisses him, a brief press of lips. "Sleep, love," she repeats. "We're safe here."

The distant lament lulls Sam back to unconsciousness.



*It should have been me. But Dean went there. He went in my place.*

Bobby jolts back to awareness at seven-fifteen in the morning according to his wristwatch, and he can still hear Castiel sobbing the words out to him before the angel finally loosed his hold on consciousness just after midnight. The torment that led up to that emotional collapse means Bobby isn't surprised to find himself staring at an empty couch, the quilts he placed over Castiel heaped messily on the floor.

He curses himself for the exhaustion that had him lower his guard, yawns because four hours sleep will never be enough, stretches so his back creaks and his shoulders pop. He leans into his hand for a moment then, because he's alone, finally alone, with no one depending on him. "Dean," he whispers. "Son. Goddammit." He sniffs, scrubs at his eyes, grits his teeth and sets his jaw, because he has to hold this together somehow. There can be no climbing into the bottle like he did after New Harmony.

A chill has set in while Bobby dozed in his chair. He pushes up, crosses into the kitchen and bends down to feed a couple of split logs into the stove. As he straightens, he sighs at what he can see through the window.

He waits a few minutes for the old copper kettle on the stovetop to heat up, pours what's left of last night's reheated coffee into the old Thermos flask he takes with him when he's walking the perimeter to check the wards are still intact. He pulls on his jacket, and slings one of the quilts over his shoulder.



The dogs are variously sitting and laying in a haphazard semi-circle around Castiel and a couple of them yip and whine at Bobby's approach, but Castiel is dumb and unreactive as Bobby drapes the quilt around his shoulders and sets the Thermos down at his knee.

"Dean wouldn't want this for you, son," Bobby begins as he lowers himself to sit opposite, and for a moment the tight rein he's keeping on himself flaps loose and he flounders, helpless to stop the sting of tears that threatens. He breathes deep, steadies himself. "You said he took your place, and—"

"Did you know that the word grief comes from the Latin *gravis*, Bobby?" Castiel interrupts him listlessly. "It means heavy."

Bobby didn't know that, but he reasons that he knows grief. He thinks on his own now, *Karen*, and the hurt and loss are still there, buried as deep as he buried her ashes the second time he killed her. "I've been where you are," he says. "Sam has too. This is different for him, he lost his brother, you lost your..." He stops, doesn't even really know how he was going to describe Dean. "But Sam was fixing to marry his girl out in California," he continues awkwardly. "So like I said. We've both been where you are."

Castiel's gaze drifts slowly over to focus on Bobby, and it is as dull and devastated as it was when Bobby took Dean from him and laid him in the grave. "Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows," he murmurs. "According to your William Shakespeare."

In his mind's eye, Bobby sees himself that first time, lost in sorrow that wrapped him as tightly as if he were stitched into his own burial shroud. "Shakespeare was right," he rasps out as Castiel blinks at him. "After my wife...it was like it suffocated me, like it was a blanket of sadness and regret, and it was so thick I couldn't see beyond it. But over time it started to fray, and it wore away in patches. And light came through." He shrugs, a minimal roll of his shoulders. "I guess you could say I adapted."

Castiel flinches, his eyes widen, and the quilt slips away down his arms as he sits up straighter. "My grief is all I have," he reproaches, his voice low. "It is my lifeline to him, and you ask me to set it aside and move on? You think I will gain perspective on my loss? You think I will *adapt*?"

His words are drawn out and deliberate, incongruously polite in the way they always are when Castiel thinks someone is being vaguely stupid, but the air is suddenly charged in a way that makes Bobby pull back involuntarily and defend himself. "No, that's not what I—"

"He is my second self, my soul, and I was designed to be with him. This emptiness I feel can't be filled, ever." Castiel's face is fracturing into lines of utter distress as he cuts Bobby off and keeps going. "My dreams are dead, all of them. My hope is dead. My future is dead."

His loss is stark and appalling in that moment, so much so that it takes Bobby a long few minutes to find a response. "Still and all, I'm here," he says eventually, and he knows it isn't anywhere near adequate. "I'm something you can count on when you're falling apart. And I'm solid."

It's like he never spoke, and Castiel is staring into space again, unseeing as he whispers, "I told him I would always keep him safe."

Bobby feels ill and useless as he pushes up. "You don't sit out here at night," he says quietly. "That's one of the rules." He turns and makes his way back towards the house.

## B

The next time Sam wakes, it's day outside and he's alone in the bed, blankets and quilts piled over him. He huffs out the foggy feeling in his head, turns over onto his back. *My brother is dead*, he thinks, but the recall is dull and blunted.

He can hear noises downstairs, and he pushes up into cold that goosepimples his arms, reminding him

of the odd dissonance of returning to wintry frost. He swings his legs off the bed, stands and shuffles to the window to pull the curtain aside and confirm he didn't imagine it. He didn't – Bobby's lot is patched with snow, much as it was last night, and Sam stares across the piled up junkers to the end, near the fence where his brother's tree stands, sees a lone figure sitting under it.

Swallowing past the sudden constriction in his throat, Sam drags his eyes away and pads out onto the landing to the bathroom, shivering in the chill. He flips the light switch, and nothing, like in the autoshop. *Power cut*, he thinks. Which likely means the well pump isn't working, and sure enough, when he twists the faucet the tap splutters out a few drops of water into his cupped hands before the stream dies away and a distant clanking signals air in the pipes. The dregs are barely enough to splash his face, but it wakes him up enough to clue into the fact that his bladder is about to pop, and he pisses loud and long. There's a bucket of gritty water from Bobby's rain barrel next to the toilet, the usual deal when the pump is down, and he sloshes a couple of gallons into the pan before he makes his way back to the bedroom. There are clean clothes in the bureau where he left them, and he dresses himself as swiftly as he can manage when his body still feels worn out and battered.

Bobby is in the kitchen, stirring a pot of something he's cooking on the old wood stove he fires up any time there's an outage. When he looks back at Sam, his face is pale, and he's red-eyed. "I was about to wake you," he says quietly. "I got some oatmeal on the go."

Sam pulls out the chair, slumps himself down in it. He's starving, he realizes, but he feels oddly disconnected from the gripe and pang of his empty belly. "Power cut?" he asks, nodding at the stove.

"Something like that." Bobby slops the oatmeal out into a bowl, tops it off with some milk from a covered jug. "Fresh from the cow," he says as he sets it down in front of Sam. "I got myself a cow. You'll need to learn how to milk her."

The concept is so out of leftfield that Sam gapes a little as Bobby snags an oven mitt from the countertop so he can slop steaming hot coffee from an old kettle into two mugs. He sits down opposite Sam, slides one of the mugs across. "Coffee. We brew it up a couple of times a day, keep it hot on the stovetop best we can."

It tastes damn good going down, and Sam can already feel the buzz of caffeine in his system as he gulps the hot liquid. He wipes his mouth, eyes Bobby uncertainly. "Dean," he starts, and Bobby visibly winces, lifts his hand.

"I got the jist of it...managed to get some sense out of Cas."

Sam thinks about what went down in the lot after they touched down, and he swallows thickly. "Bobby, I'm sorry about losing it out there—"

"No," Bobby cuts him off, and his eyes turn bleak. "I never want to hear you say you're sorry about that, son. You don't have to be." The words come out of him slowly then, like it hurts him to say them. "I buried Dean. We managed to scavenge some gasoline for the backhoe...laid him in the Trapper, like you wanted. A Viking funeral. You kept saying that's how it should be. He's warded, nothing will get to him."

His brother is dead and under the ground. This loss is final, there is no get-out-of-jail-free card this time, and the reality of it strikes Sam dumb for a moment.

"You alright?" Bobby prods, and he grimaces as Sam looks back up to meet his gaze. "Stupid question," the old man concedes. "But after the last time..."

Bobby lets it hang there, and Sam takes a moment to think about the question, about the last time. There is a hollow feeling inside him, like there was then, and he wonders how he can fill it, how he can restore some semblance of meaning and direction to his life. He didn't manage to before, but maybe this time it will be different, because this time *he* is different. "I'm not alright, Bobby," he replies honestly. "But I think I will be. And I'm not going anywhere this time."

Bobby swallows hard, nods, and then he looks away from Sam for a moment, over towards the window. "Cas is out there. Sat out there all day yesterday too, while you slept. I took a blanket out to him. He won't eat." His voice turns barbed then, the kind of sharp belligerence that Sam knows is a sign the old man is fighting for control of himself. "He's a mess, keeps saying your brother was his second self or some crap like that. I was up all night with him." His tone goes pointed. "We're going to have to watch him."

Sam glances towards the window, but he doesn't want to think about Castiel. "I don't understand why it's so cold," he detours. "It's July."

Bobby rubs at his beard, seems to be selecting his words carefully. "There's things you need to know," he says at last.

It's relatively innocuous and it shouldn't have panic spiking in Sam at all after the last few days, but the weight of it is so damned heavy he can already feel it dragging him even lower than he is. He swallows through his unease and puts on his game-face. "Go on."

"You didn't leave for Rio two weeks ago. You left six months ago. It just turned January."

It isn't really a surprise, because nothing can surprise Sam anymore. He thinks on it, the fact Bobby looks like he's shed twenty pounds, the half-starved dog, the cold. It feels like winter because it is winter, and just like time moved differently in Hell, it moved differently wherever they were.

It's *January*.

He takes it in stride.

Bobby leans over to snag a bottle of Jack from beside the sink as he waits for it to sink in, then, "There's more," he goes on, and he unscrews the cap of the whiskey and tips a finger of the liquor into Sam's coffee. "You'll need it," he responds to Sam's look, and Sam doesn't doubt him.

On the table there is a stack of old newspapers, and Bobby lifts the top one off of the pile. "I kept these," he mutters. "I don't really know why." A minute of quiet passes before he takes a deep breath. "The world you know is gone," he tells Sam, unfolding the newspaper as he speaks. It's the *New York Times*, the entire front page taken up with a picture that is Sam's worst nightmare.



"Thing exploded out of the Pacific like fuckin' Godzilla about three days after you boys did your vanishing act from Easter Island," Bobby continues. "It's been rampaging off and on since then. Whole damn planet has gone to shit. The polar ice cap melted overnight, sea levels have risen by two hundred feet. Anything coastal is underwater... Eastern Seaboard, Los Angeles, San Francisco. Florida's nothing more than a bad memory, and that's just the States. Half of Europe's gone. Millions have drowned." His expression turns even more grim then. "The global economy don't exist anymore, we're in Year Zero. No one even knows where the President is. We're under martial law, but it's anyone's guess who's giving the orders... local militias mainly. It's down to pockets of resistance versus the things out there that are roaming what's left."

Sam stares at the picture, the creature he saw in the cavern caught from a distance on a wide-angle lens, surrounded by a city in flames, and looking like a Harryhausen monster from a B-movie. The Earth died screaming while they were trapped in its vaults, just like Meg said, and there is no taking this in stride; the reality of it is stupefying and the irony is bitter. "We didn't stop it," he whispers.

"Well, it's gone," Bobby replies. "Vanished three days ago, from what I've heard on the CB radio."

*When they did the ritual*, Sam realizes, as he casts his eyes back up. "What things are roaming?" he sidetracks hoarsely, as he tries to round up the brain cells that scattered and fled for the hills at Bobby's revelations.

"You name it," Bobby says. "Demons, vamps, ghouls. Those fish-mutants. Other things that sound like those fire-vampires you ran into in Rhode Island. Dragons, for Christ's sake. Sea serpents. Weird stuff right out of Lovecraft. It's like this gave every damn creature in the book a speedball, they're faster, stronger, smarter. Lot of missing out there... and that's only what we knew about up until telecommunications were cut off. It's speculation, but we're guessing more of those paths opened up while this thing was loose, let every monster and his wife, kids and dog out to party."

Sam swipes a shaking hand through his hair, tries to get his head back in the game. "What about this place, is it safe?"

Bobby grimaces. "Near as we can make out. We're off the beaten track enough not to have pinged anything's radar... not so far, anyway. We've laid wards, and I got a glamour set up to hide the place – go out through the gate and look back, and all you see is mountain. Seems to be keeping things out for now. I have the dogs just in case." He taps his fingers thoughtfully on the tabletop. "What's the deal with the demon? Only she passed all the tests."

Sam had forgotten Meg, and the reminder has him shake his head. "I don't even really know," he says. "That thing had her, it spat her out, and she wasn't a demon anymore."

Bobby's lip curls and his thought process plays out in his expression, punctuated by his recall of Sam's



own murderous rampage through his home, Sam can see the memories there in his eyes as clear as day.

The old man's verdict carries a pointed undertone of suspicion mixed with distaste. "But she's still Meg. And still soulless."

"She's human," Sam notes warily, after a moment's hesitation. "If it's as bad as you say out there, it's in her interest to behave. And I don't know...maybe we need all the humans we can get?" Sam doesn't know if he actually means it or believes it, hasn't really weighed up the pros and cons. Part of him knows it isn't rational given the history, but he remembers the odd respect with which Meg pulled his brother's body out of the way on the beach. And beyond it all, he's overwhelmed, doesn't want to think about hard decisions. "She could be useful. So maybe we just – give her the benefit of the doubt. Like you did me."

After a long stare, Bobby sniffs. "We tattoo her. And she drinks a mug of holy water morning, noon and night. And wherever she sleeps, there's a devil's trap at the doorway just in case." He nods at Sam's forgotten oatmeal then. "Best eat, boy," he chides gruffly. "We can't afford to waste food these days."

It's Bobby's usual mix of stern but caring, and Sam spoons in a couple of mouthfuls obediently, washes it all down with a gulp of tepid coffee-with-a-kick as he marshals his thoughts. He's hungrier than he realized, and he wonders how it is he can be hungry at all when he has no appetite to speak of. As he chews, he contemplates the enormity of what Bobby has told him, spirals around it in ever-decreasing circles until he pulls up on a couple of the smaller details in the big picture, small details that matter even in the face of overwhelming loss. "You said Florida and California are both gone..."

"I got no intel on the Braedens," Bobby confirms somberly. "It happened pretty fast. I did get a message to Garth right after it all blew up...he was outside of Reno, said he'd detour and try to get the Novaks somewhere safe. That's the last I heard from him."

His tone is neutral enough, but Sam can read the subtext. "Don't tell Cas that," he says quietly. "If he asks, we tell him Claire's fine."

Bobby nods, continues more businesslike. "There's practicalities to this life. We run the generator for an hour first thing, so we have some water and power to the house." He points to a row of plastic water bottles lined up on the floor near the door. "Those should get us through the day. We got the cow for milk, some chickens. There's plenty of game, and we run into one of the outlying towns once every couple weeks for supplies. We're stockpiling canned goods, siphoning the gas out of every vehicle we come across."

Sam wonders then about the people, and Bobby continues as if he read his mind.

"Air National Guard mobilized out of Joe Foss Field early on, evacuated most of the townsfolk. We've run into some looters in town, mix of human and not, so stay frosty anywhere outside the gate. And you stay inside the house after sundown, just in case." He pauses, tugs a map out of his vest pocket and spreads it out on the table. "Plan is to move out of here when the weather warms up, head for Montana."

Sam blinks. "What's in Montana that's worth leaving here for if this place is secure?"

"Hunter camp." Bobby points to a circle drawn on the map. "In Swan River wildlife refuge, near Flathead Lake. Big and getting bigger, from what I hear on the CB grapevine. There's more safety in numbers. Tamara and Jonas Harper—"

"Jonas Harper?" Sam interrupts, and Bobby nods.

"He called here right after that thing first appeared, before the phones were knocked out. Said you gave him my number. Showed up about two weeks later with a bunch of kids in tow, and then he and Tamara lit out to Swan River with Missouri, Jody Mills, Marcy Ward, and a few townsfolk that were left."

Sam recalls how capable Harper had been, remembers how the ex-priest had clicked so unexpectedly with Castiel. There's a moment when he wonders if the other man's experience of loss might have been some use, before the thought is superseded by the realization that Bobby is still here, months on. "But you didn't go with them," Sam says, almost to himself. "Or Mira. And you didn't ward against angels, or Cas wouldn't have been able to bring us back."

Bobby huffs a little. "Well, you know. We wanted to wait. Just in case." He stops to take a swig of the whiskey, fixes Sam with bloodshot eyes. "Guess a little part of me never stopped hoping."

Sam smiles weakly. "You didn't seem that hopeful when I was on the other side of the door."

Bobby returns the smile, just about. "Precautions," he concedes. "You were towing a demon. But it's real good to see you, son." His voice catches in his throat as he speaks, and Sam swallows and nods as the old man leans back in his seat. He studies Sam for a long and meaningful moment. "Heading to Montana will mean leaving your brother behind," he goes on carefully. "It'll mean convincing Cas to leave your brother behind." He glances over at the window again and his brow furrows as he swivels back to meet Sam's gaze. "He's been out there since before I got up, and it's barely forty-three degrees. I took some hot coffee out to him, sat there with him as long as I could, but my knees were seizing up."

As a hint, it isn't even in the ballpark of subtle.

## B

The cold outside is still a shock to the system, and Sam has to pull his jacket in tight and wrap his arms around himself as he trudges through the lot, casting a wary eye at the dogs who trot out from between piles of discarded tires and old wrecks to inspect him, hackles raised suspiciously. It occurs to him that he doesn't even know what he's going to say to Castiel after what happened on the beach, and the stunned expression on the angel's face as he took note of the amulet resting on Sam's chest and pieced it all together. As it is, Castiel doesn't acknowledge him as he crunches across the frost-stiffened grass to where the dug-over patch of earth cuts a black scar into the land.

The angel is motionless, a quilt draped loosely around him. His face is ashen, his eyes dull and shadowed, his lips tinged blue in the cold. He has one hand resting on the grave, as if to steady himself. He looks beaten, crushed, destroyed, and Sam's mind is suddenly filled with the horrifying possibility that Castiel might have thrown himself on the pyre if he had burned Dean. *Sati*, they used to call it, and

Sam remembers reading about it in school. For a few ghastly seconds, he can almost smell burning meat and hear the screaming as Castiel immolates himself, and he has to bite down on his knuckle because it makes him think of the Cage. He forces it out of his imagination and his memory, but just as he's opening his mouth to speak, the angel cuts him off flatly.

"Have you come to tell me that I will adapt, Sam? That this will get easier?"

Sam knows the glacier that forms inside the newly bereaved, knows that it is impervious to everything but the time that slowly thaws it, until it melts into tears that fill a dead sea in the hollow space where the iceberg was. The sea is the barrier between two worlds, the world of the dead and the world of living, and crossing it is like traveling to a distant land. Some people sink and drown, some people swim. If you're lucky, you get a lifeboat. Dean had been Sam's lifeboat on that journey after Jess, and Sam doesn't honestly know if he can be Castiel's, but he can try. Ignoring the way his chest tightens, he rallies as best he can. "Maybe you will. Maybe you're stronger than you know, Cas."

"Your brother told me that. And he told me I wasn't alone in the darkness, but I am. I always will be now. I am angry with him for taking himself from me, and I hate him for doing it." Castiel's anguish is suddenly undercut with a simmering fury that makes Sam think unpleasantly of the way he flew apart on the beach, but it switches off as abruptly as it flared, and the glint of rage in his eyes is snuffed out, dissolving their vivid blue back to lifeless gray. "And I am in love with him," he whispers then. "I miss him. I am lonely for him. He was my soul, and I long for him."

After a moment where they stare each other down and Sam searches for something to say, he finally works his throat hard enough to stumble out a response. "It gets bearable," he offers, with as much conviction as he can muster.

"I have seen the Lake of Fire, Sam."

When Sam meets Castiel's gaze again, the angel's eyes are wretched. "In Hell, I passed by an endless, blazing sea fueled by the souls of the damned," he confides, part fearful and part awed. "I saw them caught in the furnace, saw their flesh sear from them so that nothing was left but charred bones. I saw them made whole again, because the Lake of Fire is a place of punishment, a place of perpetual torment, not annihilation. Its heat is unquenchable and hungry, and I saw the souls buffeted high by the flames before they plunged into the inferno again. I heard their despair, and it made me tremble with terror as I fled." He sucks in a shuddering breath. "How can I bear knowing he is there in my place?"

For a second it clouds Sam's mind with doubt that he can get through this himself, much less be there for the angel. Even so, he's dogged, and he steels himself against the knowledge that his brother is screaming in Hell right now. "I know how that feels. He went there for me too."

The reply is a gasp at best. "But why... why? I don't understand why he did it, I don't. *Why?* When it was me who should have been cast down there."

Sam closes his eyes, and Dean is right there in his mind, his eyes earnest, his resolve rock-solid. "The one who begins it is the one who must end it, Cas," he says. "Dean said it was him, said he just knew. Remember his fortune cookie? An enlightened individual is one who knows his own true value. That's what he told me, and he thought it meant something. He thought it meant this."

Castiel makes an incoherent, muffled choking sound, shakes his head. He's weeping, Sam can see the jerky tremor of his shoulders under the quilt. "That's not the only reason why he did it, Cas," he continues softly. "Dean gave you a gift, because he loved you. Please—"

"And angels bring suffering to the ones who love them." Castiel puts his hand up, covers his eyes as he leans into it and goes on. "That's what she told me. Kali. And Gabriel told her, and he was right."

Sam waits a moment, then sits down there next to Castiel. "Dean gave you a gift," he repeats. "Don't waste it like I did. Don't waste his sacrifice. That's no way to honor him." The ground is freezing cold under his ass because it's January, fucking *January*, and Sam's mind is suddenly full of memories. "It's January, did Bobby tell you that?" he muses. "The twenty-fourth is Dean's birthday." He knows it's pretty random, but he keeps going. "We never made a big deal of birthdays. Dean was superstitious about it, thought it was tempting fate." He breaks off to bark out a painful laugh at the irony of the memory. "It was Jess's birthday too. And Dean's deal came due on my birthday, so I guess he was right at that."

Castiel cants his head to look at Sam, and his expression is dazed, his eyes swollen and clouded with pain.

"I know, Cas," Sam says. "I *know*. But don't lose yourself to this. You're the only piece of him I have left."

Castiel holds Sam's gaze, and after a moment of quiet, he shifts closer, so they're shoulder to shoulder. "Anything," he whispers. "I would have done anything for him, anything to keep him from harm."

Sam leans on Castiel, hears himself choke out, "That's how he felt about you," and lets his own tears flow unchecked.

## B

It is January.

The twenty-fourth day of this wretched, savage month is Dean's birthday, and Castiel's mind is a raw, bleeding memory of how he kissed his way up and down Dean's body on the same day twelve months before; of how new they were to each other, of how Dean shivered and moaned underneath him, of how he carded his hands through Castiel's hair and rocked his hips up slowly, gasping and stuttering out nonsense as Castiel swallowed him down and drank from him.

January, *lanuarius*, is named for Janus, the Roman god of beginnings, transitions, and endings; Janus, who had jurisdiction over all doorways, portals and passageways.

And keyholder of the gates of Hell.

January's birthstone is *constancy*.

There is mistletoe growing on Dean's tree, its silver berries glowing eerily in the dark green sprays. Mistletoe is a token of goodwill and friendship, an omen of happiness and good luck.

Castiel notes these things in his journal because they are *significant*.

He doesn't know how or why they are significant, and muses that he may be going mad.

He shows Bobby his notes the next time the old man comes out to sit with him. "These facts are significant," he insists, and he can't shake the feeling that he is running out of time.

"Why, son?" Bobby asks him, with infinite, sad weariness. "Why are they significant?"

Castiel stares at the words he wrote, and feels helpless. "I don't know why," he whispers, and he doesn't tell Bobby that he feels as if some cosmic clock is counting down the days, and that it matters. "But I will know. Soon."

He counts a page for each day between the day they arrived back in Sioux Falls – the fourth day of January, according to Bobby – and the day that will mark Dean's birthday, and at the top of the specified page he writes a reminder to himself. *Today is Dean's birthday.*

"Are you going to do something stupid?" Bobby broaches the matter in his usual blunt way, the words laced with suspicion.

Castiel gazes at him dumbly for a moment. Then, "Define stupid..." he offers.

Bobby's fingers are playing nervously over his chin, tugging at his beard. "I don't want to lose another son," he blurts out roughly, and he stands and stalks back through the lot.

There are no weapons in the house after that, Castiel notices. All of them are gone, *hidden*, the knives and scissors too. It makes him smile secretly to himself because he has his own weapon, one he could use to gut his grace as Rachel once tried to; and there are so many other ways to kill that he knows of, ways Sam and Bobby can't even imagine. But he won't do it, can't do it. He doesn't know why, but he knows his reticence is *significant*.

By the ninth day of January Sam and Bobby are leaving Castiel to his grief, but he knows this doesn't mean they have forgotten him or that they don't care about him; he can see that they do in each careful, assessing look they give him when they think his attention is elsewhere, can hear it in their hushed tones and the abrupt silence when he walks into the room, can feel it in the weight of their distant, attentive stares when he stumbles outside to sit with Dean.

He knows Sam and Bobby hope that embracing his pain will help him define and process his loss, that it will help him adjust to his new reality and reconstruct his life, but he can't make sense of it because he can't comprehend the incomprehensible. They hope that time will heal him, but it has no *meaning*, any of it, because they didn't stop it. The apocalypse happened, and is happening still, and Castiel feels outrage. "Give me a cause," he hollers up at the sky, until his voice fades and dies with the strain of his shouts. "Give me justification." There is no answer, and he thinks to take to the heavens to search for his Father like he did before, but what's left of his grace is stubborn and resistant to his call, and his

wings barely unfurl, scarcely visible and fluttering weakly.

He knows Sam and Bobby hope his pain will mellow as it ages, knows they think his grief is an event that will pass, but Castiel knows it is a state of mind that will always be present, sometimes ebbing, sometimes flowing, but never gone; always persistent and unrelenting. And he invites it to stay, savors it, and mourns with a vigilant, stricken ferocity, mourns until he can hardly breathe with it. Sometimes he wonders absently if this is millennia of sorrow that has built up inside him, sorrow he was not made to feel without the soothing buffer of the Host. He is adrift in it, caught in a current he can't fight, swept and spun along in a torrent of dark water. The structure of his life is gone and he is in a void, without direction except for the tug of Dean that still pulls at his heart. *Creatures like you and I were not built to love as humans do*, Kali had told him, and Castiel's love has broken him just as she said it would; it has cut him open and now that his grace is not strong enough to shield him from emotion, his loss is a wound that gapes and suppurates.

Angels do not weep but Castiel sobs tears he dreams might revive Dean, and as they fall he remembers Meg's words on the beach at R'lyeh, and his guilty denial of the fix she suggested. He remembers the insanity of those first solitary moments of horrified realization, as he screamed out his sorrow and tried to claw the tattered remnants of the smashed body he held together again, tried to stitch it back to life with the frayed threads of his grace even if the result would have been a soulless monster. He wonders what might have happened had his grace been strong enough to do more than repair one broken bone, and he is *tempted*, so tempted that he leans over the dirt to blow out breath that would be life-giving if he was still what he was.

No hand crumbles the soil and breaks through, like it did in Pontiac as he watched from the spaces in between worlds.

The truth of it makes Castiel wail and shriek out sounds he didn't realize he had in him, the destruction and pain Kali spoke of, and he dedicates himself to it, his fury equal to his sadness. "I hate you for leaving me," he hisses, and then, as remorse swells, he presses his muddy hand to his scar and chokes out, "I love you, Dean, please tell me you are there, please..." He projects all of his love and need, waits to feel an answering flare of heat. *Nothing*, and he rubs, scrapes, tears frantically at his skin for hours until it smarts and stings, and his fingers are scrabbling at slick, bloody wounds soiled with the dirt of Dean's grave. The damage makes Castiel feel ill and dizzy with fever but at last, *warmth*, seeping through his palm, and he slumps into it, sobs out his relief and tells himself it is *significant*. The fat white flakes that are drifting down and settling on him are *significant* too. "Dean, look," Castiel whispers through his tears. "The clouds are pregnant with snow."

As the temperature drops, there is the scuff of a boot behind him.

"Please come inside, Cas," Sam says, and when Castiel slants his gaze upwards he can see ice crystals on his own eyelashes.

"I've been trying," he tells Sam, and he is sure to keep his jaw set firm so that Sam will not hear his shivering. "But part of me is gone. I am half a person, Sam, and this life...*all* of this, has no point to it without him. I look, but I see nothing. I hear, but I don't listen. I walk, but I don't want to leave his side. I eat, but I want to starve." He puts his fingers to his neck. "I speak...but there is a scream, stuck right here in my throat. I breathe, but I don't want this breath. My heart beats, but I want it to wither and die.

This hemorrhage inside me can't be staunched, and this curse is not one I can bear."

Sam's face falls, suffused all at once with his own sadness. "I miss him too, Cas," he whispers. "But I'm trying, man. You have to try too, or else what is there?" He sighs, turns and walks back to the house. Mira is waiting on the porch for him and he leans into her and rests his head on her shoulder for a moment, before straightening and draping an arm around her as they disappear through the door. Sam has found someone, Castiel muses, and it makes him glad.

The afternoon drags on in its customary inertia, and the sky is bruised murky when Castiel hears a low snort. He turns again, to see Meg standing behind him this time. "I don't know why you stay," he says tiredly. "There's nothing here for you."

"There's a roof and a full belly if I do my share of the work," she retorts. "Sam and Bobby don't seem to care much as long as I help out and don't get in the way."

She pulls a bottle out of her pocket, unscrews the cap and upends it so that liquid pours out and into the soil, says, "Have a drink on me," and then swallows a mouthful herself. "One of the perks of the Apocalypse is all that free booze at the local liquor store," she tells Castiel, and she grins. "If Dean was here, he'd approve. Though I doubt he'd feel the same way about you sitting out here on his grave all day, blubbering." She considers Castiel for a moment longer. "You know, I thought you had more chutzpah," she mocks. "That's what I liked about you...you found a cause and stuck with it, and when someone knocked you down you got right back up. The little angel that could, taking on all-comers, even the Devil himself. But here you are, picking at your scabs and wallowing in your feelings instead of finding a solution."

"There is no solution," Castiel growls back at her. "I told you back on the island. I can't get there. My grace is too weak now, I'm not strong enough to pass into Hell."

She flaps a dismissive hand. "So find a shortcut. A back door."

Her words remind Castiel that January is named for Janus, who was guardian of all of the doorways in existence, and *it is significant*, he thinks.

"You know there are back doors," she's saying now. "That little gnome-guy used one to get in and pull the spare Winchester out of the Cage. I snuck through one myself after the Winchesters sent me back to Hell."

Castiel knows his face lights up in hope, but she shakes her head. "Sorry, Clarence, no can tell. My memory is pretty fuzzy since my juice got squeezed out of me."

Frustration wells up in Castiel. "The doors between the realms are locked against me now," he snaps. "My grace was the key, and without all of it, I can't—"

"So find a door that isn't locked," she offers. "Or find another key. Or you could always pray. But then again we both know God hasn't been taking your calls for a long time." She pouts. "Nor mine either. I got born again for nothing, so it seems." She sups her liquor, belches, and her vibe is suddenly irritable, her voice cracking as bitter as the coffee Bobby brings out to Castiel three times a day in his Thermos.

"How do you stand it? The fall?"

Castiel cocks his head, studies her curiously, and somewhere in his mind he realizes this is the first time he has really looked at her since R'lyeh. Her face is haggard, her hair stringy, her skin gray, her lips chapped and chewed. She carries the aroma of stale liquor and cigarette smoke with her, and her clothes are filthy.

Despite all evidence to the contrary, Castiel reminds her, "You fell up. In a manner of speaking."

Her smile is too bright, bright enough to be desperate. "It doesn't feel that way."

"Back on the island, you said you thought God had saved you," Castiel points out.

Her expression rearranges itself into something harder, contemptuous. "I said that so you wouldn't kill me." She pauses to wrap her jacket around her, and Castiel sees that she's shivering in the cold. "It doesn't feel like salvation," she murmurs. "It feels more like eternal damnation. To be one of them, to be brought so fucking *low*. I haven't been redeemed, I've been condemned."

She's already turning around, slightly unsteady on her feet; drunk maybe, Castiel assumes. There isn't much else to do. She looks back over her shoulder at him, and she has already cycled to her next mood change, in that way the inebriated do. She smiles, winks, and she's cheerful. "Maybe I need to make the best of it. After all, when one door closes another one opens, isn't that what they say?"

It's an unexpected tangent but Castiel thinks it sounds familiar, and *significant*, so significant that he pulls his journal out of his pocket and writes it in one of the spaces on the same page he has set aside for Dean's birthday, while Meg drifts back towards the house.

*These things are significant:*

*When one door closes another one opens.*

*Find a door that isn't locked.*

*Or find a door you have a key for.*

Castiel studies the words, traces the tip of his finger over them. When one door closes another one opens, and Castiel knows the adage, somehow and from somewhere – and suddenly there it is, in a flash of memory. "It's my fortune," he murmurs to himself. "A prophecy...a sign, it's a sign. But a sign of what, what *door*, where..."

It hits like a lightning bolt: sudden clarity, knowledge that has him gasp at its logic and reason, and its sheer simplicity.

He feels a brief moment of panic...how much time is left? He has lost track, and *tempus-fugit-tempus-fugit*.

He flicks through the pages.



Fourteen days.

A *plan*, he thinks. Tactics, a scheme. He is a battle-hardened strategist, and he will need to be wily, he will need to be devious and shrewd, and he will need to lie.

A sound drifts in through the gaps in Castiel's thoughts, a dreary bellowing. It's the cow, he realizes. It's time for the evening milking, and Bobby is already trudging around the side of the house. Castiel pushes up, waits through the head rush, and then trots off in pursuit. "Wait," he calls, and Bobby swings around, the surprise plain on his face.

Castiel slows to a walk, because he's faint and breathless from the exertion. "I feel better," he announces, and he points to the bucket in Bobby's hand. "I need to feel busy. Will you show me how?"

The old man's expression turns dubious for a moment as he contemplates Castiel, and then his eyes fix on Castiel's hands and his nostrils wrinkle in distaste. "You'll have to scrub those."

Meg is leaning on the side of the shed smoking a cigarette, and she stubs it out as Bobby and Castiel approach. "You look perkier," she notes, and Castiel shrugs.

"Bobby is going to show me how to milk the cow," he tells her, and she brays out a laugh that sends a frisson of annoyance flaring through him. "Its name is Meg," he adds snidely.

### B

Sam gestures out the window at Castiel where he sits on the hood of the Impala, bundled up in a jacket Sam recognizes as being Dean's, scribbling industriously in the journal Dean gave him. "How convinced are you by that?"

Behind him, Mira snorts. "Well, you know him better than me. But I'm not convinced at all."

It's enough to poke Sam's own doubt. Even so, "Bobby thinks he's doing better," he points out.

"Bobby loves him," comes the reply. "Bobby doesn't want to think he might lose another son. So Bobby chooses not to see."

Sam persists. "He's been eating, even helps Bobby milk the cow most evenings. He isn't sitting out *there* all day."

Mira pushes up and pads over to stand next to him, her coffee mug in her hand, and she clicks her tongue against the roof of her mouth. "Back in the old country before we got out, a friend of my mother's thought she saw one of the men who killed her family. But she coped. She was normal, did the normal everyday things. She was calm, so calm we didn't realize what she was planning."

Her tone is crisp, dispassionate, and Sam has learned enough about this woman he loves to know that her detachment is a self-defense mechanism. He slides his eyes sideways at her. "Which was...?"

"To make us think she was fine until my mother's guard lapsed for long enough for her to stop watching the gun." Mira shrugs. "She shot him, then herself." She drains her mug, and her eyes narrow speculatively as she stares through the gap in the curtain. "Can he die?"

Sam knows Castiel can – he saw his friend drowned lifeless, though he has no real idea whether or not another miracle resurrection might have followed even without Jonas Harper's resuscitation skills. "Honest, I don't know," he murmurs. "Maybe. Meg said he told her his grace has pretty much dried up since we got back." He studies Castiel again, the angel's stillness that more than ever seems to be masking something pent-up and colossal even if Castiel claims there is little left of him. "I don't know," he says again, and then, "Bobby hid the guns."

Mira gives him a wry smile. "It's a waste of time to hide them from him, I told Bobby this. If he wants to do it, he'll find a way...and if he doesn't want to do it, then leaving him unarmed puts him at risk, especially if his grace is fading." She leans over to deposit her mug in the sink before her expression turns thoughtful. "Perhaps he won't do it because it's a sin."

Sam winces. "I don't think he believes anymore," he says quietly, from that dark space inside him that doesn't really believe anymore and hasn't for a long time.

Her eyes soften. "I don't think anyone really believes anymore," she says, and then she pauses. "It hasn't been long. He'll find purpose, maybe. And perhaps that will help him. But he should have a weapon in the meantime. Especially with the demon here." Her eyes narrow and she spits out the last with a baleful undercurrent to her tone, because Meg's presence has been a sore point with her since day one.

Sam sighs, keeps his own tone neutral. "She hasn't caused any problems."

"Yet. Look, I get it. She's still here because you and Bobby are—" Mira stops abruptly, continues more carefully after a brief pause. "You have other things on your mind. But this..." She stabs a finger at the window. "A fallen angel mourns his lost grace. How do you know a fallen demon doesn't grieve for her lost taint? She could..." She scrunches up her face, clutches at the thin air with her hand in the way she does when a word doesn't come naturally to her.

"Recidivate," Sam fills in.

Mira snaps her thumb and fingers together with a flourish. "Exactly."

"But Bobby tattooed her," Sam says. "And he's got her glugging holy water three or four times a day."

"She's compromised by her past. She is human, maybe, but she has no soul."

Mira gives him a sidelong glance when she says that, and Sam can see the assessment in the look, the reference to his own past, and his soulless rampage through humanity. "I was given another chance," he says.

"You were resouled," she parries smartly. "But what would have happened otherwise?"

Sam knows the answer to that, saw it in Dean's eyes when his brother stared him down through the hatch in the panic room door, and he knows there would have been no other option, not really. He sighs again, and Mira nudges him.

"You want to see the good," she says softly. "That's who you are. But when you focus too hard on the good, you sometimes look past the bad. We just need to be careful. If you're going out with me today, Castiel needs a weapon. Bobby is old, and slow." She shrugs at the look Sam gives her, snipes affectionately, "It's true," as she shuffles back to her chair and sits down to pull on her boots. "We'll go further this time," she decides. "Bobby says there are farms nearer to Fort Pierre where we might find fuel."

Sam exhales slowly. "What do you think of this plan to head to Montana?"

"I think it's a bad plan," she replies bluntly. "But I also think it's a realistic plan. We can't stay here long-term. There's water there, game too... coalmines and an oil refinery close by for fuel. It's defensible. And there is safety in numbers." She gags dramatically. "Even if the fucking winters will be miserable. So... we keep harvesting fuel. So we don't run out of gas on the road." She pushes up again, stretches. "It's a shame none of us can fly a plane. There must be many abandoned aircraft at Joe Foss Field, and at Glawes too. There's an airport in Kalispell, not far from Flathead Lake."

Sam bounces it back without really thinking. "Dean is afraid of flying." It pulls the breath out of him in a heavy, painful twist of oxygen leaving his lungs, so he has to gasp for his next inhale. Mira doesn't react, her eyes don't flicker away from his as he rides it out, the sheer *lack* of his brother and the knowledge of where Dean is.

"My aunt..." Mira says after a few moments. "Remember I told you about what happened to us?"

At Sam's nod, she continues. "She lived with us always, from when I was a baby. She was my second mother. She died there, in the mud, stripped half-naked. And after the men left, I came out of my hiding place and found her. I walked back into the house. Her cup of tea was there. It was still warm. Her breakfast, half-eaten; her fork with a mouthful of food on it waiting for her to come back inside and complain about being disturbed so early on a Saturday. Her glasses were right where she put them down on the table to go and see what the shouting was. She had been doing a crossword in the newspaper. I could smell her perfume, and she was all around me... her *presence*. Everything was the same, but nothing was. She no longer existed. She was gone."

She clears her throat. "I ate the food from her fork, put my lips where hers had just been. I kept her glasses. The newspaper... it's still in my bag. I look at it, at the ink from her pen, faded now. I imagine her reading the clues, I imagine her smiling as she finds the right word. I look at the paper and if I think hard enough, I can see her writing the words. It's proof that she was here even if the space she filled is empty."

Sam won't give her platitudes, she never has with him, has only put her hands on him and her arms around him as he leans on her. He presses his hand to his chest, feels the hard shape of the amulet under his shirt, proof that Dean was here. "I miss him," he whispers.

"And you always will, *moja ljubav*," Mira says. "There is never enough time, not really." She pauses a beat, then motions her head towards the window. "You should tell him we're heading out. He might worry if he can't find you. You should – you know. Say goodbye."

Any one of them could die, anytime, anywhere. Sam knows that's what she means and he almost smiles at the irony of some things staying the same in this cowardly new world. "Yeah, I'll go see him," he says, and he bends to drop a kiss on Mira's hair as he passes.

Just like every time he steps off of the porch, Sam's focus is drawn to his brother's tree in the near distance, and he has to drag his eyes away from it and dig his fingernails into his palms to distract himself.

Castiel has stopped writing, and he looks up from where he's playing his hand over the metal skin of the car as Sam approaches, and queries, "Do you see this?"

He points at a spot beside his thigh and Sam leans in to examine it, the gleam of silver through a scratch in the finish. For a few seconds he feels helpless, clueless, because this was Dean's department and Sam's big hands never were as dexterous as his brother's when it came to mechanics. "She could rust, I guess," he offers generically. "Bobby probably has something we can use on it."

Castiel frowns. "It wasn't there before." He says it seriously, thoughtfully. "It wasn't there yesterday."

Sam flounders some more. "It's an old car," he notes, and it occurs to him that his brother's baby hasn't been parked there for just over a month at all, because time raced away while they were gone. "We should maybe have Bobby cover her, so—"

"Put your hand on her. Flat. Like this."

Castiel spreads his fingers out, inclines his head like he's listening, like he's fascinated by something. His fingers are dirty, the tips stained and the nails rimmed in a rusty red that is nauseatingly familiar.

"Is that blood on your fingers?" Sam accuses, and he knows he sounds anxious. "That looks like blood."

Castiel nods briefly, and his handwave is matter-of-fact. "The dogs were fighting. I had to intercede."

It's an everyday occurrence, the skinny mutts scrapping noisily somewhere in the lot, and Sam lets it go with a breath of relief for the simple things. "Well, you should wash your hands before you eat with them," he says, as idiotic as he knows it sounds. He puts his own hand down to the metal then, feels the faint heat of the car's winter sun-warmed paintwork against his palm. "Am I looking for something in particular?" he asks.

There is a moment when Castiel studies him with what seems like a touch of his old critical stare, like he's gauging Sam, debating whether to let him into a secret. It's not unlike their first meeting and it catches Sam off-guard, makes him shift uncomfortably before Castiel prompts, "Do you feel anything?"

"Uh..." Sam furrows his brow, baffled. "I need more...what am I—"

"Her grace," Castiel jumps in, and his demeanor is somehow hopeful now. "Look how it shines. I saw it once before, with Dean, just after he brought me back." He stares down again, long fingers playing over the bright streak. "He was here," he murmurs. "He was here, Sam. His hands were here, right where our hands are."

There is never enough time, not really, and the space Dean filled gapes like a crater stretching into infinity. *I miss my brother*, Sam thinks again, but he doesn't say it out loud this time. He leans his butt on the hood of the car for a moment, and maybe he does feel a haphazard buzz of something skittering its way up his spine, or maybe it's just the shudder that seems to have settled permanently in his bones since R'lyeh. "I'm heading out on a supply run with Mira," he diverts. "We might be a couple of days."

"I'll need the weapons bag."

It's casual, but is it too fast? Is it Sam's imagination that the air is suddenly taut and charged? He can't tell; can't tell if Castiel's eyes are shining with the sorrow of unshed tears, or glinting alert and sly.

"My grace is all but gone," the angel goes on. "I need the weapons to protect myself and Bobby if anything should happen."

His tone is oddly placid in comparison to the abrupt vibe of being switched on and psyched up, and it makes Sam even more unsure. He wavers despite the conversation he just had with Mira, and doesn't reply for a moment.

Castiel raises an eyebrow, one corner of his mouth hitching up a little. "I'm not going to do anything stupid, Sam."

He's imperious now, utters it like a challenge, an edge of annoyance cresting the words. They hang there in the quiet, *expectant*, and is that the light of sanity in Castiel's gaze, or is it the gleam of the madman? Sam can't decipher it, and his uncertainty can take it no longer. He makes a decision, knows Bobby will likely whale on him for it. "Come on," he answers on a sigh, and he straightens from where he's been lounging to make his way around to the back of the Impala, Castiel tagging along.

"Hidden in plain sight," Castiel observes wryly, as Sam uses his shirtsleeve to rub at the sigil scrawled on the inside of the trunk once he pops it.

"Bobby figured it was the last place you'd look," Sam confirms, as Castiel reaches for his crossbow and picks his way idly through the guns.

The angel huffs out a brittle, gravel laugh. "I wasn't looking. Like I said, I'm not planning anything stupid."

He focuses square on Sam, and Sam remembers how there was always something fey and tense about Castiel when he lied before, the wary dart of his eyes away to focus on anything but Dean, the miniscule ruffle of his composure that was there and gone so fast Sam had always wondered if he was imagining it. But here and now, Castiel's gaze is unblinking, and his shoulders are relaxed. Even so,

Sam makes it blatant. "You better not be playing me, Cas."

After a patient sigh, Castiel assures him, "I'm not playing you, Sam."

He keeps pointing that flat, relentless stare at Sam, until Sam himself feels self-conscious and his eyes falter. He clears his throat harshly. "Well. See you soon, Cas," he says. "Stay frosty, huh?" And he turns to head for the truck.

## B

The wound on Castiel's chest burns, and it means something.

The scrape on Dean's car is lustrous silver that draws Castiel like a magnet. It's familiar, and it means something.

When one door closes another door opens, and it's Castiel's fortune, and it means something, just as Dean's did.

Castiel writes it all down still, keeping a record he will leave where Sam and Bobby can find it. But his pen moves slower now, and his vision is gritty and blurred. He feels hot even in the winter freeze, but although the blood burns in his veins he finds he shivers.

It's getting darker as dusk approaches. Bobby walks by with the bucket, on his way to milk the cow, Cheney trotting along behind him. He snaps his fingers, *time to go in*. Castiel nods agreeably, but it isn't time to go inside, it's time to leave now that he has what he needs.

It takes one hundred sixty-five Bobby-sized strides to get to the small corral the old man constructed behind the house for his cow, and Castiel counts them down, like he has each time he has accompanied Bobby on this chore so that he could be sure. He knows the cow will be waiting by the gate, that it will amble after Bobby as Bobby walks the twenty steps from the gate to the shack in the corner of the enclosure.

Castiel slides into the Impala, places his journal on the shotgun seat, and counts down the ten minutes it will take Bobby to tether the cow, wash his hands, slosh soapy water on the animal's udders, and make himself comfortable on his milking stool. Now is the precise moment when the cow will bellow out its discomfort and shift on her hooves as Bobby leans in to start stripping out the milk, and Castiel has timed it perfectly, turns the key in the ignition in the same instant he hears the animal's distant bawling.

The engine coughs and fires loudly enough to make him wince, eases off to a throaty purr as Castiel recalls Dean's cursory roadcraft advice, *just point and go, yellow lights mean drive faster*. Brake, shift, just like Dean showed him, and Castiel clicks the lever up into drive, raises his foot so the car grinds forward slowly. *Gas*, and Castiel presses down tentatively on the pedal, feels her muscles coil and tense under him as she creeps forward a little faster. He pushes harder and she snarls keenly as she speeds up. He takes a deep breath and heads through the lot to the gate, where he jolts her to a halt.

He must conserve what is left of his grace for what is to come, so Castiel deals with the padlock

securing the chain around the gate the old-fashioned way, using the lock picks Dean keeps in the glovebox, before steering the car out under the sign and onto the road. Chain rewound around the gate and padlock replaced, he glances over his shoulder just once as he drives away, sees nothing behind him but a cracked, gnarled rock face: the glamour spell Sam and Bobby have spoken of. It reminds Castiel of the mountains in the other worlds and he shivers, tells himself the memory isn't a bad omen.

At the top of the road, Castiel turns left. After a couple of minutes he sees the first signpost, and five minutes after that he's on I-90. It's the same route Dean took to get them to Black Hills national park on their hunt for a Christmas tree, and the road is as deserted as it was back then, the fields that border it draped in spotless ivory just like they were on that journey. Castiel can't see the blacktop that lies beneath the white powder, but he centers the car between the poles that line the road and presses on. Bobby will know he's gone by now, and Castiel can imagine the old man's gruff dismay as he shouts impotently at the empty spot where the car was, can almost hear his enraged yell, *boy, what the hell are you doing?* He knows Bobby will be calling Sam on the CB radio, knows that Sam might already be speeding his way back to Sioux Falls, might even be there by now and following Castiel's trail, driving the truck through the ruts the Impala is cutting into the snow.

The car slides and glides, shimmies and skids on ice, each lurch sending a burning sensation rippling out from Castiel's shredded chest. It's a *sign*, and he rubs at it with his right hand while he steers with his left, feels the oozing, wet warmth of the wound warm his cold-numbered fingers. *Find a door you have a key for*, Meg had said, and she had been flippant and not entirely sober. But it was *significant*, because Castiel knows where there is a door he has a key for.

He keeps heading west until he reaches the split in the road that will take him in a southerly direction, and the big car streaks across the broken land, mile markers and exits flitting by, until the sky darkens and only the sparkle-dance of moonglow on silver lights the way.

The hours split apart around them, the present moment fading into the past as Castiel drives towards his future.

Towards Devil's Gate pass and the abandoned cemetery at the center of Samuel Colt's iron trap.



## B

The railroad crossing where Jake Talley finally succumbed to Azazel's temptation is exactly where Carver Edlund's gospels said it would be, and Castiel slows the Impala down as she crests the raised iron rails, stares ahead at empty prairie land. *Fifty miles thataway*, Azazel had told the luckless Talley, and a knot of anticipation is tying itself ever tighter inside Castiel as he forges on through the snow.

The graveyard is colorless and desolate, iron gate hanging on its frame, dead and diseased trees pointing hopelessly up at the sky. The crypt is dead center, incongruously grand and stately among the weathered stone monuments and worn, lopsided wooden crosses that are scattered around it, and Castiel eyes it curiously as he pushes up out of the driver's seat. There is no sign of it ever having opened, but Castiel knows that it did, knows that it loosed a multitude of demons into the world. He knows that John Winchester emerged through it too, knows that Azazel met his end here; and there to his left is the solid bulk of the monument Dean slumped against while he raised the same gun Castiel has gripped in his fist.

He crosses to stand in front of the tomb. Its front is ornate, the sheen of the inlaid silver devil's trap that seals it bright in the pearly gray of dawn, and its sheer presence is forbidding, but Castiel is undeterred. He sinks down to kneel in front of the crypt, placing the Colt on the earth beside him. He brushes dirt and leaves away from the step that forms the threshold to Hell, slips Dean's jacket down off of his shoulders, feeling the frigid air bite into the skin of his arms. He breathes deep and steady as he reaches inside himself, drawing on his grace as economically as he can. His sword coalesces with an effort that leaves him gasping and off-balance for a full minute. He braces himself on the ground with one hand as he reels and blinks through the chaotic whirl of trees and monuments, until the world rights itself again, and then he doesn't hesitate any longer.

He slices his blade across the flesh of his inner arm so that blood shining luminous with grace wells up and oozes thickly through the lips of the slash. He whispers out the words of the ritual that will hold the horrors of the Pit inside the open gate as he journeys, daubing sigils and runes across the step, the



*Claves Angelicae*: the forty-eight angelic keys. It's powerful magic, old magic, magic with a *k*; the magic of the *Liber Logaeth*, the Book of the Speech of God, and nothing demonic will get past the barrier the symbols form.

Castiel pushes up, the Colt gripped tight in his fist, ignoring the bloody rivulets that trickle down his wrist and hand and drip thickly from his fingertips.

For a moment he stares at the devil's trap, but he feels no doubt. *It should have been me*, he thinks.

He reaches to slot the gun into the keyhole, turns it sharply right, and steps back.

For a moment there is only stillness and silence. And then Castiel hears it: the creak of gears shifting laboriously into a rhythm, a clanking as the inner and outer circles of the seal begin to turn, slow at first and then more rapidly. Its sound is a clarion call, he knows, and already he can hear the far-off whisper of realization, a susurrant that builds to a doubtful whine and then a gleeful howl as the ground underneath him begins to tremble with the restless anticipation of damned souls impatient to escape their prison.

Gripping the hilt of his sword even tighter, Castiel backs away slowly as the doors begin to grind open. He can already smell the fetid stench he remembers so well seeping out through the gap, the smell of burning meat; and the ashy heat of demons bombarding the portal blasts out at him, sending him reeling back against the Impala. Their screech and cry is earsplitting now, and Castiel raises his sword, braces himself to take on any that might breach the portal as the clamor becomes a fretful wail of disappointment and rage when they are thwarted by the runes.

They mill about aimlessly on the other side for long moments, plumes and puffs of oily black smoke that leap and billow, before they start to recede. As they clear, Castiel expects to see what the Winchesters saw when they stared into the abyss.

It isn't what the Winchesters saw, not according to the Prophet's version of events.

It isn't what Castiel remembers either, not from the first time he descended to redeem the Righteous Man, or the second time he ranged even deeper, to the solitary outer darkness where the Cage was.

Neither is it the same as Crowley's remodeled *foyer*, the bland front entrance to the demon's take-a-number-and-step-right-up torture chamber, with its endless waiting line.

Beyond the yawning maw of the portal there is a cracked and broken black top, bisected by a double yellow line. It stretches into infinity, into a far-off point on a sunset-red horizon, like the many highways Castiel has driven with the Winchesters in the Impala. Almost as he thinks it, he feels the nudge of the car on his thigh, places his hand on her to soothe her. And there it is again, that low-level current that blazes up through his fingers and casts his skin silvery-blue, and it is *significant*; and only now, as he focuses back on the road to nowhere, the road to *somewhere*, does he begin to understand what it might mean.

"You want to come with me to bring him home," Castiel murmurs, and he can feel her sigh under his palm. He smiles, remembers Dean's advice, *treat my baby right, and she'll be real good to you*. He dips

his fingers in the blood on his arm, methodically inscribes the angelic keys on the metal shell of the car, a daisy chain of symbols to shield her as they travel. Once done, he swallows, looks up at the big sky. "You brought me back twice," he says. "Let it be for this. Please."

Castiel steps back up to the open mausoleum, reaches to pull the Colt out of the keyhole, and wedges it into the waistband of his jeans as he heads back to slide into the car. He slams the door, cranks her up, drowns out any trepidation with the rev of the engine as he pushes his foot against the pedal and is rewarded with a satisfying growl. The mark on his chest burns in reply, and when he rubs his hand over it, he thinks he feels it like embers beneath his skin. *Son, don't do this*, he can hear in his head, and it's as if Bobby is right next to him, but when he glances down he sees a red outline, a fiery glow that seeps out through the cotton of his t-shirt in the shape of Dean's handprint. "I'm coming, Dean," he breathes, and he ignores the howled chorus of distant hellhounds.

Castiel remembers how he folded his wings tight to himself and dove into the inferno before, he and his brothers in attack formation, accelerating arrow-straight and beset by demons. And surely this moment of passing from world to underworld again should be equally climactic even if his mode of transport is infinitely more mundane, but it's no different than going through a highway interchange at a toll booth, as the Impala slips effortlessly through a slot she is too wide to fit and her tires crunch across the border into the landscape of Hell.

Up closer the route looks like nothing more than a dilapidated road with weeds growing up through its cracks, and as he looks ahead of him Castiel raises his hand to his mouth, chews meditatively on a knuckle. He knows that human philosophers have long dwelt on the concept of Hell, pondered on what its perceived quality is, theorized over whether it is literal or whether it is a state of consciousness, a spiritual condition caused by separation from God. But its fires are real and eternal, he has felt them himself. This is just the beginning, he knows. He must push further, and perhaps in a while he will be surrounded by all the familiar mosaics of Hell: the fire, the brimstone, the *usual*. Or was that simply the Hell he knew as an angel, instead of the hybrid he is now?

Too much thinking, and he shakes his head, punches the radio, and static comes in. "No," he decides sharply, because he wants music to drown out his thoughts and he wants it now, *dammit*.

He thumps the dashboard with a fist, and suddenly the radio chirrup and a transmission breaks through. According to Bobby there hasn't been radio since things fell apart and Castiel knows there isn't radio in Hell, even if Crowley's piped *Blue Danube* might still be playing as the late, unlamented King's endless line shuffles forward before looping back on itself. And that wasn't even proper radio, not like the station that Dean tunes into when he's holed up at the back of Singer Salvage with the guts of a classic car scattered around him on the floor of Bobby's auto shop, sorting out replacement parts for his baby.

No, they don't have that kind of radio in Hell.

Only now it seems they do, as a voice filters in through the static and magnifies.

Castiel doesn't know the song or the singer, but he lets it play because it sounds like the kind of thing Dean would listen to during their long drives through rustbelt cities and one-horse towns, through suburbs and abandoned places back in the world; along roads just like this one, because they all look

the same at midnight, under the silver of moonglow. There's an hour when the dew hits and mist creeps up from the ground, and this is what Castiel drives through now, taking his time at a sedate forty miles per hour. He can make out stars revolving above through the trees, and from time to time he thinks he sees a face in the mist, a figure, but just as he draws closer it dissipates like a mirage.

He keeps his hands steady on the wheel and time stretches on like the road, and the road is long, so long that Castiel believes hours might pass while the radio plays in the background of the humming engine with the needle balanced over the red line, reading E. He doesn't know how the car keeps driving. It just does.

He finds himself falling asleep behind the wheel, thinks, *highway hypnosis*, and recalls Dean telling him about it on a long, meandering drive through deep-south humidity, Sam tucked in the backseat, snoring and drooling onto the leather.

*Between the vibration of the engine and that syncopated line, you just fall asleep*, Dean warns him again inside his head. *So you have to be smarter than that, keep yourself aware, awake. Just that moment of comfort can cost you everything.*

Castiel rolls down the window to feel the bite of wind in his face, and he turns the music up. He remembers what Dean taught him but he wonders if any of it is really relevant in this place where the road doesn't end, doesn't curve, doesn't meet with crossroads or intersections, but just goes on, and on, and on.

From dim memory, Castiel can hear the ghosts of conversations past, voices traded during midnight rides between cities and motels, Dean earnest, because it meant something to him, saving people, hunting things.

*You feel yourself drifting. You want to pull over and grab some sleep and yeah, sometimes that's what we do. But I don't like that. Someone's waiting for us, you know? There's families out there, people in need, and if we don't get there, they could be on some vamp's dinner menu. Or a werewolf's. Or just a garden-variety haunting.*

Castiel supplies his part of the conversation softly, like he had back then. "How do you deal with it?"

*Don't fall asleep. Don't stop. Don't give up. I keep the faces of everyone I ever helped on a hunt with me. They keep me on the road.*

Castiel reaches up to adjust the rearview mirror and he catches the familiar pattern of leather seating and then the smooth lines of Dean's shirt, his muscles flattening the fabric with their pressure and his easy slouch as he sinks into the vintage upholstery. He occupies it like he was born in the car. *Just keep your eyes on the road*, he instructs with a casual wave of his hand, as he scans the verge that races past. *I got it under control. This is the way through.*

Castiel fakes a derisive snort. "Do you have a road map for Hell back there?"

Dean smiles, the slow curl of his lips sensuous, and his eyes are iridescent in the pale orange sodium lights that dot the endless highway.

*I can do you one better, buddy boy. We can try GPS.*

Castiel smiles back, whispers, "We aren't in the world anymore, Dean."

Dean winks, a fold of green. *Not the Global Positioning System. Get with the program, sport. It's the Gabriel Positioning System down here.*

Castiel inhales, and only now does he realize just how heavy the atmosphere of comfort that surrounds Dean is; how even Dean's phantom presence arouses every latent memory of love, and joy, and ease, even as it scores him through with grief. Heat blazes out from the scar on his chest and he presses his hand to it, stifles a cry as another familiar voice echoes deep inside his head, calling his name. It sounds like Sam but Sam isn't here, and Castiel finds it easy to ignore because Dean's face is rippling like water swirling down a drain, and now Gabriel's face is in its place, his eyes crinkling and his grin crooked and snarky. In his hand is a Pepsi can, and Castiel can make out the beads of condensation dripping onto his fingers where he grips it.

*What, you didn't miss me, brother?* Gabriel taunts, and there in the background is Sam again, *Cas, come on*, almost as if he means to ground Castiel in reality.

"You're not real," Castiel says, his disappointment welling bitterly. "Neither was Dean. It's just...Hell. Like echoes of all of you. Like ghosts in a haunted house."

*We could be real...*

"Or you could be here to lead me astray."

*Clever boy!* his brother declares with a wink. *But why on earth would we do that, Cas? I mean, we don't want you to leave. We want you to stay. Forever and ever. And wasn't that the plan from the get-go? You were supposed to be here with the rest of us. Your smackdown with the Beast was supposed to be a one way voyage on Lake of Fire Cruises, but you let boy-hero take the fall.*

The radio crackles through *Paint It Black*, and then the *Keith fuckin' Richards, hell yeah* guitar riff fades into a sugar-sweet harmony, *she's got a ticket to ride, and she don't care*, before static crackles again. Castiel hisses, turns the dial left and right, then left again, until the volume peeters out and all they are left with is the faint rumble of the engine and the vibration of the struts as they float aimlessly across the blacktop like a ship adrift at sea. Behind him, his brother scoffs again, *are those tears?* and Castiel's frustration sears like inflammation, the patience he used to know so well and exercise with Dean lost somewhere on this odyssey. "I'm not human, not completely," he snaps, although he's not entirely sure if he's speaking to himself or the grinning apparition in the back seat. He swabs the wetness away from his eyes. "I don't cry. So if you've come for tears, go somewhere else."

*Oh, you'll cry*, Gabriel assures him, and his jocularly is gone. *Especially if you think you can use it to put out a fire. A lake full of it.* He leans back in the seat and laces his hands behind the back of his neck, as though he's reclining in a hammock with an ice-cold six pack at his feet, and he smirks. *What is your plan, anyway short-bus? Don't you know how this road works?*

"You're not real," Castiel persists. "I'm in the car alone and I'm arguing with myself."

*I thought that was Sam's job*, Gabriel points out, and suddenly his face is a twisting mire of flesh tones and facial structures, and his face pulls into Sam's familiar expression of gentle compassion, his listening face, the deep hazel of his eyes softening with every tale of woe, as though he takes on each stranger's sorrow for his own. Castiel wonders if that was a quality burned into him from the night his mother died onward, for all of time, as Sam's lips form words, pleading, *Cas, come on, man*.

Castiel pulls his eyes away from the mirror. "You're not Sam, either."

*Well, what's a guy gotta do to get you to trust him?*

Not-Sam shifts so he sits up in the seat, and he laces the fingers of both hands over his heart as he begins to sing, an alto of surprising strength, *close your eyes, give me your hand, darling, can you feel my heart beating? Do you understand, do you feel the same? Am I only dreaming, or is this burning—*

Caught out, and Castiel is triumphant. "Dean doesn't like that song, and Sam has better taste."

*Don't talk shit about the Bangles, idjit!*

Sam's long hair is gone, eyes shadowed by a threadbare baseball cap whose team insignia has faded beneath the force of a South Dakota sun. Bobby is as weathered as the tombstones that jutted haphazardly out of the soil in Colt's cemetery, sand-blasted by years of hunting, and he's typically stern and forbidding as he waggles a finger and lectures Castiel.

*Dean used to sing that song to Sam to make him laugh and forget about what dear old sainted John Winchester was up to in the middle of the night with a forty-five and a prayer.*

"Actually, that sounds like something Dean would do," Castiel admits.

*Maybe he'd tell you himself, but you won't turn up the volume.*

"Is that supposed to be a hint?"

Bobby sighs and then winks out like a light.

The radio snaps on again, and suddenly a woman is singing about clouds in her coffee, clouds in her coffee, and how Castiel is so vain he probably thinks the song is about him. *It's a distraction*, he tells himself; all of it is, distractions he doesn't need. Or perhaps this is a Hell of his own making, like those philosophers posited, a change in perception fueled by his waning grace and impending humanity. How many transmutations will it take, from angel to human and back again, from angel to God to this mongrel he is now, before the world as he knows it begins to look unrecognizable, before *he* is unrecognizable? *Will Dean know it's me?* he thinks frantically, and the hard smack of his palm onto his scar is purely instinctive.

When Castiel's fingers fall into the familiar grooves of Dean's handprint, he thinks that for an instant the thrum of the road and this eternal midnight falter. There is a flash like a spark that reminds him of

that night in Pontiac, when he strode through the barn doors and the lights blew out above him in a thousand pinpricks of light. But then there is nothing but a brief flare of flame that erupts between his fingertips before it dies again, and if there was a connection between him and Dean, screaming for Castiel from the heart of Hell, it is gone.

Castiel chokes out terror, has to force himself to breathe deep and keep his free hand steady on the wheel and his eyes on the road. *Not now, soldier*, Balthazar breathes in his ear, for he is a traitor too and he burns with Dean in the Lake of Fire. *You don't leave anyone behind*. Castiel shakes his brother out of his head, focuses on his quest, but the fear that he might not succeed still seethes fitfully inside him. "It doesn't work," he whispers. "Dean, the link doesn't work. How am I going to find you if it doesn't work?"

He turns on the high beams as he careens along, pushes the pedal down until it grinds into the floor. The Impala races faster, Castiel's hands tighten on the wheel, and somewhere in this exhausting anxiety he drifts without thought as the hours turn into days.

### B

Castiel sees the boy standing on the roadside at the last minute and almost clips him as he hauls the steering wheel to his left so that the big car fishtails clumsily, her tires tearing up grass and dirt as she skids to a halt. He peers up at the rearview mirror as the boy turns around, and he gasps, his eyes widening with his astonishment.

He's already leaning over to pull the handle and push open the door as the boy comes trotting up the shoulder, and as he draws close Castiel can make out the awkward sway of his arms poking through the sleeves of his black shirt and grass stains on a pair of old, unwashed jeans. He grabs the open door with one hand, stares in, and what Castiel sees steals his breath away.

"Dean," he croaks, his voice sandpaper rough because his throat has seized up from the long weeks of silence since Bobby flickered and vanished.

"Nope. I'm Vassago," the boy answers as he all but dives in, gangling arms and legs everywhere at once. He slides across the leather and looks over the interior of the car as though he's inspecting it to his satisfaction.

Castiel hasn't seen Dean for all the long weeks since he first drove the Impala through the portal, but he has known Dean down through his skin to his very molecules, through every hidden memory and every thought, both intimate and objective, and the teenager sitting beside him in the car is Dean. There's no mistaking it, even though the name he offers rings a distant alarm bell that clangs *not*, and even though Castiel can vaguely hear Sam's voice of reason cutting through it all from far away, *Dean isn't here, Cas...*

"Word is you're looking for this Dean guy," Vassago offers nonchalantly, and he winks in a way that stabs Castiel in the heart as he reaches across to clunk the passenger door shut.

"Have you seen him?" Castiel manages. "Do you know where he is?"

Vassago snorts. "Don't you know?"

*Riddles*, and Castiel blinks. "No. Where is he? Please...tell me."

"Look," Vassago says, and he sidles closer to Castiel with a glance around the wilderness, as though someone might overhear them, before he leans in conspiratorially. "Did you think to check the car before you started riding off every which way and getting your damn fool self lost?"

Castiel frowns, searches the boy's green eyes, with their stitchings of brown, and he is so hungry to find Dean's soul shining inside them that he has to make himself pull back and consider that what he is dealing with is not human. This thing beside him in the car is playing on his heartstrings by wearing the face of someone he loves so fiercely that he will lose all sense of purpose and direction if he doesn't make an effort to remain detached. But oh, it is so hard. "Come on," he dares finally. "I have no patience for your games."

After a snort, the boy rolls his eyes. "Jeez, try the trunk, man. Isn't that where Dean keeps everything he needs?"

Castiel opens the door in an unthinking, desperate scramble, and pounds down the asphalt. The trunk lid creaks loudly as it yawns wide open, and he thinks abstractedly that Dean would grease the hinges, that they will do it together when they get back. Moonlight fills the trunk and plays across the usual weapons bag, still open from when Castiel retrieved the Colt, and Castiel stares into it as though something will miraculously reveal itself.

Nothing does.

He scrubs a hand through his hair, yells, "There's nothing here!" and his voice echoes mockingly, *nothing-nothing-nothing*, so that he snaps his head around and gazes out across the flatlands.

The Impala's headlights cast an eerie beam across the landscape, barren but for deformed trees whose branches twist and gnarl to form sigils against a glutinous mist. Outside of the safe confines of the car, this new version of Hell is even more desolate and hostile, and Castiel senses the malevolence of the place pressing in against him. He can feel it sliding across his bare arms, feel its cold caress at the nape of his neck where Dean likes to nuzzle warmth into his skin, feel it seeping into his pores, a creeping infection that might taint him forever now that the immunity of his grace is weakened. He has fought on myriad fields of glory through his long existence, but this place is ancient, frigid evil, and its chill sends dread coursing through him, making him long for the warm, red glow of torture he remembers from before. And *move*, he needs to keep moving and not stare into the wasteland, but when he tears his eyes away from it and steps to the side of the car to squint in through the quarterlight window and repeat, "There's nothing here," the shotgun seat is empty.

In the next second Castiel hears the crunch of a boot on a scree of stone and grit, turns to find that Vassago is behind him. And child-Dean is gone, replaced by a hulking giant, rake-thin and sinewy, with onyx eyes and skin like coffee with a splash of half and half.

The giant grins, flashing a row of sharpened teeth. "There will be," he says, and his fist is the last thing

Castiel sees.

## B

Castiel comes round to the taste of blood in his mouth, and it is half so bitter as the aftertaste of regret. He thinks it was a stupid trick, a ruse he should have seen coming a mile away; thinks that Dean would have known.

He jounces with every imperfection in the pavement, hears the rush of momentum beneath him as the wheels press hot rubber over ground, and an array of weapons clunking against each other under the false bottom of the trunk and inside the weapons duffel he is curled against. He has an arsenal at his disposal and no way to reach it, tied and trussed as he is, like a pig ready to be spit-roasted.

He strains at the cords that wind around his wrists and hands and cut cruelly into his flesh, mouths at the duct tape Vassago slapped over his face and tastes its bitter glue with a curse. *How long have we been on this road?* he thinks desperately, as he squirms against the rough surface of the trunk interior.

*How much time has passed?*

He thinks that it has been days.

He suspects that it could be weeks.

He worries that it could be months.

"Try years!" Vassago sings out from the front, and his voice slithers silkily through the back of the bench seat like a snake in the grass, before the sound of radio static snaps on and grows louder, cutting in and out through snatches of music until it settles and the sound of a guitar riff filters through to the trunk.

Castiel hears it only vaguely, beguiled by the notion that years might have passed for him down here even though it should come as no surprise after the four decades he spent here the first time, decades that added up to mere months back in the world. The second time he had been newly minted and stronger, raised at the hand of God, or so he thought, and the journey to the Cage and back had taken much less time.

He finds himself pondering his aimless drift through the wasteland before the demon waylaid him, and he considers his perception that this is not the Hell he knows, that this Hell is different. It has been stripped bare in the absence of Lilith and Alastair, without Crowley's iron hand at the tiller and the threat of Lucifer's return looming large. This Hell has been left to decay and ruin, and its miasma of atrophy befuddles and confounds his mind, spins his sense of direction until he has lost his true north. Everything is ephemeral, even memories he thought would be etched in stone. What is the name of the old man whose eyes soften when he thinks Castiel isn't looking, the man who offered him a home and calls him *son*, and what is the name of the man's dog? Who is the child he can see in his mind's eye, the girl with eyes like his own? And who is the pearl-skinned demon he kissed despite being repulsed by the misshapen, unholy fiend that roiled beneath her human veneer, the one who called him... *what did*



*she call him?* Not his name, and that seems fitting because he can't recall what her name is.

They are important, he knows, but their identities are lost to him.

If he spent enough time here, trapped in this place, would he soon forget Sam too?

And would he forget *Dean*, the tidal pull of him, the longing of both separation *and* proximity? Would he forget the stolen kisses, the torrid nights, the way his bold, brash lover becomes something soft and tender in the dark, the way he gazes at Castiel through half-lidded, lust-dazed eyes as he worships him with tongue, teeth, trailing hands and teasing fingertips? Would he forget that Dean loves him, would he forget how Dean felt under him and around him as Castiel claimed him for his own?

Castiel suspects that given enough time, nothing withstands the amnesiac eternity that shapes this new Hell.

*Years, has it been years?* he marvels again, and he finds himself wondering why he came at all. He tries to navigate through this dementia that has cast his recollection in murky fog, searches through the ragged holes in his memory to find the reason for his quest.

*I'm looking*, he thinks. *I'm looking... looking for...*

And he spends a long time trying to recall the name of the thing he lost that he wanted back so badly, but can no longer remember.



The road goes on. And on. And *on*.

There is a wound on Castiel's chest that burns, and when he looks down he can see it glowing red through his t-shirt, but he doesn't know how it got there or what it means. When he seeks within himself for the remaining shreds of his grace to aid him, there is no weight to his light and energy; both are spent, dissipated, leaking from him like marrow from a smashed bone. Whatever is left isn't substance enough to fight back with, so he lets go with a sigh, starts to sing to himself softly, a song someone he can't put a name or face to taught him, *hey Jude, don't make it bad, take a sad song and make it better*, as he waits for the road to end.

And then an incredible thing happens.

The car stops.

Castiel wriggles like a worm, all invertebrate muscle and no bones or joints, twisting onto his back so he faces the opening of the trunk, and in his head he is going over every scenario, how to thrust his bound legs out heels-first, into Vassago's face to knock him backwards; how he will scramble to escape and cut himself free. Will he have to kill Vassago first? Castiel digs in with his awkward, clasped, immobile hands and listens, breathes in the Impala's sweat, and it smells like motor oil and gasoline.

A door opens and slams closed. Castiel hears muffled speech and there is more than one voice, the lilt of a woman speaking, and then another. He lists to the side, pushing his ear against the metal of the wheel well. The voices are low but he recognizes Vassago's baritone, and then an uptick in the conversation as it becomes more heated. Words filter through.

"Tweedledemon, I suggest you get back to wherever you came from—"

"Oooh, he's gettin' testy now."

"I'm the crown prince of twenty-six legions of demons, Tweedledumber. This means I'm not to be trifled with."

"You used to be a nice guy, Vassago. I know that ain't your car."

"I bought it. Fair and square."

Castiel kicks out and screams as best he can behind the barrier of duct tape. He tastes plastic as he kicks again, all feet and knees crashing against metal, until he pauses and listens to the silence from outside.

"Oh, that? That's nothing."

"Sounds like something, all right. You got contraband? You know we can't let you smuggle, Vassago. Rules is rules."

Vassago clears his throat loudly. "You really ought to treat me with more respect than that."

"We don't trust rats. And we know you dabble with those mudmonkey souls more than you should. So why don't you open the trunk and show us what you got?"

Castiel stills and listens to the scuffle and scrape of feet over gravel and dirt. The footsteps pause before the trunk catch, and he hears the sound of Vassago fumbling with the keys, and then the grating sound of metal shifting as the trunk opens.

Moonlight pours in, and Castiel scents brimstone on the air, but he has only a second to appreciate the view of the night stars and the inverted Milky Way scattered above before Vassago stands above him, bisecting his view of the pinprick lights and the sinister forest surrounding them. Beyond Vassago are the twisted faces of low-grade demons, their darkened skin bubbled and raw in their true forms, the withered remains of the humans they began life as barely apparent.

Castiel cries out behind his duct tape gag, cringing deeper into the trunk.

"Lookit that shit! He's smuggling a fuckin' angel in! Holy shit..."

Vassago does a funny thing, then. He winks at Castiel, his eyes flaring yellow for a fraction of a second. Before Tweedledemon and Tweedledumber can stop their hoots of excitement at discovering angel contraband in the back of a Chevy Impala, Vassago swiftly reaches down a hand to Castiel's

lower back. He whips it up again grasping the Colt, snapping back the hammer before he turns and sets the butt of the gun over his left forearm to steady his aim. He shoots once, twice. The first demon goes down with the same vapid expression of delight on his face as the woman demon beside him. She has the sense to show fear before the bullet plugs her square between the eyes, and then they erupt into flame, dispersing their energy into the night.

Vassago huffs with annoyance and looks down at the Colt before he returns to staring at Castiel. His face is neutral, his eyes still burning sulfur yellow.

"You understand the kind of trouble we're in?" he says, not unkindly. "Now you just sit tight, kiddo. Hell ain't what it used to be. It *feels*. It *senses*. Especially bright ones like you. It *knows* you're somewhere around here, so I need you to be quiet inside, okay? Quiet, deep down. Don't be thinking about your sweetheart, you dig? You think too loud, and Hell will find you. And when Hell finds you, you don't get out. Upstarts like Crowley and even the grand master badass Lucy thought they had ownership rights on Hell, but you can't own what enslaves you. So...you be quiet for me, pretty little angel. Huh?"

Castiel wonders if this is a demon who has been tortured for so long he has gone mad, but his yellow eyes give all the indication Castiel needs to know that this is an old one, as old as Azazel and maybe even older. *Azazel?* he muses then. *Where do I know that name from?* And the name Vassago tolls that same warning klaxon it did before, but Castiel is so tired he can't remember where he heard it, and most of all he can't remember the one he swore he would never forget.

"Hey," the demon's voice cuts in. "You listening?"

Castiel stares up, nods obediently.

"Good," Vassago grins, and looks at the Colt. "I'll keep this with me for insurance. I'll give it back later."

And he closes the trunk and shrouds Castiel in pitch black again.

## B

Castiel thinks he sleeps, and in the tiny slice of death that is heavy slumber he hears a syncopated, dull thud like an arrhythmic heartbeat far, far in the distance. He dismisses it and sleeps on but it remains, stitching haphazardly through his rest while he drifts, dreaming a jumble of incoherent images. He thinks he dreams of a man who smells faintly of bourbon, a man who sits beside him in this car that transports him and gives him a wry smile as he passes him a bottle. The man has green, *green* eyes, a faint smattering of freckles over his cheeks and he blinks lazily at Castiel and asks how he's doing, his voice a familiar drawled-out rumble, a patchwork of accents from a splintered life spread across too many states.

Castiel wants nothing more than to cant his head and touch tender lips to the man's, but before he can say this he is shaken awake by the halting of the vehicle. He hears the squeal of rubber as the tires skid across the surface and he rolls in a painful jumble of limbs from one side of the trunk to the other,

ending up lying on his back like a turtle, staring up into the dark.

He hears the faint thud sound in the distance again.

He thought it was a dream—

*thud*

—but it beats as steadily as ocean waves crash onto the shoreline, and now Castiel becomes aware of a pounding *boom* just behind the sound. It is forbidding, threatening, like the footfalls of a giant a thousand miles away from here but drawing closer with every second, and Castiel wants to bury himself in a hole until the sound stops along with whatever is making it.

Running steps patter around the car and then there is a rush of air as the trunk creaks open again and Castiel is staring at someone new.

There is a moment of silence as the man regards him, and Castiel makes out a circle-flare of light around the man's head before it is gone, winked out of existence as the newcomer reaches down and rips away the duct tape.

Castiel winces and licks his lips. "Thank you," he ventures uncertainly, while the man stands there expectantly.

"Well?" the man challenges, and he raises an eyebrow.

Castiel tilts his head quizzically, asks, "Do I know you?"

"Know me?" The man throws up his hands. "Bro. Think harder. It'll come to you."

Castiel blinks. The man's face looks like a malleable wad of silly putty, meandering through any number of amused, bemused, indulgent expressions beneath a mop of brown hair, and he has eyes the color of mud. He waits with an air of patience for Castiel to reach some great conclusion, and when Castiel continues to stare without deducing anything at all, he sighs and reaches into his pocket, withdrawing a soda can with the word Pepsi across it.

Castiel recognizes it from an infinite number of motel vending machines across the lower forty-eight, and finally it clicks. "You're the man from the commercial."

The Pepsi guy's eyebrows arch with dramatic flair. He pops the tab and a hiss of carbonated syrup escapes. "Uh, *no*, little brother. That's just my vessel, Richard Speight Jr., before a certain spoiled brat of a kid brother killed the both of us and I ended up with a one way ticket to Inferno Island, do not pass go, do not collect \$200 dollars." He leans down to pinch Castiel's cheek between his thumb and forefinger. "Don't worry, buddy. I'll admit, you weren't the smartest doll off the Precious Moments factory line, but ye olde Highway to Hell can do a number on you."

Castiel knows he gapes. "Vessel...you're an angel." A name surfaces from the depths then, and he clutches after it like a fisherman reeling in a line. It's not the right name, but it feels close, feels right,

and he blurts it out without tact or consideration. "Kali."

The man goes still with the aluminum can still clutched in his hand, which flexes to form a fist and then grinds convulsively. Soda jets out as the metal crushes and he lets it drop, staring daggers at Castiel.

"You shouldn't drop litter like that," Castiel diverts. "Are you going to help me out of here or not? And where is Vassago? Why did he bring me to you?"

"Vassago's doing you a solid and risking his neck," Vassago calls out, and Castiel dares lift his head higher to see the demon taking a leak by a stunted tree. All he can make out is Vassago's motorcycle jacket, all zippers and intimidating leather, and a flare of phosphorus yellow where he pisses a line of urine into the ground as the tree blackens and withers under the stream of noxious liquid.

"Still got no reception?" the short man asks Castiel.

"You're an angel," Castiel repeats, and after a moment of trying to parse the concept it occurs to him to ask, "But what are you doing here?"

There is a short but weighty pause. "Fallen angels get the express elevator ride straight to Hell," the man retorts lightly and he taps his temple. "Been—"

"Fallen angels?" Castiel echoes, and he gets a flat look.

"Let's not dwell," the man says, and he repeats the tapping motion and backtracks. "Been on that road for a while, huh? Spacing out? Memory like a sieve? No matter. It just means we get to do everything all over again. My name's Gabriel, you've—"

"*The* Gabriel?" Castiel queries faintly, and the smaller man preens.

"*The* Gabriel. You've already met my sometime associate, Vassago."

"I find lost shit," Vassago interjects as he zips up and ambles over, idly kicking a stone across the faded meridian.

Again Castiel hears the faint thud-boom in the background, and it momentarily distracts him. "What's that noise?" he wonders aloud.

"That, kiddo, is going to jog your memory," Gabriel informs him, and when the smaller man winks, Castiel likes it not at all.

The noise sounds again as Gabriel sidesteps around Castiel, muttering something about *Rambo* and *overkill*, and leans on the lip of the trunk for a bare instant before he snatches his hand back along to a vibrant strobe of light. His eyes widen as he slants his gaze back to Castiel.

"It's her grace," Castiel explains, and he knows this more than ever now, as he reaches to touch the metal himself. A hazy bluish light emanates from her dusty skin to bathe his fingertips, and again he is caught by its familiarity and comfort.

Gabriel grunts noncommittally, disturbing Castiel's brief reverie as he bends in to heave the weapons duffel out and on to the ground. The angel squats down, his hand streaking into the bag to grasp one of the short, lethal silver blades poking out from the jumbled collection of knives, semi-automatics and crossbows. "You kept my sword," he remarks softly, as he runs a thumb along the edge.

Castiel has no real memory of where any of the swords in the bag came from, but he nods anyway.

The man returns the small gesture, says, "I'm touched." He returns to his examination of the bag's contents, clears his throat in what seems a critical way as he sifts through the interior. "That's quite a killing spree, little brother. Isn't this Rachel's?"

"I...don't really remember." And it's true, Castiel is racking his brain as he stares at the weapons, but there is nothing, just a nebulous fog he can't see through.

"Oh, that'll all come back to you too," the man says. "In fact—" He stops abruptly and Castiel hears a barely perceptible out-breath, sees his shoulders tense as he withdraws another sword. It's different from the others, the blade longer, the hilt covered with intricate designs. Gabriel holds it up in front of him, turns it so that Castiel can see a curved sigil etched into the metal under the crossguard, and he whistles with something that sounds like awe. "I know someone who'll be pretty damned happy to see this," he says, and a wicked smile curls his lips up as he admires the rest of the weaponry. "Sure you brought enough?" he adds dryly.

"The trunk has a false bottom, so there's more ordnance should we need it," Castiel tells him. "I came prepared because I'm here to find — *someone*. I'm just not sure who."

He knows it comes out a little sheepishly, as though this is a matter of remembering where he put the car keys, and after another grin and a wink Gabriel says, "Like I said. We're going to jog your memory."

Vassago pulls his lips back from his fangs as he reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a pair of brass knuckles and a knife. "Why don't you hang onto this?" he offers, as he holds the Colt out butt-first.

Castiel takes it gingerly and slides it back into his jeans. Gabriel looks him up and down, the examination critical, and then turns his attention back to the duffel, his eyes narrowing as he pulls out an assortment of weapons. A few minutes later, Castiel is feeling twenty pounds heavier. There are several bandoliers slotted with salt rounds slung around his neck, his crossbow is clipped in its customary position at his back, knives drenched in holy water are jammed into a holster strapped to his thigh, and a shotgun is hooked over his shoulder.

"You look beautiful," Gabriel decides, and he opens the passenger door for Castiel with a theatrical flare, as though this were a date, and the thought sounds like the kind of thing Dean would say.

*Dean?*

Castiel trips over the name, and there is a quickening of images that swirls into nothingness as quickly

as they arrive.

"Looks like you almost had it there," Gabriel says. "Don't worry. You will soon. Now get your head back in the game, because letting Vassago get the jump on you like that?" He *tsks*. "Not the soldier I remember."

Just as Castiel is settling into the shotgun seat, there is a shattering noise that sends him bolt upright in choking fear, and he forgets the relentless thud-boom that never quits. When he turns to look, he sees Vassago leaning over the trunk with a tire iron in one hand, and the shattered glass of the Impala's back windshield is sprinkled all over the bench seat.

Castiel is speechless for a split second before a geyser of rage bursts out of him. "What the fuck did you do that for?"

"Better now than when the shooting begins," Vassago informs him through the ragged shards that still cling to the windshield frame. "I've eaten glass. It's no party."

The answer is even more disconcerting than the distant sound, and Gabriel slaps a hand down on the steering wheel, barks out, "Get in the damn car, we've been in one place too long as it is." He guns the engine as Vassago is slamming the back door shut, and doesn't wait for anyone to brace for take-off before he kills the lights, barrels them into motion, and cuts the wheels into a hard right.

Castiel grunts in surprise when he feels the Impala leave the numbing security of the endless highway and dig into soft soil. "Don't we need to stay on the road?"

He gets a decisive headshake in reply, followed by, "You still don't get it, do you? The road's for dogooders like you. It just goes in a circle, round and round." Gabriel's features twist into a scowl. "It's like driving in New Jersey."

He floors the pedal then, and they rocket forward. It takes only a matter of seconds before Castiel realizes they are heading in the direction of the sound, the sound that is growing louder as they travel, shaking the leaves on the arching trees that are greater in number here in the wooded hinterland, and appear to be closing in and bending over them to scratch and tap inquisitively at the windshield and quarterlights. A shot explodes in the darkness, and Castiel sees Vassago's silhouette in the rearview mirror, cranes to look over his shoulder as the demon leans out the busted back window and fires into the darkness again.

He looks back at the narrow-featured man who stares calmly ahead as he drives, asks, "What's he doing?"

Gabriel waves a dismissive hand. "It's just the trees. Don't worry, this isn't the worst. You should see what happens when we have to use the sewers." He spares Castiel a glance and smirks, an expression that's so familiar it catches Castiel in his heart, though he doesn't know why.

If the man notices how Castiel sucks in a surprised breath, he ignores it. "I keep forgetting you haven't been to this part before," he goes on. "It's not the sort of place you send postcards from. More like the lock-your-doors-as-you-pass-through and keep-your-hand-on-your-gun section. The Detroit of the

Underworld."

Gabriel turns his attention back to the road again, and in profile it's easy to see that a muscle is jumping in his cheek and his jaw is clenched. It gives Castiel the impression that he's scared despite his bravado and his snarky comments.

Far above the trees is a pale hue of pink, as though the horizon is on fire. A jet of flame spikes into the sky and then recedes, and after a moment Castiel realizes it is occurring in time with the steady thud that has become a *boom-boom-boom* that shakes the car. Through the window he can see shapes flitting by now; twisted freaks, gargoyles, aberrations that never should be, things with scales and talons and forked tongues, things that he somehow knows are wrong even for this place of the condemned. He presses his nose to the glass to see better, jerks back with a yelp as something grotesque looms up from the half-light. "Why are those creatures here?" he gasps. "I don't think they should be."

"Bad things afoot," Vassago informs him amiably from the back seat. "The planes are coming together, ripping into each other's meat, bleeding their infection into each other's wounds. Like osmosis, and soon there won't be any barriers. Purgatory, Hell... they're becoming one reality, one disease, and the underworld is spilling its bacteria out all over your beloved place of men."

He pauses to let loose a volley of shots, and as the gun blats, the Impala launches into a whirling three hundred sixty-degree turn, Gabriel spinning the steering wheel energetically even as he shakes Castiel off his shoulder. The car pegs three demons at the back end, crushes them under her thundering wheels in a grind of bone and tissue that splatters upwards and curves its glutinous way down onto the trunk lid.

"Jaywalking's a capital offense in my book," Gabriel quips.

Vassago makes a gleeful hooting noise, and when he glances back at Castiel, his face is streaked with ichor and gristle. And then they are plowing once more through earth that might not be earth at all. Where demon blood spatters the Impala's hood, Castiel can see the paint job smoke and singe as it burns away into ash beneath a faint blue-white glow of grace before vanishing. Castiel studies the side-view mirror, finding the view hypnotic. He thinks he sees things buried in the crust of the earth as they blur past, struggling neck deep in mud and waving their many hands. He had wondered what those ominous thumps beneath the chassis were, and there they are, deformed fiends birthing themselves from the poisonous womb of the Pit.

Before long the forest grows patchy, but Vassago remains with his hand white-knuckled on the back seat as he leans out the broken back windshield. Castiel can see him casting his eyes up and around them every few minutes, as if he's expecting something to descend from the midnight sky, and when he catches Castiel's gaze he pulls a face of mock horror. "Here be dragons."

The steady *boom-boom* grows louder as they breach the treeline and bounce down an embankment before breasting a slight rise.

At the pinnacle of this brief valley, the Impala's headlights dip over what lies beyond, and Castiel sees the mirror surface of a lake. For an instant he thinks it is no more imposing than a resort for older folks looking to take in the air and serenity of the countryside in their twilight years, but for the midnight



blackness and the sense of fire close by – and not fire like Castiel knows fire. Vague memories trip back into his neurons, lighting a path through his brain, and he thinks of the green-eyed man who told him about the fireworks he set for his brother. A man who showed him how to flick open a lighter without using your thumb because it was more *badass* if you did it off the sleeve of your jacket; how to take one apart and adjust the flame so the next person to light a cigarette with it nearly burns off their eyebrows.

*Dean.*

That name again.

Dean understood fire like this, somehow Castiel knows it.

When he looks down across the onyx surface of the lake it seems flat black, but as they draw closer, their proximity reveals more. A ripple disturbs and distends the surface along to the resounding *boom*, because the sound is emanating from the water itself, and in those fractious ripples small currents of flame erupt hot blue before winking out as though they had never been there at all.

The car rolls to a stop, and the silence within the cabin is broken only by the nightmarish pounding.

"It's on fire, isn't it?" Castiel breathes.

"You remember?" Gabriel asks.

"No. Not...quite." It is there somewhere though, recall from long ago and from more recent times too. "I can feel something," Castiel continues in a murmur. "Familiarity. A memento of this place buried in the back of my mind."

"It doesn't look like it's on fire," Gabriel teases.

"No," Castiel agrees. "But it is, isn't it?"

Gabriel nods, and the mirth is suddenly gone from him. "The blue flames, the heat of the forge." His tone turns almost wistful. "This was earth. This was earth before the surface cooled, before bacteria, before the Cambrian explosion, before those really important fish, before dinosaurs, and before the mudmonkeys climbed down from their trees. This was the earth of the Great Old Ones. The primeval heart of Hell. Can you hear it beat, Castiel?"

Boom. *Boom*. Boom. Castiel can hear it, and he licks lips gone arid. "That's where he is, isn't it?"

"That's where *they* are," is the enigmatic reply.

"They?" Castiel pushes tentatively.

Gabriel shrugs. "Dean bound himself to Cthulhu and dragged the big guy down with him like a drowning. We all heard it when it happened."

"Cthulhu..." Castiel frowns, chases the name through the murk in his brain as though it will bring everything flaring back to life, and then, like a computer rebooted, he will know everything complete. It simmers beneath the shell of his consciousness, so close, *so close*...

"This is where we switch seats," Gabriel continues. He doesn't look at Castiel when he says it. He stares over the surface of the lake as though he's mesmerized by the flutter of blue fire that snaps across the top and then recedes. "You have to drive her down, down deep. Strap in and go, and you may as well forget about calling triple A. They don't take calls down here."

Heat, *molten*, and Castiel remembers it abruptly, remembers how it scalds. "It's too hot," he protests feebly. "We'll burn up. It's not possible."

Gabriel keeps his eyes fixed to the Lake of Fire. "We've got a case of Pepsi to cool us down," he quips, and his lips twist in a humorless smile. "You're right, though. We probably won't survive it. The car might give us an extra layer of protection, though. Her grace and all...who knows? Anyhoo. Balt's been expecting you, but it's *this*—"

Gabriel leans over to tap his first two fingers against Castiel's chest before withdrawing, and Castiel feels an electric charge of sensation there, where the handprint is burned into his skin.

"—that you need to use to find him."

Confused, Castiel asks, "Find Balt?"

"Dean," the angel corrects. "You need to use that to find Dean. So...ready for the Indy 500, bro?"

Castiel swallows. He thinks, *no*, and he doesn't even know what he's here for and what his motivation might be when he exits the passenger side almost mechanically, as if Gabriel's words are hiding some spell of compulsion. As they switch sides, Castiel experiences a sparking fragment of memory, armor shining like light through fire and Gabriel's face set as solemn as it is now.

He has done this before, through different means and for a different cause, but the elements are all the same, and Castiel is suddenly serene and ready. He makes himself comfortable in the driver's seat, adjusts the rearview mirror and sees Vassago reflected in it, watching the proceedings with eyes that glow red before their embers dampen to cold obsidian again, and his gaze drifts to the lake.

Gabriel doesn't bother to buckle himself in and he twists, holds his hand out, palm up and flat. Castiel hears Vassago groan behind him.

"Drama queen," the demon growls, and he leans forward to slap something that looks like a rounded shank of bone into Gabriel's hand. It winks, a glimmer of blue-white that flares for a fraction of a second before it vanishes into the ossified surface once more, and Castiel blinks because he has seen it in Gabriel's hand in some other past.

The angel's sharp features are almost reverent as he looks at Castiel. "And storms will rage and oceans roar, when Gabriel stands on sea and shore..."

And Castiel finds that he knows the prophecy, and picks it up. "And as he blows his wondrous horn, old worlds die and new be born."

There is a still moment, a moment that feels like brotherhood, before Gabriel snorts. "I'm supposed to save it for earth, but, meh, what the hell, right?" He reaches a hand out to brace himself on the dash, and his face splits in a smile as he looks at Castiel. "Hit it, kiddo."

Castiel takes a deep breath and when he does the mark in the center of his chest flares like power does on electronics, as though it is one great *on* button in the middle of him. It begins to throb like a burn when the deep tissue is busy dying, but there is no time to wonder at that now and Castiel fears to remember how he was scarred, or the name of the man who left it there.

He slams on the gas pedal without ceremony.

The pedal sinks to the floor and after a brief hesitation as the old car catches up with the command, the engine revs so hot and hard Castiel wonders if her pistons might break, and her valves blow, and her engine block crack like a nuclear reactor. But the rev reaches a scream and then levels out as the car jolts forward, and Castiel bites down on a cry while everything in him cringes backwards into the surface of his seat and revolts against slamming the car grille-first into the waves.

From the corner of his vision, Castiel sees Gabriel lift the horn in one fist. The archangel's eyes have become burning stones in the center of his face, reflecting the waves that surge across the surface of the lake to meet them. As Gabriel inhales deeply and presses his lips to the mouthpiece, there is a second of time that Castiel uses up deliciously, savoring every micro-fraction of it the way he remembers the green-eyed man, *Dean*, would savor the best liquor when he tipped a glass until every last drop was gone and sliding down the golden trail of his throat. And then there is a sound that causes a visible shockwave, the air folding and bending around them.

Gunfire rips through the engine's growl as Vassago leans out of the window and begins to shoot a steady *rat-a-tat-tat*, like a Chicago gangster from an old film Castiel remembers watching with the green-eyed man. The front windshield explodes outward simultaneously with every other pane of glass, and the instrument panels blow, dials spinning in every direction. Castiel can smell burning rubber and a swift glance at the side mirror reveals flames licking out from the Impala's back tires as they hit the water and shoot fat clouds of noxious smelling smoke into the air.

Castiel rocks back in his own private whiplash, knuckles sharp and bony as he grips the steering wheel, and the car is illuminated in white like a halo as they breach the surface. The temperature spikes like a kiln at the highest setting, heat billowing in through the broken window and melting everything with its simmering breath. Gabriel leans over and collapses into the concave of his chest as he blows into the horn with his eyes closed and tears streaming from his lashes, and Castiel can't hear Vassago shooting at anything now.

Liquid fire rises up to meet them and Castiel thinks he cries out, *no*. His shirt ignites with a vicious snap where it meets the mark on his chest, and he slams his hand there to put out the flames. When he does, the jolt is nuclear and he is at the nexus of infinite volts of energy from every dimension, and *memories*, memories that stutter out from his mind and then speed up to flood him with recognition.

*Of course. Sam. Bobby. Gabriel. Balthazar. And Dean-Dean-Dean.*

Castiel leans forward to hug Gabriel into him, away from the inferno that engulfs them. This is what he was made for: the fight, the glory of victory, and he laughs wildly with the centrifugal force of their spin as they submerge and dive full-fathom-five into deep, hot, wet Hell.

13



13

The greatest drawback to vessels, Gabriel once said, is that they burn.

And this is what happens – Castiel burns.

All around them is an ocean, and it could be any wild ocean, unplumbed and filled with uncharted mysteries, until it hits substance worth burning – and humans were made for burning.

When this body was born, it was born as James Luka Novak, and later Jimmy Novak invited Castiel's grace into the claustrophobic mortal coil, this thin-skinned, fragile-boned matchbox structure that was marked as Castiel's from the second its embryonic heart first beat. The vessel was both a trap and an opportunity, and Castiel is unsure if there are words in the human language to describe the sensation of wearing Jimmy's body in those first days of walking among men, how intimate it was and yet terrifying as free fall. And so, he feels a sense of grief as fire licks at the edges of his t-shirt and sets the cotton ablaze. The clothing is his shroud now, his mourning veil, in the seconds before it begins to blacken and char. His naked skin lays exposed long enough to begin burning with it, tissues and muscle shriveling away from bone.

Castiel feels the glorious agony of it as though the marrow in his bones has turned to acid, and all the

while he is aware of the horizon twisting and turning, of flames buffeting them on every side, blocking out the world around them in a revolving funnel of fire that spins the car round and round, until, abruptly, she lands with a crunch.

Her door swings open and Castiel tumbles out and into a new wasteland of glowing volcanic rock, its mantle oozing thick, molten lava and scored with fissure vents that belch magmatic gases and steam. Ash and the stink of sulfur waft on the wind, and the air is like a dragon's breath, dense with cinders.

For an instant, Castiel marvels at Hell's shifts and fits of structure and reality, at its sheer schizophrenia, at how easily it *turns*, like a snapping animal; fawning one instant and then striking and puncturing teeth through skin the next. Then comes the *boom*, resounding in the distance as it did in that other fold of Hell ahead of the lake, and the car shudders and rattles beside him. He turns his head to see a burned husk resting on her rims, her finish immolated to bubbling, ashy-gray base metal. But still the wisps of silvery-blue light that are her grace wander lazily from her wounds and even if she is battered now and ugly, her steel is strong through the center and unbreakable.

Castiel hears Vassago moaning and cursing inside the car, and then his brother erupts from the other side, a shifting shape of bright colors. Only then does Castiel know that he too has been *released*, and he has been so long growing comfortable in his slow human body, making a home in it, that when all that is left is his grace there is an instant when he is disoriented. But then comes the marvelous sense of liberty, like a banner unfurling on a wind, along to the sound of Gabriel's horn, glowing white hot as a star in the archangel's hand.

Castiel unfurls his wings to the instrument's clarion call, and they beat with a power and fury he hasn't experienced since after Stull, when he was restored so much stronger. He had forgotten their familiar weight and pressure, weakened as they were by Purgatory and his slowly waning strength, but there is no flesh now to pin them down and he feels the widening expanse of himself brushing against Gabriel, brothers matched wingtip to wingtip as Gabriel fills his head.

*You remember now, little brother?*

*I remember. I remember everything...*

Memories jostle for Castiel's attention, images of himself swooping down, his garrison behind him, his grace blazing like mercury and his sword cutting a swathe through Hell's foot soldiers as their dying screeches made sweet music and their smoke formed the scent of victory. He exults in his elemental form, and he feels a quickening inside him; the ruthless ferocity of the hunter-warrior he was and now is again for this struggle. But still the scar he is branded with glazes phosphorescent on his chest, a human touch that etches through to the very center of his heart and anchors him to Dean Winchester. And Dean Winchester is what he wants and longs for, his choice; and he draws his grace in, weaves its silken threads together, stitches his form back into the one he has come to appreciate because Dean loves it.

*You're boring*, Gabriel observes tartly as he shimmers opposite Castiel, but then he rolls and flexes his shoulders, folds his own grace back inside his vessel. "But you're right," he continues. "Bright ones are public enemy number one here. Silent running it is, or we'll have dragons and leviathans on our six." He glances skeptically at the battered car beside him. "It isn't traveling in style, but at least the sigils

should help cloak us."

"I'm not leaving her anyway," Castiel retorts as he slides by his brother. "Dean would be pissed at me."

Gabriel scrambles up and over the hood and settles in beside him, releasing one wing again to shove Castiel over in his seat by several inches. Castiel spits out feathers, shoves back, and hears his brother make an amused snort.

In the next second, Castiel has his fingers around Gabriel's throat. "I strongly recommend that you move over," he growls.

Gabriel smirks. "Watch it, kiddo, or I'll break out the duct tape again. Mister Trickster doesn't like pretty boy angels."

Castiel's flare of irritation sparks a brief, heated slap fight until a shot fires from the back seat, an explosion of noise above the distant bass of the *boom-boom*. Castiel freezes, his fist extended, and the moment tapers from irritation to embarrassment before Gabriel subsides back into the passenger seat. Castiel slants his eyes up to the rearview mirror and watches Vassago holster his gun, his features cast in an expression similar to the one Sam often wears: polite distaste, amusement, derision. A *bitchface*, as Dean would say.

"We're on the clock, boys," the demon rumbles easily.

Castiel clears his throat, nods towards the horizon. "I assume that's where we're headed?"

At Vassago's nod-wink, he cranks the engine again, takes up the wheel, and eases the Impala forward into the red-hued night. The demon is right, they are on the clock, and as the car speeds up Castiel thinks about why he's here and feels a sharp pang of want and need, laced with a low-level anger. He comforts himself with the thought that he will tell Dean all about it when he sees him, tell Dean how furious he is that Dean tricked him and left him, showed him love only to take it away. He will demonstrate just how furious he is by pinning Dean to the ground and spending several hours in deliciously compromising positions, until Dean gets the message loud and clear.

"We're on the other side of the lake," Gabriel breaks into Castiel's thoughts, and he's his usual good-natured self, the tension forgotten. "We'll stop at the gift shop on the way out so you can ask geek questions about the quantum physics of Hell and pick out a postcard. And you hit like a limp fish, by the way."

## B

A column of flame occupies the distance, and it belches great swaths of fire with each thud that shakes them. Castiel feels an itching trepidation as they draw closer; a fear that weaves through the steady beat of noise, dances in the inferno that shimmies across the empty plain ahead, and ebbs and flows with the hulking shapes that flutter in the darkness just outside their field of vision. But he grits his teeth and plows them on, ignoring the grind of metal on rock, the bounce and shriek as the car crushes something dead-alive under her rims, and the brimstone stink in the air.

The dashboard dial needles are spinning frantically in their housing, so there is no way to know how fast they're going, and grace forms a pearlescent film over the interior, casting them in half-light. Bluish filaments are bleeding up out of the steering wheel, into Castiel's hands and up his forearms, and he imagines that the Impala is a living creature taking on the sentence of Hell, that she breathes out her exertion with each stutter of her engine and plunge of piston.

He urges the car onward, *onward*, despite his ever-growing fear as he realizes that the column of flame they're heading for isn't mindless combustion at all. It is aware, and Castiel can make out the twisting muscle of an arm outlined in fire, the shape of a huge, horned head. Burned-out, empty sockets that serve as eyes flicker over them and then beyond, and with each step the *boom* resonates as its heel connects with ground. *What is it...?* Castiel fears the answer, but he presses the gas pedal down harder.

A lacework pattern of barbed wire formed from warped bones holds the boundary of the monster's territory and the rest of Hell beneath the Lake of Fire, and as Castiel guides the Impala alongside the barrier it grows dense with the flotsam and jetsam remnants of damned souls. They twist and writhe on the razor-sharp barbs, a moaning, groaning wall of suffering, their faces gray and splotched with blood, and their eyes shining flat-black with hungry curiosity even as tears leak from the corners.

Between them, at irregular intervals, there are things that glow and waft in Hell's zephyr winds, and Gabriel sucks in a rueful breath, murmurs, "I will never get used to that."

Castiel reaches for the handle to roll down the window out of habit, before he realizes there is no glass left – it has been shattered and melted away by fire. He leans out and winces at the sight; the torn chunks of meat that will never rot here, gleaming cartilage poking out from the stumps of wings, feathers clinging in puffs and bloody hanks. The wings of his brothers, some of the remains millennia old, dating from the War of Angels and Lucifer's banishment, and some of them more recent, battalions he fought with, lost in the crusade to free the Righteous Man.

Fetid air drifts from the fence, and burns a stripe of slime down Castiel's throat. He swallows it down, grates out, "I don't see a way through."

Beyond, rising up high above the boneyard of suffering and pain, Castiel can make out the fire monster and its changing face. It sways, breaks down and reforms in the fire, and it seems to wink at Castiel from the distance, before it cranes its neck and peers at the ground so far below it. Castiel tracks its gaze, gasps then, because there is a tiny shadow at the monolith's feet, a shadow that somehow withstands the fire, that darts and runs and waves its hands in supplication or defense, Castiel can't be sure – but the knowledge of who it is streaks through every nerve ending.

"Dean," he chokes through his teeth, and he feels the comforting squeeze of a hand on his shoulder. He spares a glance at his brother, and Gabriel is staring ahead with his jaw clenched and his teeth bared in a wolfish grin, because this is the business of angels and he enjoys his work.

"Soon," Gabriel murmurs, and he lifts his arm, the horn glowing in his hand. He blows through it again, and the shockwave of its sound ripples through the atmosphere. The things impaled on the fence cry out, the tattered souls that retain a semblance of purity shrieking for salvation while others, gone demon with the many years, screech out in agony. And all along the length of the barrier Castiel can see the

faint glimmer of latent grace, as though the disarticulated limbs of his brothers are remembering what they once were before they wink out like dying stars.

"Head for the gate," Gabriel says, pointing towards what looks like an immense portcullis in the near distance, and he cocks his head as Castiel brakes the car to a halt in front of the structure. He clasps the horn and his stare is empty, as though he listens on the inside of himself for an answering call. Then the radio dial turns on with a crackle of airwaves, stray frequencies and broken-off voices. Castiel thinks he recognizes some of them before they fade away and another voice replaces them, its enunciation crisp and clear.

"I didn't think you were coming to the party."

Castiel snaps his head around to stare at the radio, and he knows he gasps out the name. "Balthazar? Is that you?"

His question is ignored in favor of, "Gabriel, don't you think that horn is a little outdated in this day and age? We're getting a cell phone tower down here next month."

Gabriel leans forward with his elbows balanced on his knees, intent. "How about opening the gate for us, brother?"

An irritated *tsk* crackles out of the speaker. "Why should I? I just remodeled. You'll track all kinds of mess in behind you."

Gabriel directs a look of fond exasperation at Castiel, tents his eyebrows. "Time to pucker up and kiss his ass," he mouths.

Annoyance spikes, and Castiel leans in close to his brother. "I don't have time to—"

"I think you better make the time," Gabriel clips back at him. "Since you're the reason he's stuck down here."

The reminder is blunt and painful, backtracks Castiel to Crowley's lair before he opened the portal, and to his paranoia and madness. *We have a Judas in our midst*, he had said, and it had been him.

"Balthazar," he begins softly, and he pauses to spend a moment composing himself, dips into memories of watching Dean before he interviewed witnesses and victims of attacks, the way he sized up the situation and assessed what mask he must pull on. Castiel hadn't quite understood how the hunter life can toughen and desensitize a human so much they must go to such extremes at pretense just to cull information from others, but he thinks he understands now; understands how the persistent anxiety of thinking about Dean and his welfare might render him intolerant to Balthazar's hurt.

Castiel takes a deep breath and reorients himself. He considers anew what he feels for his wayward brother, a fellow soldier who cared enough to compromise himself when Zachariah's accusations rained down on Castiel. He reminds himself of the moment that put them here on these opposing sides, the slice of his blade, the roar of white-hot light that has haunted him so often during long nights on the road when he lies awake while Dean sleeps beside him. Castiel has regrets, more now than ever before,



and he must learn to invite them back in for Balthazar's sake, for Dean's sake, and perhaps for his own sake, to exorcise the ghost of his treachery as well as honor his brother's pain.

"I'm sorry, Balthazar."

The radio clicks on like an inter-dimensional intercom. "Not good enough," comes the stiff reply.

Castiel cracks. The constant booming in the nighttime darkness, the lurking shadow of the monster, the stitching of Dean's handprint that burns hotly over his chest, and his shame combine to shatter him and he slams his fist down on the dashboard, sending a lightning glow of grace rolling and rippling over the skeleton of the car. "Fuck you," he scathes out. "Fuck you, and fuck you again. I'm apologizing and there's nothing more I can do – I can't go back and fix it. And you're here because you're a traitor to the Host. If I hadn't killed you Raphael would have, and you still would have ended up here. So get over your pissy fit, assbutt, and open the gate. Or I'll mow it down."

There is an unconvinced silence after Castiel finishes, and Gabriel pokes him, a gleam in his eyes. "Ever the diplomat," he mocks, before he leans towards the radio. "Balthazar, we have Michael's sword," he reports triumphantly.

Castiel doesn't wait to see if the announcement makes a difference. He hisses a breath through his teeth and jerks the car from park to reverse with a snap of his hand. The Impala skids backwards before he slams on the brakes, and he grips the steering wheel tightly, clenching his jaw. As he fixes his eyes on the closed entranceway ahead, blue-white light floods out of the car's skin and illuminates the moving blockade of souls. He revs the engine, and the car growls obligingly.

Static crackles in on the line followed by Balthazar's voice. "Vigor is always appreciated, but I still don't forgive you. Come in. Though you might regret it later."

There is a sound like a giant wheel turning in a field of gravel before the gate lurches and separates, pulling wide to open a pathway within. Castiel takes a deep breath, drives through the gap at speed, braking sharply as a figure comes bounding from the darkness and stops dead ahead.

Balthazar, and he smacks his palms down on the hood of the car, arms spread wide. "Well you're here now, aren't you?" he declares brightly. "Waiting for cocktails, hors d'oeuvres, perhaps? Come on, come on, we don't do carside-to-go in Hell, you know. You've been on earth for too long and you've been spoiled by that terrible American service industry."

Gabriel curses luridly as he pushes open the passenger door, but he takes a moment to look back at Castiel and offer a crooked grin. "Better get it over with."

There are embers all around them, and as he emerges from the car Castiel can see jumping trails of fire that mark her tracks through the gate. He pays them little heed, stands on guard and alert as he regards his brother, because in truth he thinks that it might be a trick and he deserves no less than to be stabbed in return.

Instead, Balthazar opens his arms in frank greeting. "Brother," he acknowledges, and there is a brief press of hands and a familiar warmth in his smile. He gestures in the direction of a massive building at

the center of the compound. "Welcome. Mi casa es su casa. Or rather, Crowley's casa. He left it to me in his Will."

The building is an elaborate mish-mash of columns, ornate flying buttresses, ramparts, towers, and minarets, and a grimace crosses Castiel's face before he can help it.

Balthazar claps gleefully. "I know, I know – it looks like the bastard child of the Taj Mahal and Sleeping Beauty's castle. It's so *me*. And luckily Zachariah agreed and took the beach villa."

They are in the Lake of Fire, where traitor angels languish, and Castiel shouldn't be surprised to hear that his old nemesis is here. But still the news dries his throat, and his response is little more than a whisper. "Zachariah?"

"Oh don't fret, Castiel," Balthazar scoffs. "Zachariah has found his niche. He's far too busy lording it over the northern shore to worry about you. Revenge pales in comparison to a well-developed God complex. But you'd know all about that, from what I've heard on the demonic grapevine." He stops, seems to be giving Castiel a chance to defend himself, but Castiel has nothing to offer and no defense. He looks down at his boots as Balthazar gives a derisive-sounding huff and moves briskly onto Gabriel, his tone becoming urgent.

"You have the sword?"

Gabriel nods, jerks his thumb at Castiel. "The little angel that could is packing it in the trunk."

Balthazar's face falls strangely melancholy in the light of the rising column of fire in the near distance. "Then this is the end, beautiful friend," he breathes. "At last, this is the end." He pauses, runs his hand across his chin reflectively before he nods at Vassago. His handshake with the demon is wary, as though their history extends over less pleasant memories.

"Like old times, seeing all you chaps in one place," Balthazar muses, and then he turns to Castiel, puts a hand at the small of his back and leads him along. "You having the sword is such priceless symmetry, Castiel," he offers, "and I'll show you why."

Castiel allows himself to be guided as his brother continues.

"It's been positively Enochian lately. Everything was perfectly copacetic in the Lake of Fire until a certain hunter turned up on the radar. Came down hand-in-hand with quite a surprise." Balthazar is steering Castiel back to the gate as he speaks, towards an ancient-looking, derelict kiosk that resembles one of the many toll booths Castiel has driven through with the Winchesters. "Judging by Cthulhu's mood swings—"

"Cthulhu?" Castiel gasps it out, the final puzzle piece, and even if the name came up blank when Gabriel spoke it, now Castiel remembers the full horror of what he became, what he did, and what he must do here to set things right again. His thoughts turn panicked, his throat locks, his muscles tense; but underneath his fear, his grace simmers and thrums with a strange joy at the thought of reparation, even if it will doom him.

Balthazar is staring at Castiel when he comes back to himself, and his eyes are frigid-pale and knowing. "Your soul food binge didn't agree with you, did it?" he reproves coolly. "I seem to recall that you were warned about that."

Castiel can't stay locked on his brother's gaze, tracks his vision down to his boots. "I'm sorry," he whispers.

Balthazar clears his throat. "Anyway, I get the distinct impression Cthulhu is somewhat vexed," he detours, as he beckons Castiel to start moving again and strides ahead. "Things have been far too busy here for my taste. I much prefer the French Riviera."

Balthazar reaches to the door of the booth and hesitates, muttering to himself. He makes a mark and then changes his mind, rubbing it out with his half-curved first before he begins again and makes a scribble of circles and meandering lines. He tugs open the door and a tangle of brooms and mops topples out, along with several rags that go flying off on the sulfurous wind and a box Balthazar flicks his hand out adroitly to catch. "ShamWows. Always useful. These hold twelve times their weight in liquid, you know."

Castiel is mystified and it must show on his face because his brother rolls his eyes. "Keep up, Cas. The chap that does the commercials was one of Crowley's lot." He tosses the box back inside, closes the door, adds, "I keep forgetting that sigil is only one mark away from the one for the broom closet."

He smears away the mark and scrawls a new one, finishing it off with a flourish and stretching his mouth wide in a genuine grin. When he opens the door this time, his triumph is well deserved, and Castiel's eyes widen as he stares inside the dilapidated structure. Flashes of light from the distant fire illuminate the rinds and arcs of burnished gold and silvered chrome, and Castiel's eyes widen as he takes it all in, thinks back to the stories his garrison would share, about the great War of the Angels and the fall of the Lightbringer. "Is that...?"

"The armor from the Fall," Balthazar confirms, and he claps Castiel on the back. "We weren't going to let a two-bit wide-boy like Crowley use it for scrap metal, oh no dear boy. We scoured every nook and cranny of this ghastly place to find it, and tucked it all away for a rainy day. And since you have the sword, it would seem that now is that day." He reaches in past Castiel and plucks what looks like a breastplate off of the jumbled pile. "Time to suit up," he invites, and thrusts the filigreed item at Vassago, who holds it up against himself.

"How do I look?" the demon asks cheerfully.

The metal is stained with a distracting red patina, and Castiel rubs his finger down it. "It's rusty," he says. "You should clean it off. In Star Trek, a red shirt marks you for death. Dean told me the redshirts never make it."

"You must be new," Balthazar interjects thinly. "Everyone here is marked for death."

As if in emphasis, another *boom* sounds, and Castiel looks off to the distance, where the reflected inferno is casting the sky as blood-red as the breastplate the demon is presently rubbing with his hand.

"He's always noisy," Balthazar explains, as though he's apologizing for a rude houseguest. "But lately it's been frenetic. Frenzied." He flaps a hand. "Back and forth they go. It's been centuries. Property values have plummeted."

Castiel attempts to retrace the thread of time back to the beginning, but the world and earth seem so far away now, with things like texting, and television, and pie, and property values. "Centuries?" he echoes.

"Tempus fugit since that jackass showed up," Balthazar confirms. "Everything's out of whack because he wasn't put down properly. But now we have the sword, the Righteous Man, and the False Prophet..."

He trails off, his eyes frosty again, and critical as they appraise Castiel, but Castiel holds his gaze this time. "If I am to be bound to the Beast to end this, so be it," he says. "I deserve nothing less for my crimes. Just – see Dean out of here safely. Please." He is utterly sincere, and he doesn't think he imagines that his brother's eyes soften in response.

"I'm sure you've earned the full weight of divine justice, Castiel," Balthazar starts, his tone level. "But there's bound to be a loophole. Perhaps it'll come to us in the field. You always were a pragmatist under battle conditions." He twists an arm up behind himself, arches his back as if in discomfort, and adds wryly, "I can still feel the evidence."

Castiel shifts uneasily, mutters, "I have no excuses."

The response is tart. "Then it's lucky I'm so tolerant."

This is the brother he loved and has mourned, and Castiel manages a smile. "I've missed you, Balthazar. I dreamed of you."

He gets a grimace. "Not a sex dream, I hope. The righteous boyfriend would be peeved."

Castiel shakes his head. "You were trying to help me, but you never really told me anything I didn't already know. I think it was my own guilt."

"I should think so, too," Balthazar retorts, but then his features fall serious. "This is our chance, Castiel," he says quietly. "Our chance to atone, our shot at redemption. If Gabriel and I help the Righteous Man finish what he began, perhaps our grace will be unbound from this place and we can ascend back to the Host. And perhaps Raphael may be more forgiving than—"

"Raphael is no more," Castiel blurts out, and the appalling memory of vaporizing the archangel makes him shiver. "I destroyed him after I absorbed the souls. I obliterated his grace from existence on any plane."

Balthazar simply stares back, his lips compressed thin and his expression locked into what looks like a sort of disgusted fascination, before his eyes glitter ferally. "Well, that certainly didn't filter through the grapevine," he murmurs, and then his mouth curves into a sly, predatory smile. "So some good came of your little coup d'état after all."

The guilt still nags at Castiel, plays over in his head right now. "He was our brother."

"He was a piece of work, just like Zachariah," Balthazar counters savagely. "Don't forget why you were fighting your war, Castiel. Raphael ended you once before and would happily have done so again. And I have no doubt that setting Lucifer and Michael free to visit their revenge on the Winchesters would have been next on his to-do list." He raises an eyebrow, adds, "And in any case, from what I've heard, you have infinitely worse crimes to be guilty for." He falls pointedly silent then, because they both know it's true.

The sky lighting up scarlet overhead is a welcome diversion that breaks the moment, and as Balthazar turns his attention back to strapping on his armor, Castiel follows the flash back to its source and recalls the inferno that erupted from the Beast in the vaults of R'lyeh. "So Cthulhu still burns," he murmurs.

Huffing, Balthazar replies, "He fizzled out like a damp squib just after he arrived. But without Crowley here doing his Rudy Giuliani impression, the ship got loose. There were a lot of demons wandering here and there across the countryside, renegade angels that made bad deals and met bad ends. Or, you know – some that just had shitty friends." He flicks his eyes in Castiel's direction at that, and smirks. "Anyway – keggers, rioting, looting. It was like south London in the eighties. Until Cthulhu gatecrashed the party and it turned out he was partial to snacking on our heathen compatriots." He blanches. "Wandering souls, demons with more muscle than brains, Uriel—"

"Uriel?" Castiel gapes, and Balthazar nods.

"Come to think of it, that's when Cthulhu's mood took a turn for the worst," he muses thoughtfully. "But then, Uriel was a grumpy bugger at the best of times. I can imagine he gave our beastly friend a nasty case of indigestion." He flaps a hand. "Anyway, Cthulhu burned off all those extra calories by ripping paths through into Purgatory and wrecking this place from top to bottom. He's torn through every circle, all the way down to the lowest deep."

The *lowest deep*, the barren, windswept plateau Castiel himself has flown across, and the news of his erstwhile colleague's fate recedes to the back of his mind in the second it takes him to register what Balthazar is implying. He feels a grim and icy chill that would be welcome in the scorching heat if it weren't for his fear for Dean, down here and vulnerable to Michael's persuasion; and for Sam, up in the world and as susceptible to manipulation in his grief as he was before if Lucifer reaches him. "The Cage," he says hoarsely. "Is it still secure?"

It's Gabriel who answers. "That's the sixty-four thousand dollar question." He blows out, and his tone goes somber. "We don't know for sure. We haven't sensed a disturbance in the force, but this place – it messes with you, catches you out."

Castiel knows, sensed the way the place twisted his perceptions, disoriented him and clouded his memories, and he shivers. But he makes himself think it through, apply logic, and consider it rationally. "It's still sealed," he decides, with as much resolve as he can muster, and he forces himself into a state of composure. "Michael is nothing if not diligent in his duties." He motions his head at the distant fury. "If our brother was loose, he would be battling the Beast like he's supposed to."

Balthazar quirks his mouth as he considers it. "You may be right. Michael always was a jobsworth. Anyway...to answer your earlier question, there's all this naked flame down here, as you know, and our friend's diet was richer than he's used to. And, and..." He seems to be fumbling for words, until Vassago chips in.

"One of his farts caught fire and he went up like a torch." The demon smiles a content smile. "It was really pretty, actually."

A singularly horrifying image flashes through Castiel's mind, and, "Sam passes toxic gases in the car," slips out of him before he can stop it. His brothers cast flat looks at him and he shrugs sheepishly. "I hope that never happens to him."

There is a second, maybe two, of thoughtful silence before Vassago throws his head back and brays out laughter, and one by one they join in, Gabriel bending over, his hands on his thighs as he guffaws, Balthazar's face creased up and his shoulders shaking with mirth.

Turning back to watch the landscape beyond the old toll booth, Castiel doesn't join in their merriment. Instead, he maps out the movements of the fiery monolith on the landscape. He assesses and measures, calculates distances and trajectories, counts the steady *boom-boom-boom*, finally searches for Dean in the rubble at the creature's feet.

He strains to see, and from time to time he spots a distant shadow scurrying across the ground and fading into darkness. He strains to hear, and picks out what he thinks are distant gunshots on the wind, or perhaps it's the sound of crunching bone between a monster's teeth, or the snapping of tendon and sinew as a beloved one is damaged beyond repair. Castiel hates to think of it, and he clenches his fists as the sounds of metal chiming against metal drift into his awareness. He does not care about armor or battle plans, wants nothing more than to run across the burning plains non-stop, until he has Dean in his sights and can grab him by the scruff, *monster be damned*, and take him back up to the light, like he did before.

Castiel reaches up under his t-shirt for Dean's handprint, and his fingers fall into the grooves like a sword into its sheath. His skin jumps with the nerve endings that tangle there and send a series of sensations tripping over each other: pleasure, surprise, jolting electricity. He closes his eyes and opens up to the feeling while his brothers' voices grow faint. He concentrates, sending all of himself into the search for Dean, and what reaches back to touch him is wordless, mute. What reaches back is a jittery, wide-eyed animal racing from stone to stone and shadow to shadow beneath a blast of heat that scorches and blisters him, and Castiel's heart begins to pound in his ears, blood racing through him as he tastes terror, senses the desperation in the frantic dash. *Run! Dean, run!* he thinks. *I am here, but run!* and—

*—Dean reels out from between the feet of the monolith, but this is not a monolith at all because monoliths are not living, and this beast is aware and alive. As Dean cranes his head to look, the flames extend ever upwards into the sky; beneath his feet, bubbling lava broils his skin and sends smoky, stinking fumes wafting up into the air to choke him.*

*The Beast is a morass of moving things that make the whole, with faces caught and drowning in its skin, features melting and running into one another over and over, lipless, fanged mouths screaming. It*

*has blazing tentacles of fire that streak lines through the sky where they whip out to find Dean and chase him down, and he is running again, always running and running, dodging and wheeling, zigging and zagging from stunted tree to scarred boulder, until there is no breath, only this choking stench of burning horror that follows him endlessly.*

*He is dimly aware that he can't run forever; but the truth of it is there are hardly any thoughts at all, only the struggle for survival. He is gutted, his heart and soul overwhelmed by primal fear; and he is empty of thought and strategy. He is pure instinct, like an automatic weapon designed to blindly fire shot after shot, and all that is left is run-run-run. But still, he raises up his head in the shadow of a massive rock, narrows eyes as black as old motor oil, and sniffs the air as though he can scent Castiel on the wind. His tongue flicks out, one reptilian lick of his lips, and he frowns—*

—"Castiel?"

Castiel draws in a whooping gasp and stumbles the way a man might when he dreams he is falling through space, but Gabriel's hand is on his shoulder, keeping him steady. His brother's face is drawn and concerned and he taps his wingtip against Castiel's shoulder in a gesture of reassurance.

"Hey there, bucking bronco – you tuned out for a minute."

Castiel shakes it off, scrubs the palm he had pressed to his scar on his jeans, because he needs to wipe away that image of something that is Dean but *isn't*. A few minutes must have passed while he was caught in his trance, because his brothers are clad in tarnished metal, and Gabriel is holding a fauld, offering it to Castiel.

"Your fight, bro. Your armor."

Before Castiel can reply, Balthazar is there by his side, gripping his wrist and stretching out the length of his arm so Vassago can clap plates upon him. Gabriel crowds in too, nimble fingers connecting rerebraces to vambraces, and vambraces to the gauntlets that go over Castiel's hands. Castiel is a reluctant puppet, but when he tries to shake Balthazar off or refuse Gabriel's help, he gets a slap at the back of his head for his trouble.

And then it is time for the sword, and Gabriel holds it in his hands reverently for a long moment before he shakes his head. "You were one of his favorites, you know that?" he says, as he presses the hilt into Castiel's hand, and he smiles, a flash of white in the darkness. "Go get him, tiger. Make it right." He turns to Balthazar then. "And if you make it topside before I do, tell Kali I will find her."

Balthazar leers. "If I make it topside before you, I'll be keeping Kali so busy she won't even remember who you are."



Gabriel grins whitely, twists away and bends to hoist a shield up from the ground. Vassago smashes his sword to his own shield, and the clang rings like a bell, a spire of light bouncing from the metal. Abruptly, Castiel finds their motivation infectious and he thinks, *yes, this is it, now is the time*.

He turns toward the Impala with a new energy, and yanks open the door. It comes off in his hand, and he stares at it where it dangles in his grasp.

"Well, that's anticlimactic," Balthazar points out.

"You might want to get that to a mechanic," Gabriel offers helpfully.

"Do we even need it?" is Vassago's contribution, and he unfurls his wings pointedly.

Castiel tongues the inside of his mouth before he casts the door to the ground and imagines what Dean would say. *Shut up*, followed by a puerile insult pertaining to having sex with oneself. He tracks his eyes over the wreck, her metal glowing vivid, as if she is a pale silver ghost, and he can remember Dean's pride in her as they worked together to rebuild her. *Two hundred seventy-five horses*, he thinks randomly, and it brings with it a recollection of Eloni Nam'ulu telling them of a white horse, and a rider faithful and true.

"We may not need her, but I'm taking her," he snaps decisively. "She has brought me this far, and it may help Dean to see her when I reach him."

He folds himself laboriously into the driver's seat, his armor clinking and clanking with every small movement. He turns the key, gives the car gas until she purrs, and then skids around into the direction of the monster towering ahead. "Today is a good day to die," he says to his brothers. "I'll race you."

They blink into fractured light and are gone so fast all that remains is the settling of dust as they take flight.



His brothers are on the wing.

They are shapes and shadows in flight; they are warriors, and so is Castiel, and their armor is woven through with grace and the stars, smithed by prayer so old even God would be troubled to remember it.

Castiel floors the pedal again, forsaking his wings for the metal and the churn of the Impala's engine as they head for the mountain of fire that bisects the horizon ahead. His brothers are faster; Castiel can hear their sonic boom as they break the sound barrier, see the arc of a lightning flash as they spark into being again. Their shockwave rolls past him, the car stuttering with its vibration before she picks up speed again. This time there is no cruise control, no steady feeding of gas for even velocity; she is alive, shimmering with grace and greedy as she swallows up the miles. Fire erupts from her exhaust, the tail of it flickering crazily in the rearview and side mirrors, and there is something intoxicating about it, something exhilarating in the way the wind howls through the empty space where the car door should be. "Yes," Castiel hears himself growl out through gritted teeth, and at his bidding the Impala goes even faster, her motion so smooth now Castiel imagines for a moment that she has taken wing herself, and is hovering over a thin slice of air above the broken rocky terrain.

Up ahead, Gabriel, Balthazar and Vassago are a V-formation of bright silver specks before the rising hulk of the monster, and it stretches out fiery tentacles like welcoming arms to pull them into its embrace. It grows as Castiel races closer, jumping in size in fits and starts, like a skipping film reel, like stop-motion photography. It arches and flexes its many-knuckled spine with fluid agility, each knob of bone a miniature Vesuvius erupting sparks and ashes, and in its flesh Castiel can see the faces he saw in his vision of Dean, endlessly manifesting and dying in shapeless agony.

This close, the sound of the Beast's steps can't be drowned out or ignored, and Castiel knows that Dean is somewhere down there, at ground zero. He hits the brake and turns the wheel so that the Impala spirals in a widening pattern, describing circles that leave both fire and traces of white-hot grace in its wake. Falling out of the seat in an ungainly clank of metal as the car screams to a stop, Castiel swallows a mouthful of the yellow sulfur flakes that drift down from the sky like snowfall, and blinks up at the Goliath that lumbers above him, breathing fire at its attackers as they dive and roll.

Balthazar swoops down, his mouth a grim line but his eyes shining with a vicious pleasure, his blade strobing luminous as it smashes into the enraged monster's neck. Castiel sees Gabriel wheeling in around the Beast's other side to slash efficiently at it with his own sword, and a tentacle whips out, smashing into him and sending him tumbling, light rays slanting out where he takes the hit. But Gabriel is fast, lifting his weapon again as he banks, rocketing back into the fray and slicing the tentacle through. The Beast howls, tilting back its head and unhinging its jaw to bellow even louder, and Castiel doesn't want to think about what such a thing might eat that it has a need to unhinge its jaw.

The severed tentacle falls like a column of ash from the end of a cigarette, if the cigarette were the size of a Greyhound bus, and Castiel is thrown up from the surface as it touches down. Vassago lands beside it, runs forward to plunge his sword into it, and the action is as effective as sticking a pin into stone – the blade shatters, and metal shards go flying as though it were made of no more than glass. Catching Castiel's stare, Vassago shrugs and rolls his eyes, and in the next instant a tentacle snaps from above,

like a fiery lasso, and snatches him up. His eyes grow round and he shouts, pounds his fist into the sizzling flesh that imprisons him, and then he is gone, up and up and *up*.

Castiel cannot stand to watch, and nor can he wait even if he thirsts to join the fray. He can feel the pull of Dean from somewhere hidden in these shadows and these rocks, can sense Dean's frantic, primal thoughts lost in the demon black, lost in the sulfur and brimstone. He forces himself to ignore the crunch of the Beast chewing on brittle bones above him, reaches to his chest again, and the breastplate grows hot, as if the shape of Dean's hand is being cauterized into the metal itself. *Dean*, he calls, and he sends the thought out with the force of an arrow, sharpened and cutting through the interference of the fight, the creature's snarls, his brothers' battle cries and the clang of their armor.

Like before, Castiel finds he is tuning into a jumble of thoughts, terrified perceptions and impressions of *now*, mixed with a shuffle of random images and memories from the past. Castiel tastes Dean's ragged breathing, feels how he tires, and aches, and craves comfort, rest and safety; how he longs for his lover, his brother, an old man he cares for as his own father, his home on wheels, a ramshackle house in South Dakota. And, *over there*, Castiel realizes, honing in on the cascade of troubled sensation, his eyes scoping the terrain until he locates what he seeks.

Dean is taking shelter behind a rock, crouching on hard-packed desert earth where nothing grows and never will. He is illuminated by the monster's fire, swathed in red and yellow where he squats, and his soul gives shape to all those things that Castiel has so missed and dreamed of, the shape and solidness of *Dean*. He is bare-chested, and Castiel's keen vision can make out mottled purple-black bruises underlying a patchwork of scratches and cuts, and the cruel scars he died with. Dean's soul bleeds out from every wound in a faint white light, the way Castiel's own grace seeped out of him when Rachel sliced into it with her blade, but he is studying Castiel with pitch-black, bottomless eyes that are void of emotion. Castiel reaches out again, finds traces of fright and suspicion, distrust, for this Dean isn't seeing a friend, lover or savior when he looks at Castiel; he is seeing a threat, an assailant, an assassin, *danger*.

Castiel tightens his grip on his sword as he steps closer, but the blade does not increase his sense of faltering security, because he knows he will not use it if he comes under attack. *How have you survived this long?* he marvels, for in his hurry to get here he didn't stop to consider what toll Dean's second damnation would take. But it has warped into centuries, according to his brothers; centuries of running without rest and without hope. Castiel thinks that perhaps he can give that hope back, and he drops the sword into the dust, exciting a puff of sulfur, and casts his shield away as though it were detritus, before approaching Dean without thought or strategy, holding his hands out palm-up.

"Dean..." he calls softly.

Dean cocks his head sharply and stares at Castiel, unblinking. His tongue flicks out, once, twice, tasting the air like a reptile would, and his shoulders tighten, the contraction of muscle extending down through his frame almost imperceptibly. It's fight or flight, Castiel knows the signs, has seen Dean tense up like this too many times to count, and he realizes he will have to bring Dean back by force.

He allows himself a second of regret and sadness before he explodes into motion, but perhaps Dean can remember the signs too because he is already shooting bolt upright and pivoting into a run, and run from Castiel he does. Fear and centuries of the chase have made him fast and clever, and he darts away,

weaving agilely between rocks and trees.



Castiel cries out, "Dean," as he beats his wings and takes to the air, eyes scanning the terrain below him, catching fleeting glimpses of pale skin flashing in the darkness. He slaps his hand to the burning scar heating up his breastplate like nuclear fission, hollers at the top of his lungs, "Stop, Dean! I command you to stop!"

He doesn't think it will work, but Dean jerks back as though he is being pulled by an invisible chain. As Castiel eases himself down to the surface again and furls his wings, Dean's eyes oscillate from black to green, and then black again, because he *is* in there; buried deep but there.

"Dean," Castiel whispers to him. "Can you see that it's me, Dean? Your friend, Cas. Can you see that I'm here to grip you tight and raise you from Perdition?"

Dean's brow furrows with something that might be recognition, and a hand drifts up to touch its fingers to his lips. And then he slumps, his face crumpling and his mouth choking out a soundless syllable Castiel knows because he has seen Dean form its shape so many times.

Castiel breathes a sigh of relief, thinks, *we can fix this, we can do it*, and he stumbles forward to take hold of Dean as his friend's arms reach out in welcome, and—

—The crack of the limb that smashes down in between them is like thunder, for it seems the Beast has been waiting for a lapse in concentration and it strikes cobra-swift. Castiel doesn't have time to cry out a warning before the tentacle separates them, setting the land alight as it churns through the soil and snaps itself around Dean's waist, sizzling through the remains of his soul. Weak light shines from the rupture, a slither of fire that opens up Dean's hip and illuminates that delicious uptilt of bone that Castiel has worshiped night after night, tonguing along the point and making love to the flesh with his lips, and then the monster pulls back on the tentacle as if it is fishing line and Dean no more than chum dangling from a hook.

Castiel screams, "No," and thrusts himself forward into flight.



His velocity has him erupting from a tornado of dust and sulfur, but by the time he reaches the spot where Dean was standing, Dean is soaring up much as Vassago did. Castiel follows, and this is the moment where everything moves so fast his consciousness lags behind his instinct. His thoughts flatline while the rest of him calls on resources that have been gradually lost to him in the World as his power wanes, but are somehow restored to him in this moment of desperation; how to rearrange atoms

and break apart molecules, to collapse time and truncate it, to call on the elements and fashion weapons from nothing but his grace. And suddenly he is weightless, and time and motion become fluid and transparent as he travels at hyperspeed to take back the one he loves.

He sees Gabriel on his right, a hash mark of burns cutting through his armor and sinking into his grace beneath, but he is still up and fighting, dancing gracefully from shadow to fire and driving in his sword when the monster turns to swat at Balthazar, who beckons and teases it with a come-hither flick of his hand. Balthazar's face is covered in soot, like war paint, but he grins with a flash of white teeth and Castiel can hear his thoughts like a prayer in the ancient tongue, *go-run-conquer-win-victory-will-be ours-brother!*

Dean is there ahead of Castiel now, writhing and tearing at the coils of fire that wind themselves about him, his mouth open in a cry Castiel cannot hear through the roar of the Beast. Castiel makes a desperate plunge for the tentacle, feels its fire burn through his gauntlet and scythe through skin and bone, into his grace. A glow escapes his armor and sears into the Beast's flesh, and despite his pain and horror Castiel gasps as he sees the fire dampen, sees the tentacle split, and suppurate, and shrivel as his light plays across its surface. And, *loophole*, he marvels, and in that second he remembers that he isn't only a half-man, a hunter, a warrior, a falling angel – he is the False Prophet. *I can help destroy you*, he thinks, and he tightens his fingers, digs them in while the creature bucks, sends his grace streaming out of his wounds to irrigate the growing split until the limb atrophies, and then Dean is slipping, falling, fading into the half-light below.

Castiel feels Dean's impact on the sand in his own heart, cries out his distress, and then Dean is there in his head, a faint, exhausted whisper, *let me go...no more running*.

But Castiel is rage and fury, he is avenging angel, and he can feel his grace swelling exponentially, his armor stretching to accommodate it, gold, silver and bronze expanding at the atomic level because he wills it so. They will win this battle and win it together, and he focuses, forces his energy into the Beast's flesh for as long as he can while he fixes his eyes on Dean's crumpled figure and roars out words so fiercely he sees them bend the air, "Don't you give up, soldier...don't you dare."



The effect is immediate. Dean reacts to the order like the veteran he is, struggling to push himself up, his fatigue clear in every lethargic movement. But it's too slow, too fatigued, too disoriented, and Castiel knows the despair of seeing another one of the Beast's tentacles snake out to trap Dean again. Dean twists in its grip, scrabbling at the earth for purchase as he tries to stop the monster's pull, and when he raises his fist from the sand and the sulfur he has the hilt of Michael's sword in his grip.



The Beast lifts Dean up into the sky like before, and Castiel does not pause to strategize before he changes course and follows, spinning and rising up so fast the trajectory makes him nauseous. He is tiring, he knows, this final last gasp of grace finally reaching the end of its out-breath, but he calls for more, *more*, as the massive bulk of the Beast rushes past him, its screaming souls, demons, and monsters nothing more than a blur now.

Dean looms into Castiel's field of vision, staring at the sword in his hand with his brow furrowed, before he is swung away again so fast that Castiel blinks. Dean pinwheels around again, below him now, and Castiel dives to reach for him only to feel a hand at his back, jerking him roughly out of the path of the Beast's claws as it slaps at the air in an effort to swat him like a troublesome fly. Vassago, and he has lost most of his jaw but his eyes still shine with something like amusement before he flings Castiel back into the air and lends him his momentum, pushing strength into him.

Castiel feels his grace swell like a battery charged; he vaults upward faster than ever, so fast he fears he might burn out of existence altogether.

And then, he is there.

## B

The great head of the Beast is all fire and smoke, and its eyes are crimson embers peering through lashes of fire. It is yawning its mouth wide open, showing teeth like gravestones, broken and jagged, and layered as a shark's. It is pulling Dean closer and closer to its gaping maw, and Castiel knows that if it swallows him Dean will spend centuries burning inside its belly until he is nothing but screaming, charred skin on its surface, along with all the other forsaken souls and monsters the Beast has ingested.

Castiel knows that he will follow his lover into this inferno.

He steels himself, prepares to launch himself into the conflagration, but he finds he isn't alone; his brothers are cutting through the air at either side of him, their faces grim as they dive in to heave him back. Castiel thrashes violently in their grasp, cries out Dean's name like he did when Sam held him back from this same moment so long before, but their hold on him is strong.

"Let me go, let—"

"Light the sword, Righteous Man!"

Balthazar drowns out Castiel's protest, his voice a blast of sound, but Dean stares at the flat plane of silver he holds, shaking his head violently. And somewhere beyond the frantic urging of his brothers as they begin pulling Castiel away, Castiel can sense the chaos of Dean's thoughts, his *denial*, all bathed in flashes of his soul as his heart and his pain slip out of him in this moment of weakness. There is denial of the Beast and his fate; denial of the life that has been a fight when he wants peace; denial of a God who fashioned his fingers to hold a gun, a knife, or a sword, instead of a pen, a tool, or a beloved's hand.

Dean breathes out an exhausted sigh that floods from his mouth in a curl of evaporating steam, the fire of the Beast burning the moisture from the air as fast as Dean exhales it. Castiel sees him mouth the words, *Righteous Man*, sees the disbelief and lack of self-worth in his tired eyes, and Castiel will not have that.

He slaps his palm to his chest across the scar, forces the thought across the space that divides them.

*You don't have to be the Righteous Man, Dean. You can be your own man. It will be enough...*

It is enough.

Dean's eyes burn to white and the sword erupts into flame.

⌘



⌘

He can hear them close by, snarling, barking, yelping, baying, howling.

*Son, don't do this...*

The hounds, it's the *hounds*, and he fled from them before, with the bleeding soul of the Righteous Man nestled within his grace.

He thinks he whimpers as hands clamp themselves under his arms and he is pulled. It's an almighty heave that sends pain shockwaving through him, and he sobs, tasting ash carried on scorching, stinking, brimstone air. Sulfur burns his gums and the insides of his nostrils, stings his eyes so that he blinks frantically, and his tears turn the flames that leap and dance around him into watercolor patterns of



yellow, orange and crimson before the world switches off.

B

*Flash*, and his pupils contract painfully.  
*Cas? Cas?*

A voice, fading in and out of his awareness. *The radio* he thinks dreamily, and he remembers how the transmission cut in and out as he drove.

B

Hands on him, tapping lightly at his cheek.

*Cas? Come on man, you just opened your eyes...*

He's lying flat, on something smooth and soft, too smooth and soft to be ridged leather upholstery. Everything is good, and he isn't compelled to scream out the horror and agony in his heart because it's gone, away into the blackness, even if his body aches all over, and heat still sizzles through his veins, and the throb of his head thuds a regular percussion against the inside of his skull.

*Drumroll* he thinks. Destiny's drum, a metronome counting down time. *Tempus fugit*.

*What day is it?*

He peels his lips apart with effort, runs a dry, swollen tongue along his teeth, and attempts speech.  
"Day...what...?"

Something cool and moist touches his chin, water like nectar dribbled into his mouth, and he swallows thickly, chokes a little.

"Easy. Easy now." The voice is louder now, because this isn't disorientation; someone is here with him.

"Date," he whispers hoarsely. "The date."

There's no answer, just the creak of swift progress across a wooden floor, the draft across his face as a door is opened, and a voice calling. Sam's voice, hailing Bobby, and then the rustle of fabric as he returns. Castiel feels his friend's fingertips, calloused but gentle at his temple, brushing hair away so that a cool, damp cloth can be placed there, and he sighs out the relief of it.

When he cracks his eyelids Sam is staring down at him, his face drawn in lines of stress, dark shadows smudged under his eyes. "Jesus, Cas," he says. "You really gave us a scare."

He's leaning over Castiel, and he moves to straighten, but Castiel lifts a heavy hand and snags Sam's shirtsleeve. "Date," he mutters, with more force now, as Sam cocks his head. "What's the date?"

After a moment Sam says, "The twenty-fourth," and his face falls.

Castiel smiles at him, and it takes some effort to rearrange his features because they feel as if they have fallen into disuse. "Dean," he croaks. "Dean's birthday."

Sam swallows and nods, and now Castiel can see that his friend's eyes are bloodshot and puffy from weeping. "No more tears," Castiel consoles him. "It's Dean's birthday."

Sam is sinking into a chair, and as he pulls it closer to Castiel's bedside the doorway is suddenly filled by Bobby. He looms up, his features as harrowed as Sam's are, his voice gruff.

"Dammit, boy, you should have told us. Your chest is a mess."

He busies himself above Castiel, and when Castiel shifts his head to follow the movement he can see a tube taped to his arm and rising up to an intravenous drip hanging from a hatstand. Bobby is attending to it, and Castiel notices that the old man's hand is bandaged, the fingers taped right up to the tips. He glances down at Castiel, and there is a vein pulsing energetically above his left eye. "We've pumped nearly all the antibiotics we have into you. It was touch and go for a while."

Castiel manages to crane his neck, sees that the sheet is pulled up to his hips, that his chest is bare and his scar is swathed in gauze, that other dressings are randomly scattered down his arms and that one of his hands is bound in a similar fashion to Bobby's. He casts his eyes up again, licks his lips so he can ask the question on the tip of his tongue. "Where is..." He lets it trail off when he sees that Bobby is glowering at him.

"What the fuck do you think you were doing?" the old man demands sharply, his annoyance only barely suppressed. "Of all the—"

"Bobby."

Sam's voice is calm but firm, and it's enough to pull Bobby up. Sam nods at him, looks back to Castiel and awards him a wan grin, but Castiel doesn't mind Bobby's ire because he knows there is love in it, and because he made it back, *they* made it back. Pure joy bubbles up despite his weakness, and he smiles at Sam, asks, "Where is Dean?"

Elbows planting beside Castiel on the mattress, Sam shields his face in his hands so his reply is muffled. "Don't do this."

Time freezes for a second, and when the wheels crank back into motion, unease is niggling at Castiel. He flicks his eyes back to Bobby, and tries to ignore the sudden feeling of disquiet as he studies the drip and filters what Bobby said through his mind. "How long since I got back?"

Bobby's eyebrows are tenting with what seems to be bewilderment, so Castiel tries again, husking the words out as clearly as he can. "How long since I got back?"

"You didn't go anywhere, Cas."

It's Sam who answers his question, weary and resigned; a simple phrase the weight of which makes Castiel feel suddenly unsteady and lightheaded with a wave of nauseating vertigo. It makes the room pitch and yaw crazily for a few seconds before it settles back where it should be, and he hears, "How long have I been back?" hiss out of him insistently, and then, "Dean...where is Dean?"

Sam pinches the bridge of his nose, echoes what he just said. "Don't do this, Cas, please. You know where he is. Don't do this."

But Castiel will do it and does do it, as hysteria rises inside him. "How long have I been back?" he persists. "How long since you found me? How long have I been *here*?"

Flustered, Sam scrubs a hand through his hair. "Here? I don't know what you—"

"The bed, how long..." The room is spinning again, spots are dancing across Castiel's eyes, and he shakes his head blindly, so that the pain inside it buffets him. It wasn't a dream, it can't have been. "How long?" he pleads again. "Where is Dean?"

Sam is still uncomprehending, his expression crumpling into sheer dismay, and it's Bobby who barks out a distressed admonishment.

"Stop this now. I found you yesterday. You're damn lucky you set the dogs off...and Dean is dead, you know that."

*They don't know.*

It comes to Castiel in a bright and terrible starburst of clarity: they don't know because Dean wasn't in the car with him when they found him. And it makes perfect sense, and how could he have been so stupid, and it has been a whole day, and, *no-no-no*.

He wants to moan, but he sucks the sound back in, gropes for Sam's sleeve again, and tugs at it. "Dean, you have to get Dean," he gasps, while Sam stares at him with hurt eyes that don't understand what Castiel is telling him. "Birthday, it's his birthday," he tries, and now Sam grips his wrist in strong, determined fingers while his vision tracks anxiously up to Bobby and back again.

"I know that, Cas," Sam soothes, "but—"

"I wrote it all down for you," Castiel cuts in. "My journal...I wrote down my plans, and I drove for years, I drove into the Lake of Fire for him...love is stronger than death." And there isn't time for this, it has been *a whole day*, and Castiel surges up even as Bobby makes a frustrated noise and puts a hand on his shoulder to keep him in place.

"Steady, son, you—"

But Castiel is desperate, thrashing against Bobby's hand, and his voice goes thin and jagged in his panic. "It wasn't a dream, Sam, I found a door, a *door*, because love is stronger than death, because..." His thoughts are speeding up now, too fast for him to speak through his slow, tired mouth, *because when one door closes another one opens*. It was *meant*, and the final puzzle piece the Dragon King

gave them is right there waiting to complete the big picture. But Sam is looking up at Bobby and shaking his head, his eyes bleak and frightened and his mouth pursed into a thin line.

"The trick to finding things you've lost is to look where you last saw them," Castiel almost-shrieks, and Sam's head whips back, alight with curiosity and a glimmer of recognition.

"Fortune, it was your fortune..." Castiel sobs, as Sam's brow corrugates into a frown. "It meant something...and I went back, I wrote it all down for you...my journal..."

The book is right there on the nightstand, and Castiel waves a hand over towards it, hearing his words go faint and faraway as he speaks, but his vision is starting to tunnel, *Dean*, inky blackness spreading from the outside.

*It means fate too*, he thinks. *Fortune means fate too*.

## B

The beep on the thermometer sounds, and the display tells Bobby the angel's fever has gone down even if he's still burning as hot as the car Bobby dragged him from. "Least he isn't seizing any more," he thinks aloud, as he tries and fails to flick one of his wrapped fingers against the barely full drip, wincing at the sting of his burns. "He's not out of the woods yet though. Hope Mira finds a hospital that hasn't been looted, because we only have a couple more of these."

Castiel is a mess, and it makes Bobby shudder to think he might have chosen that way to do it. He can still hear the greedy lick and slurp of the flames, and he can't get the smell of the inferno out of his nose, the acrid stench of burning rubber that had his head pounding for hours afterwards, the toxic smart of chemicals that still blurs his vision. He stares at his hand, cauterized right through to the phalanges when he gripped the door handle, and he curls his fingers in and then straightens them with difficulty. He wonders if he'll ever be able to use them properly again, and not for the first time he thanks the Maker it isn't his gun hand.

"What the fuck was he doing?" he marvels again, and his good hand falls to rest on Castiel's shoulder, grips the bone as if to anchor him, as the awful moment when he realized there was a man sitting in the car and it could only be Castiel hits him again. He shakes with the delayed shock of it. "Jesus. I still can't believe he'd do that."

"Maybe he didn't."

Sam sounds absent, and when Bobby glances across at the other man, he is indeed preoccupied. He has Castiel's journal in his hand and he's studying it intently, eyebrows drawn low, as he chews on a thumbnail.

Bobby snorts. "You're not reading anything into any of that are you? He's delirious, he—"

"Found a door," Sam cuts in softly, and he's standing up slowly, what little color he had draining from his face. "Oh my God," he whispers, and his hand floats up to cover his mouth as his eyes go huge and

round with something like horror. It's alarming to say the least, but Bobby doesn't have time to press further before Sam whirls around in an explosion of windmilling arms, and skids across the room and out through the doorway.

"Balls," Bobby grates out to the unconscious man in the bed, and he doesn't spend more than a minute debating what to do before he follows Sam's thunderous progress down the stairs and up the hallway.

A crescendo of midnight barking is starting up as Bobby gets to the front door, left swinging open and unattended, and his breath is a plume of mist in the chill January air as he scans the lot. "Where the hell is he..."

He trails off as Sam sprints back around from the back of the house, knees almost hitting his chin as he runs because his legs are pumping so fast and hard. He's carrying an armload of tools and a flashlight, and he's trailed by an excited pack of dogs springing and bounding to join in the game. He swings his head around as he goes, hollers at Bobby.

"He found a door, the same door we did. It's in his journal. *Fuck.*"

Bobby looked at the journal himself, when Castiel showed him a list of unconnected words and phrases that he claimed were *significant*. The memory is vivid, Castiel's eyes trusting and hopeful as Bobby scanned a spidery, haphazard scrawl of nonsensical, arbitrary ramblings and realized in that moment that he couldn't deal with the scope of Castiel's grief even if he wanted to, just like he couldn't deal with Sam's or his own after New Harmony. "It was crazy talk that made no sense," he mutters under his breath, but still he's mystified and unsettled as he stumbles after Sam.

When he sees where Sam is headed, Bobby's guts contort inside him so aggressively he thinks he might shit his pants right there. "Oh, no...no, no, no," he gasps out, and now he's running himself, lumbering along as fast as an old guy who hasn't had a square meal in six months can, running right up behind Sam and barely dodging the backward curve of the pick ax as Sam brings it around and down into the topsoil under the tree.

Before Sam has the chance to go at it again, Bobby fists a handful of his shirt, pulls him around all the way. "What the fuck are you doing?" he yells, but Sam is already slapping his hand away, turning back. Bobby can't let this happen, and he steps around Sam, throws an arm up to deflect the other man's swing, plants his good hand on Sam's chest and pushes him hard. "I can't let you—"

The blow crunches squarely into Bobby's jaw, sending red-hued pain slamming through him, and he can taste copper as he tumbles back onto his butt. There is a moment when he sees stars and the lot gyrates crazily, and he coughs, spits blood as nausea has him retching, and wipes his hand on his sleeve. In the background of it all, he can hear the solid thud of the pick ax into earth. "Please don't do this," he wheezes, but Sam is hooking up a shovel with his foot and tossing it over to land next to Bobby.

"Dig," he orders tersely. "We can't use the backhoe, it could hurt him."

Bobby can feel horrified tears pricking his eyes, doesn't want to do this, doesn't want to look at what Sam seems intent on uncovering. "You're going to listen to a madman who just tried to cremate

himself? Son, please, we—"

"It was Cas's fortune," Sam interrupts, and his face is set and his mouth is grim as he slams into the ground again. "One door closes, another one opens. It's in the journal, all of it, the door, the key... we missed it, all of it. He didn't have enough grace to pass into Hell, so he found a door he had a key for." He spares Bobby a glance. "You said he was holding the Colt when you found him."

*The Colt.* Castiel had been holding fast to it when Bobby heaved his limp form out of the blazing car, and it slots into place. "You think he opened the Hellgate," Bobby croaks, but even if it's the most obvious conclusion it doesn't fit. "But that doesn't make sense. He can't have driven to Wyoming."

Sam grunts out confirmation as he arches his back and pounds the soil. "I know it doesn't make sense," he ekes out between pants as he works. "But dig. Because it's been a whole fucking day."

Bobby shakes his head, protests again desperately, "But there's no way, he can't have—"

"It's Dean's birthday. Now *dig the fucking hole.*"

Sam screams it at him with such force that Bobby feels spittle fleck his cheeks, and for a moment he's caught in a memory of being roped to a chair, begging for his life while the soulless monster wearing the younger man's face studied him like he was a clinical specimen and hefted its blade. The shock has Bobby blindly complying, and he fumbles for the shovel and staggers upright.

The loam is still relatively loose-packed, gives under the blade without too much effort as he uses his foot to lever it in, and they fall into an effective if reluctant partnership, Sam reaching tall, curving his lanky body around for the swing and pistoning down with such force Bobby can feel the shockwave of it through the soles of his boots. He feels sweat break out and start to soak his shirt, can see that Sam is already drenched, his hair plastered to his face in wet hanks as he keeps up a relentless pace.

"How deep?"

Sam doesn't look at Bobby as he snaps out the question, keeps hacking at the earth to loosen it so Bobby can scoop it up and pitch it away.

"Son, please," Bobby broaches again. "You don't—"

*"How deep?"*

The ground had been frozen so hard even the backhoe bucket found it tough going, but Bobby had gritted his teeth through the blur of tears, had forced the edge down through the permafrost for two hours straight to dig out a trench large enough for the canoe and deep enough so that his boy could rest in peace. Mira had silently helped him maneuver the Trapper down into the grave, had pressed her cold hand to his cheek for a moment, and walked back into the house while he sank to his knees, clutched the body to him and wept.

He shakes the memory out of his head. "Five feet at least." Out the corner of his eye, he can see that a couple of the younger mutts in his pack of guard dogs have ranged closer and are joining in, paws

slapping energetically at the soil. Every half-minute or so they pause to bury their noses deep in the holes they've excavated and snuffle in smells Bobby doesn't want to think about.

"There should be air pockets," Sam labors out. "Disturbed soil has air pockets that don't close up for weeks. And the Trapper was way big for him. So if he didn't panic..."

Sam is showing no signs of faltering, and large clods of earth are jouncing up every time the spear of the pick ax impacts the surface, but it doesn't seem to be enough. He curses incoherently, flings the tool to one side and snatches up the other shovel, starts ramming it into the rapidly deepening depression in the ground. They're in the grave up to their knees now, and Sam's pace is still frenetic, his eyes wild and staring, the muscles of his arms corded rigid with effort. "We need Mira back here, *stat*," punches out of him, and he heaves a wet, sobbing breath in before he follows up. "You'll have to get her on the CB if you can."

Bobby doesn't answer because he's weighing up the odds of serious injury if he clips Sam on the back of the skull with his shovel, and as if Sam is reading his mind he mutters out a subdued defense.

"I know you think I'm crazy, but it's all there in the journal like Cas said."

Bobby can't help an unimpressed snort as he throws earth over on the growing pile at the graveside. "It isn't possible," he snarls, and right then, he hears the dull clunk of Sam's shovel on wood, and Sam lets out a gasp. In that instant, Bobby knows he's done here. "I won't be a part of this any more," he says through clenched teeth, as he turns and clambers up the shifting sides of the hole.

"But Bobby—"

"No."

Bobby puts a shaking hand up to pull off his cap, and he presses his forearm up to his eyes to hide from it all for a moment. "This is wrong," he grinds out. "You're asking me to help you do this, and who the hell has to clear up the mess afterwards? *Again*." He stops for a moment while Sam stares up at him, eyes huge and inky in his pallor, and then he loses it, roars out his own anger and grief for the first time. "Near thirty years worrying about your brother and you, thirty fuckin' years of feeding you, housing you, nursing you, stitching you. I was the first person your brother spoke to after your mother burned, and he hadn't said a damn word in months. And after your dad dumped you and him here, it was me who got up to him in the night when he hollered for her, me who rocked him back to sleep. I pulled his first loose tooth, I taught him his letters and his numbers, I played catch with him when your dad wanted him out doing target practice. And you expect me to do this to him? *No*."

Sam is dumbstruck, mouth hanging loose, so Bobby plows on, scrubbing tears from his cheeks with his sleeve. "You think I'm going to stand here and watch you haul out a rotting corpse, and then clean up yet another fuckin' Winchester mess. *But no*."

He flings his shovel down to the ground, takes a few angry, stiff-legged steps before he spins back around and gestures at the house. "Him, he's still alive, even if he is so far gone he'd set the fuckin' car on fire with himself in it. That's what matters to me. Him and you. You're all the family I have left, and keeping the both of you breathing is what matters to me now. It's all there is. So when you've finished

this, *you* clean it up. And then I'll just go on trying to keep him and you alive."

Bobby doesn't wait for Sam to respond, he's moving again, almost without realizing it, striding back through the lot, his memory taunting him with a thousand images of the child of his heart, and he won't sully them with whatever Sam disinters tonight. His dog is by the porch, and it directs disapproving liquid eyes on him as he approaches, griping out a sound that's part whine and part-sigh. "What the hell do you know?" Bobby chides it, as he stomps up the porch steps and into the house.

He clumps his way into the study, fishes in his desk drawer for a bottle of Wild Turkey, one of a case that hitched a ride back on a supply run even though Mira narrowed her sloe eyes and spat, *jebena seljacina* at him when she saw it in the truck. After she had a couple of shots herself she told him it meant *fucking hillbilly*, which he thought was appropriate. The liquor screeches across the split inside his mouth, where Sam's fist sent the skin slamming into his teeth, and he winces.

It's been... five minutes at least since he turned tail and ran from the grisly scene unfolding out in the lot, and even as he's steeling himself for the first cries Bobby hears them, rising up into the night outside the open door. His uneasy stomach rebels and folds itself inside out, and he has to fumble for the trashcan under his desk. The liquor is eighty-proof coming back up too, and has water stinging his eyes again as he hoiks up bile.

He fists his hand, rams it down on the desk so hard he wonders if the bone might have shattered. "Damn," he hears himself choke out, and he thinks that dying would have been so much easier than this. "Damn it all to Hell."

### B

Sam is kneeling on a four-foot square patch of uncovered wood now, scrabbling away damp, stinking earth, and there is the seam between two of the lumber strips he can vaguely recall thinking would make a good cover for the Trapper. He squeezes his fingertips down into the gap, exerts as much force as he can, but nothing, they won't be budged, and he cries out in frustration and rockets upright.

"Bobby!" he yells in the direction of the house, and he hammers a fist down onto the ground at the graveside. "Dammit."

But it's *his* turn now, *his* fortune that's at stake here. And love is stronger than death, and he still has his hope and his sheer willpower.

He snatches up his shovel again, wedges the tip of the blade down into the crack, levers it back and forth and further down even as he tries to calculate how much clear maneuvering space might be under there. "Just knock on wood if you can feel this, Dean," he shouts. "I don't want to hurt you." He stamps a boot on the rough surface. "You hear that? I'm here. So hang on. Just – just hang on, Dean..."

*Push* against the shovel handle, and Sam is doing it with as much force as he safely can, easing the blade further, and he can hear its metal grinding, thinks maybe something shifts under him. More pressure, shove, and he can feel tears starting in his eyes. "I'm here, Dean," he mutters. "I won't let you down, I'm—"



The noise of the handle snapping is like a pistol shot in the still of the night and Sam crashes down onto his ass, pain shooting up his tailbone and spine, the impact jarring his teeth. "Fuck," he grates out as he flops forward onto his hands and knees and puts his lips to the nook between the strips of pine. "Dean," he says, and he twists his head, lays his ear to the wood. "Can you hear me? Dean?"

Nothing, and Sam bricks up the dull wave of despair that threatens, pushes up to glance around him. The space he has cleared isn't big enough, he can see, thick drifts of soil are still piled up and there is no way he can shift the cover, weighed down as it is. It will take an hour at least, probably more, to clear a big enough space and it has already been a *whole day*.

Sam's mouth opens and his anguish comes out of him in a harsh cry as he slams his palms down onto the wood. "No, fuck. *No*. I won't. *No*." But every instinct in him is telling him to keep doing this, and he will do it with his bare hands if he has to.

He scrapes and claws tenaciously at the loose soil, digs into the wood, feels his fingertips rip and tear, feels his nails catch and split, feels splinters stab viciously into his skin. He feels a niche, a gap, the butt end of a plank of wood, hooks his fingers under it and hears the pop of his knuckles as he closes his eyes, blows out, and grits his teeth. *Dean* he thinks, and suddenly he can feel it flood through him, something darkly familiar, a vigor and vitality he hasn't felt in years exploding out from some closed-off part of him. *Power*, and it courses through him, the brutal, inhuman strength that always made him feel invincible; and the barrier between him and his brother is suddenly so flimsy it fractures and disintegrates into matchsticks.

The thick miasma of rot and decay that buffets him makes Sam gag and cough, and he slaps his hand up against his nose for relief. He blinks away sweat and tears, peers down in the dim glow cast from above by the flashlight, puts down his other hand. There is cloth, rough to the touch; a blanket, because Bobby must have wrapped the body before he laid it to rest. "Dean?" Sam whispers, and he prods the body cocooned in the fabric.

Nothing, no sound but Sam's own breath, no movement but his own anxious tremor. There is just the stench of death, and the swift scurry of an insect across the back of Sam's hand, because insects feed on the dead. "No," Sam chokes out in painful disbelief, because he had been so oddly sure of this. "Dean. No, God, no. De—"

He is cut off by a dull, low noise, a forlorn animal whine that disorients him for a split second before the body under his hand jolts sharply and erupts out of the makeshift casket. And the sound is coming from Dean, *Dean*, and it's a desperate, desolate dirge, and Dean is a flopping, shaking, panic-stricken wild thing that might not even really be his brother any more. But even through the daze of shock and bewilderment, Sam is reaching for him, pulling him in, wrapping his arms around him and rocking him against his chest, while he hollers for Bobby.

## B

The shouts are echoing in from outside, frantic, Sam calling Bobby's name, and the dogs are taking up the chorus. They howl plaintively in time with Sam's clamor, and Bobby sighs deeply, screws the cap

back on the liquor bottle. *Clean-up time.*

His mouth is cotton-dry, a band of pressure is squeezing his temples together, and his back is already aching from digging. His legs are slow and unwilling as he makes his way back towards the tree that looms up ahead of him, and he can hear Sam sobbing in between his calls, hear the awful, guttural mantra of horror he knew he would hear at the end of all this.

At the lip of the grave he stares down, and in the moonlight he can see that Sam is cradling his dead brother in his arms, hunched over him and talking in a soft, low voice.

"It's alright, boy," Bobby soothes, and he steels himself for what he's going to see, a facsimile of the countless maggot-infested bodies he has salted and burned in three decades on the hunt. "I didn't mean what I said. I'll handle this, but you—"

Sam's head snaps up, and his features are shining wet but they are more bright and alive than Bobby has seen them in weeks. "Mira, you need to get her on the CB," he croaks. "And I think we need to get him inside to be with Cas. I don't think he knows me."

But Bobby is lost, rooted to the spot, his heart juddering to a dead stop and his voice petrified and useless on the back of his tongue, as he stares at Dean, *Dean*, slumped against Sam's shoulder, blinking slowly, his hands out ahead of him and scratching restlessly at thin air as he moans.

"Bobby," Sam says again, gently enough to cut through Bobby's stupefaction better than any shout would. "You need to help me. I don't want to do anything that might spook him."

Sam is already shifting to get his feet underneath himself, easing himself and his brother up. Still speechless, Bobby nods, squats and slides himself down the crumbling earth bank until he's standing next to Dean and Dean looks right through, past and beyond him. He's shivering, making a strange clicking sound that Bobby realizes is his teeth chattering violently. He looks slowly away, to Sam. "What did he do?" he whispers finally, so thinly he can barely hear himself. "What did that crazy damned fool angel do?"

There are tears glistening on Sam's cheeks, and his teeth flash white in the darkness. "Love is stronger than death, that's what he said."

Dean's legs are boneless and buckling under him and Sam groans as he braces to take the extra weight. The smell of rot is strong, and Bobby reaches out a hand, touches cold, clammy, dirt-streaked flesh as the ragged blanket he used as a shroud falls away. "This isn't right," he says, and his eyes flick up to Sam's again as his instincts grind back into motion. "This isn't right," he repeats, tense now even if he desperately wants to *believe*, even if the nausea twisting his guts into a reef knot is undercut by joy. "He could be a revenant. Or a demon." He can't help moving closer though, pressing a hand to Dean's chest to feel the rapid thrum of what sounds like a live, human heart doing panic-stricken overtime. "Vade, Satana," he says anyway. "Inventor et magister omnis fallaciae..."

There's no reaction except for the glower Sam directs his way. "We need to be sure," Bobby defends.

After a second of consideration, Sam concedes. "We'll do the tests. Silver, holy water."

They're moving towards the house now, slow, shambling steps as Dean shudders and lurches between them in a way that makes Bobby think of Romero zombies, his feet tripping and dragging on the soil. He loses his legs again, makes a harsh sound of distress, his head lolling forward onto his chest, and in a swift fluid move, Sam is bending and scooping him up into his arms. Bobby's breath catches in his throat at the sight, because he's looking at a mirror image of what he looked at when they materialized out of nowhere three weeks before, and it's as wrong now as it was then.

Now they're closer to the light from the house Bobby can see that Dean's eyes are vacant, unfocused and wandering aimlessly. "I don't like this," he mutters as Sam makes his way slowly up the porch steps. "He wasn't like this the last time."

"He wasn't buried alive in his own coffin for a whole day the last time," Sam grunts, turning sideways to slide them in through the door. "And Cas was stronger then. Maybe he didn't have the juice to fix him up as well this time."

That opens up a whole new can of worms for Bobby, as he maneuvers past Sam and his armload and drops to his haunches to root through his backpack for what they need. "How do we know he isn't like you were?" he pushes, even if he doesn't want to think it. "How do we know Cas didn't screw it up this time too?"

Sam blanches as Bobby rises. "I'll know. Maybe not until he's *compos mentis*, but believe me, I'll know."

It's all they have right now, so Bobby sidetracks to what they can do. "Holy water first."

Sam nods, braces as Bobby unscrews the cap of the flask, tilts it and drips the contents in through Dean's lax lips. Dean flinches, *God, no*, before Bobby knows the relief of seeing the tip of his tongue poke out to lick at the water. "Easy, son," he croons gently, as he tips the flask up again, dribbling more of the water into Dean's mouth as he gulps the liquid greedily.

"The knife now."

Bobby glances up to see that Sam's eyes are watchful, his frame taut and ready even if the first test is done and his brother passed it with flying colors. He nods, tugs his shiv out of his hip pocket. He made it himself and the blade is pure silver, the edge vicious. "Jesus," he mutters as he lays it against the flesh of Dean's arm. "He stood here three years ago and did this to prove he was clean."

Sam's reply is parched. "Just do it."

Blood springs, bright scarlet beads of it, but Dean is still oblivious, his eyes still spinning in their sockets. "It's him," Bobby manages. "Christ, it's him, I think it's him..."

Sam is already pulling away, heading for the stairs. "I think he needs Cas," he throws back over his shoulder, somehow assured and calm. "We'll get him cleaned up later."

It takes several minutes for Sam to reach the top, Dean's arm swinging languidly just ahead of Bobby's

face as they climb, and Bobby dodges around and ahead once they get there, pushes open the bedroom door. Castiel is where they left him, perfectly still, and Sam groans as he bends over to lower his burden down onto the bed next to the angel.

"He's in shock. We need blankets." Sam glances back. "Bobby."

Bobby shakes himself, crosses to the closet and starts pulling out quilts as Sam starts maneuvering the jeans down Dean's legs. Once he's stripped down to his boxers, Sam tugs the bedclothes down from under his brother and covers him, Bobby spreading more bedding on top of the pair.

And it's done, and in the space of an hour everything has changed, whether for the better or not Bobby has no idea.

Sam moves to stand next to him, and he huffs out a laugh that might be horrified. "What did he do?" he says, and it's an awestruck echo of Bobby's own incredulity out at the gravesite. He puts his hand up to his mouth, his composure draining away suddenly, and he reels on his feet so that Bobby has to reach for his arm.

"Steady, boy."

Bobby hooks the chair with his other hand, drags it up behind Sam, and Sam slumps into it, his eyes still fixed to his brother in the bed. "I don't believe it," he mumbles. "I don't believe it."

A drink is what the boy needs, Bobby thinks, and they need to get fluids into Dean. But there's something he needs to do first.

He rounds the end of the bed, and treads softly up to the head end, sits on the edge of the mattress and puts his hand on Castiel's shoulder. "Cas," he whispers, giving the insensate man a gentle push, and then another, until he groans and his eyelids crack open. "Cas, you with us?"

Castiel blinks at him a couple of times, slurs, "It wasn't a dream," as pain floods his eyes and his face falls back into grief.

Bobby nods. "We know, son," he says. He doesn't know how he gets the words out past the swelling in his throat, and anxiety might be dancing a jig inside him, but he smiles through it even though he thought he had forgotten how to smile. "Look. You stupid goddamn angel, look. Look what you did."

After staring back at Bobby long and hard, and puzzled too, something seems to dawn on Castiel's face. He frowns, twists his head to his left, and freezes for an endless moment before his features relax.

He doesn't speak, starts clumsily shifting himself onto his side, and Bobby splays his hand out on his upper back to support him in the maneuver as Castiel slides his palm across Dean's chest to fit it to the handprint scar that still mars Dean's skin. He dips his face in to press his mouth to Dean's shoulder and sighs quietly, a miniscule expression of relief that sends his whole frame sagging and settling against Dean as he closes his eyes again.

Bobby isn't a sentimental man, but he finds he's blinking hard and biting the skin inside his cheeks as

he stands and glances over at Sam, sees that the younger man's expression is still dumbfounded, his jaw slack.

"I guess now we wait," Bobby manages.

B



B

Running, always running, while he hurts, and coughs, and heaves for breath, and tastes blood in the back of his mouth.

He aims for economy rather than style. Short, quick steps mean his feet spend less time in contact with the ground, and that matters because he's running on third-degree burns through fields of fire, after something that he wants to forget exists in the same dimension as him stole his boots one night while he huddled in his hiding place and let it have the damn things rather than have him, even if he knew his skin would melt without them. Three steps per second it is then, *slap-slap-slap*, through the corpses and carnage of this wild frontier, eyes narrowed to slits by fierce and scorching headwinds and billowing dust storms. He does it along to *Enter Sandman* over and over in his head, and it's so damn appropriate because he's back in Never-Never Land and sleeping with one eye open when he can slip into the shadows and find a safe crack in the earth.

But *it* never rests, and *it* has a long stride and keen senses. And so they go, endlessly, because journeys of a thousand, million, billion miles start with a single step, and he took that step when he bound himself to *it*.

He drifts off sometimes, remembers his brother when he was soulless; how Sam loped along like a wolf, strides eating up the ground, breath steady and not even a bead of sweat on his brow. Castiel runs

like that too, but that memory and loss, loss of closeness, of whispering in the night and the feeling that nothing else mattered, is too much to bear so he tries not to think of it. Except when he does, and he presses his hand to his shoulder then, even if it disrupts him and sends his rhythm skewing into an ungainly stumble that threatens to poleaxe him.

Sometimes when he does it, he thinks he feels something.

*Dean...*

This dream is more real than most of them have been; there is skin pressed against his, a hand on his cheek.

He speaks, something he pulled out of his memory to comfort himself with right after he found himself lost here, something that still echoes in that small part of him that hasn't been charred to black by Hell's fire, that small part of him that is still a *poet at heart*, although he knows his heart is turning colder and harder with each eternity that passes here. He twists his head when he says the words, so that his own mouth ghosts over the scar he wears. "Ego dilecto meo...et dilectus meus mihi..." he murmurs. "I love you. I miss you...so damn much, Cas. And I want you so badly."

And then there are soft lips moving against his, a faint reply eked out over long seconds because Castiel is still in that languid sleep-wake state Dean remembers, that loose sprawl of limbs that Dean would drape himself over and kiss his way along and across, up and down, until his lover sighed and shuddered his way to alert and needy.

"Te...amabo...in aeternum"

"I dreamed that I saw you...that you reached for me," Dean mumbles back, through a lazy smile. "I wish you were real."

There is a drowsy huff of air then, and the rumbled-out voice he will never hear again outside of his mind.

"M real. Open your eyes."

But *fuck, no*, Dean doesn't want to and isn't going to, isn't going to let go of this fraction of a second of peace and rest any sooner than he has to, because he *will* have to and then he'll be on the move again. "Just talk to me," he whispers through his exhaustion.

A thumb moves back and forth under his eye, slow and gentle, and the lips are nuzzling and pulling at his now, warm, insistent but careful.

"I did reach for you."

The dream-Castiel hums then, and after a moment Dean hears his breathing level off to an authentic, deep in-out that signals slumber.

This feels real.

It's so warm where they are, a good warm, not the inferno he has been subsisting in, counting down the long seconds until he finally slips and falters.

He's lying on something soft, covered by something soft.

Castiel is long, and sleek, and *right there*, and Dean pats out a hand, finds that Castiel's thigh feels as real under his palm as the rest of this dream, finds that when he runs his hand slowly up Castiel's back, the skin there is as smooth as it always was, and that when he mouths his way along Castiel's jaw the stubble is as scratchy as he remembers it. He inhales sweat, the faint scent of soap and antiseptic, because this dream-Castiel even smells real as he wraps his arm around Dean and curls into him, fitting his leg in between Dean's.

This feels real.

There is no scent of brimstone, no dust in his throat, no snap-crackle-pop of flames, no din of suffering and no screeching soundtrack of demons mocking him as he stumbles past.

The fatigue feels real, the deep, dull ache in his bones feels real, the pull of strained, overused muscles feels real.

There is a tickling sensation on his cheeks, liquid that tastes of salt when it meanders its way down to his lips, and it feels *real*, as if Castiel is there and weeping in his arms.

Real, this feels *real-real-real*, but it can't be.

"Are you real?" Dean whispers anyway, but there is just that steady inhale and exhale, and the rise and fall of Castiel's ribcage under his hand.

"He's real."

It's another voice Dean never expected to hear again, the words choked out and strained.

"Open your eyes, Dean. He's real. This is real."

Dean doesn't open his eyes. He pulls his hand up and out from under the covers, paddling it blindly in thin air until it is caught and held.

And then he looks, and *sees*, and the tears he can taste are his own, not Castiel's at all, because Castiel is out of it, lashes snug-tight on his cheeks, mouth a little open. And his brother is there, sitting in a chair on the other side of the bed and leaning forward, white-faced with strain, his eyes red.

"This is real, Dean," Sam whispers. "You're safe."

Sam is gripping Dean's hand tight, and Dean grips back.

Restoration takes time and there is a sense that they are all running out of it. Yet, some things have to take their course, and healing is one of these things.

According to Bobby's calendar, it's ten days since Sam hauled Dean out of his grave. All Dean can remember of the first few is sheer dissonance: snapshot flashbacks of talons flaying his chest open wide and a fiery tentacle melting his flesh, so that he screamed himself awake scrabbling at his skin even though he knew his wounds were gone. Then there were the long hours of mute trauma when he just lay there in the bed and stared at Castiel lying there next to him, while Castiel stared back and they held onto each other like they might never let go.

They mend slowly, an arduous slog of nightmares, nausea and neediness, shaking hands and weak legs, hearts sent leaping into throats by loud noises. But even so, this second week has been better, the aftermath and fallout interspersed with periods of testy *fuck-you-all* normality during which the Sam-and-Bobby pincer-movement mother-hen act has driven Dean crazy, and he has wanted nothing more than to crank his baby into gear and sweep out through the gate of the lot to gank some soulless sonofabitch as viciously as he can. And he knows there are plenty of them out there, even if he has only half-focused as Bobby tells him again, slowly and patiently, about how Hell came to earth, how this new world works and what lives in it. Who has died in it too, and Dean couldn't find anything to say to that. He had pushed up silently and snagged the bottle of Jack from the pantry on his way back up to the bedroom, where he downed a third of the liquor while tears streamed down his cheeks and he cursed the irony of grieving a woman and child who died not even remembering who he was.

Castiel had found him there, had slid down the wall to sit next to him. "I think Amelia and Claire are dead too," he had said quietly. "Bobby told me they're fine, but he isn't a very good liar. I know it isn't the same. But."

Dean hadn't really known if it was the same or not, but he had listed and rested his head on Castiel's shoulder anyway. "This is my fault," he had whispered. "I didn't kill that thing when I should have." And Castiel had turned into him, wrapped him in his arms and hushed him, gripping him hard, as if Dean was the only solid thing in his world.



Dean has shrugged helplessly when Bobby asks him *what the hell happened?*

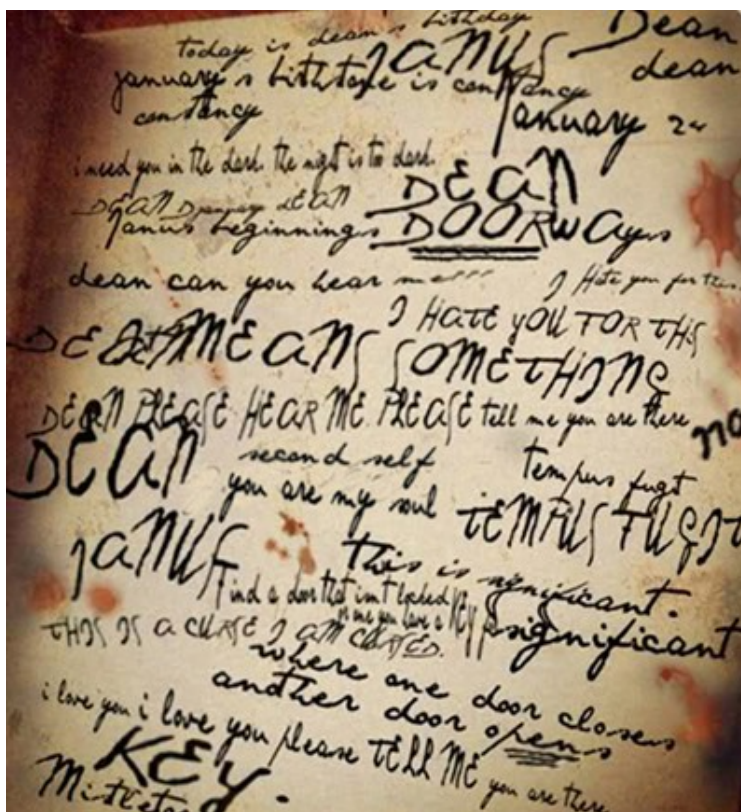
"Cas came for me," he has replied, and every time Bobby's face has fallen into a sort of harrowed bemusement.

"But he can't have," the old man has insisted, drifting off a little into his own doubt. "There was no gas



in the car. It never moved, not one inch. The dogs started hollering five minutes after I walked past him to go milk the cow."

Sam believes it though, showed Dean the blood spattered page in Castiel's journal with a sort of reverence after Dean came around properly, pointing to the words and phrases that formed each step in the equation.



Then he had unfolded a small slip of paper that was as creased as Dean's own fortune had been, and read it aloud. "The trick to finding things you've lost is to look where you last saw them."

Beside Dean, Castiel had cleared his throat. "No, the trick is finding your faith," he had offered softly, and he had smiled at Sam's quizzical expression. "You had faith in me," he had elaborated in a tired murmur. "And faith in your brother. And faith in yourself. If you hadn't..."

Dean doesn't want to think about that, wants to push the vague recall of horrified scraping on wood and airless claustrophobia down as far as it will go and pour concrete on it to seal it there. And he has given up trying to work out the logistics of any of it; he only knows that Castiel came for him like he did before, and it makes him cling to his friend even more tightly in the dark, tying them both together in a twisting, looped double knot of arms and legs.

When he snaps awake on a stifled cry, he rouses Castiel and kisses him bruisingly hard, biting at his lips, sobs out incoherent bullshit as he rubs them together, because the desperate, feverish heat of sex,

the trifecta of skin, sweat and semen, grounds him in reality even if it's uncoordinated and exhausted, and it peeters away into holding on for dear life, breathing his friend in.

"Prove you're really here," he pleads out harshly. "Prove that I'm alive."

And he hangs on Castiel's voice as Castiel tells him, *I'm here, Dean, I'm really here, and you're alive, you're alive*, on a continuous loop, until his throat is so raw the words are a hoarse scratch in Dean's ears.

He's really here.

He's alive.

No, healing can't be hurried.

And they all are healing, so Dean tries to be patient when Sam hovers at his elbow to prop him up when he isn't even wobbling, or falls asleep slumped on the chair in the corner of the bedroom because he stumbled in there at midnight, roused by screaming, and never made it back to his bed. And he tries to be patient when Bobby chides him for not eating enough and drinking far too much, and when the old man snaps at Castiel for every little thing even though he produces platefuls of baked zucchini for Castiel afterwards and his hands are as gentle as Dean has ever seen them when he tends to the angel's burns.

### B

Auto work is another thing that can't be rushed, and Dean always has found a leisurely escape in drinking in some old junker, seeing what she once was and could be again in his mind's eye. And now he does it with even more of a quickening in his heart, as he walks around the scarred remains of the Impala, his hands stuffed deep into his hip pockets. The chill cuts through him like a blade, but he welcomes its sharp edge as he stands in the lot in the early dawn gray, because Hell was never cold, and the frigid air grounds him as much as his family does. He glances up at the window, smiles at the thought of Castiel still burrowed under the quilts, his hair a black tuft poking out from underneath the layers. He knows that if his friend or any of the others saw him out here shivering, they would have something suitably cutting to say about how he skulked out of bed before sunup and didn't fire up the stove and put the coffee on before he braced himself against the abrupt winter.

And now here he stands, gazing at his car. He has only seen her from a distance before this, has put off making this pilgrimage. Up close, her burned-out, trashed hulk looks like a monument from a bygone era, or maybe from the future. Dean doesn't know if it counts as a memory if it's something that hasn't happened and never will, but the words slip out of him almost unconsciously, before he can swallow them back.

"Oh no...baby, what did they do to you?"

He thinks he sees an arc of winter sunray hit the plane of the side panel, and there is a bright flare of light out of conjunction with physics, something that should not be. It vanishes in a line of pearlescence

that gives Dean a trembling feeling inside, and he closes his hands into fists to stop them from shaking. He wants to growl and snarl at it, and it takes everything he can summon to stop himself from dropping to his knees, into a predatory crouch. Something of that Hell will always be with him; it has the persistence of a splinter that will not be prised from the skin. But repression keeps him intact like it always has, and he shoves the splinter down deep, buries it where it will not catch on anything, or recall him to pain.

He distracts himself by jotting down a mental list of auto parts that he will have to pilfer from the cars stacked in Bobby's salvage yard, as he surveys the damage. The door is missing from the driver's side, and in places the metal panels are burned through to nothing. She's on her rims, her tires in shreds, and her windows are all blown out. He suspects the ignition won't even cough if he turns the key.

"What happened to treating my baby right?" he grouches out loud to Bobby's dog, where it stands a few feet away. As if to answer the question, the mutt strolls up and cocks its leg, delivering a spatter of rank, steaming piss onto the back left rim, before it flops down and contorts itself into a suitable position for licking its balls, which it does with gusto. "Fuckin' charming," Dean tells it, and it grins toothily at him.

He slants his eyes over towards the auto shop, sighs as he thinks of the saber saw, the plasma cutter, the welder, the paint gun. Without power running out to the shop, he's doing this the hard way, and maybe not even at all. He lays a hand across the bubbled paint of the trunk, and he can feel in the way the cover bounces beneath his fingers that the lock is broken. When he withdraws his hand, the trunk opens up like a mouth, and he blinks, has to shake his head at the split-second flash of yawning jaws gaping wide to swallow him.

No.

*No.*

The ground is frozen hard beneath his boots, and the air is icy, and his family is here and this is the world, the *world*. "This is not the Pit," Dean croaks, and when he feels Cheney's wet nose poke into his hand he pats the dog almost frantically as it leans into him and nuzzles his leg.

He breathes it down, even counts backwards from twenty like Sam sometimes still does, lips silently forming the numbers while his fingers close around the shape of the amulet his brother returned to him again with the wry comment that *it better be the last time we do this*. It works for now, and Dean turns his attention back to the trunk. It looks like a munitions factory vomited into it; the ordnance he inherited from his father and has steadily added to over the years is in disarray, a haphazard pile of revolvers, shotguns, knives of all sizes, silver swords scavenged from dead angels, shells, grenades, boxes of ammo. The disorganization bothers the military training ingrained in him, a mark of John's legacy.

But what really stands out are the flat metal plates piled toward the back, and Dean leans over to snag one for a closer look. In the darkness at the rear of the trunk it looks like silver, but somehow he knows it's more than silver, and there's a strange glow he can't place when his fingers brush the burnished finish—

"Dean."

Dean startles with a cry, and hits his head on the trunk lid. His heart ping-pongs in his chest like a cheap arcade game and he slams the trunk closed as he whirls, sitting on it to keep it closed against the broken lock. The metal paints a stripe of frozen cold that seeps through his jeans to his ass.

Castiel is standing there with a mug of coffee in either hand, and a drape of dark fabric hanging over the crook of his arm. Dean waits for the scolding and the quiet *you shouldn't be out here, not by yourself*, but Castiel offers him nothing more than gentle eyes as Dean rubs at the sore spot on the back of his head and takes the cup his friend is holding out to him.

It's too hot.

Dean should have realized, because Hell is like a deep tissue burn and you can feel it afterwards, the steady throb beneath the skin. It makes hot objects hotter, and his fingers scorch through to the bone. He drops the cup, and they both watch without a sound as it falls to the frozen ice underfoot and shatters in several pieces, dashing hot liquid across Cheney's leg, forcing a yelp and a flinch from the mutt. Dean knows how it feels.

After a moment of staring at the coffee as it melts the ice into a brown puddle, Castiel offers Dean his cup instead, holding it out into the empty space like the broken mug is nothing in this landscape of broken things and he will always hold out something whole and perfect for Dean to fuck up, over and over. Dean doesn't want it but he takes it anyway, and this time he does it smart, gripping it by the top until Castiel lets go of the handle.

"Thank you," Dean croaks. He isn't talking about the coffee.

They stand in silence then, as the dawn starts creeping over the horizon and the snow goes from blue to pink, until Cheney breaks the quiet, licking the cold coffee off the ice with a thick lapping sound. The screen door bangs in the distance at almost the same time, and Dean glances towards the house to see Meg stretching out her morning kinks, oblivious to them lurking behind the car, before she cups her hand to her face and foggy gray wisps start wreathing up.

Dean can smell the acrid stench of the cigarette already. "The house stinks of smoke," he sidetracks morosely. "It burns my eyes."

He finds he's shivering, hugging himself, and without saying anything Castiel tugs the fabric from his arm and holds it out to him. Dean recognizes it even though he has never seen it before: an olive drab M-65 military field jacket. He knows it because it was the field jacket of choice during the Vietnam war, and he saw his old man wear one just like it enough times to remember.

He also recognizes it from 2014.

With a weak smile, he manages a joke about it. "Hey, future-me wore one of those." He jerks his head at the wreck that was once his car. "Had one of these rusting out in his lot too."

Castiel looks at him, his eyes liquid. "It was hanging on the hallstand," he says. "I assumed it was

Bobby's. It'll keep you warm."

It might well be the old man's even if Dean can't recall ever seeing Bobby wear it: after all he was in-country too. And Dean knows his friend is right; the henley he's wearing is useless for insulating him against the cold. No point in being superstitious; he relents with a grudging huff, pulls on the extra layer. There are thousands of jackets like this still in circulation, and in the end, it doesn't mean anything. It fits right through the shoulders, and it's still warm where Castiel kept it close, but for all that, Dean can't seem to stop shivering even with the inner zip pulled up and all the buttons fastened. He wraps his arms around his chest again and remains poised there, one boot on the ice beneath the car and the other kicked up on the bumper while he eases on the car's backside and tries to focus on what he was doing before Castiel said his name. "Hey, when you came back...did you bring your armor with you?"

Castiel frowns. "No. I left it with Balthazar. At least I think I did." He sighs then. "I'm afraid my recall is a little murky still. I wish I could remember more."

Dean feels a twinge and a tug at the base of his skull, like a ghost poking a finger into his brain matter. It awakens his own foggy memories, memories viewed through a veil of brimstone that turns the winter world around them surreal and hazy with light and endless white drifts of ash. When Dean blinks, it becomes brighter still and he hears voices penetrate from another world—

—"Will he be alright?"

*When Dean turns to look, Castiel is backlit by hellfire that casts his armor fiery orange and renders him a strange mixture of terrifying and glorious, so that Dean wonders what it might have been like to look up and see him leading legions of Heaven's warriors as they dove into the fray. He is staring right at Dean, his eyes like methane, as Vassago, his teeth exposed through his cheek in a relentless grin that he has no control over, unbuckles his breastplate.*

*As Vassago collects Castiel's armor from him, Dean returns the angel's gaze, looking on Castiel's face with only a dim understanding of what it means to him. He feels base instincts of possession, and want, and need; looking at Castiel fills him with a thousand sensations, and they all make him feel undeserving and smaller than he should be, so he switches to stare behind Castiel, at Balthazar.*

*The other angel's eyes are bright and elated even though his face is lit with cuts that leak silvery grace. He's talking in Enochian, and twice Dean hears his name as he blinks in his stupor. And then Balthazar and Castiel are embracing, chest to chest and hands slapping against their backs, as Vassago nods approvingly.*

*Dean can feel the twisting burn mark the beast lashed him with curl up and down his torso like a living snake that nips at his skin. He's uncomfortable and hurting, shock is setting in, and he can feel the tremors start to rock his frame as—*

—"You're shivering, Dean," Castiel cuts in.

Dean startles as he wakens to himself through spliced-in memories occurring in Hell-time; and this is how it has been these past ten days – pieces of a shadow life coming back to him in dribs and drabs. He

spills hot coffee on his hand, and it burns more than it should. He bites his lower lip and he can't stop shaking even after he can no longer hear Balthazar and Castiel, or hear the clink of them shedding their armor. He knows Balthazar said something about returning to Heaven, made some sardonic quip about his dictatorship being a benevolent one, but he can't seem to remember where Gabriel ended up, or when exactly he disappeared without explanation.

"Oh," Castiel realizes. "It happened again?"

He reaches forward and plucks the coffee cup out of Dean's hand. Dean lets him without asking why, and Castiel sets it on the ground, where Cheney rams his snout into it eagerly until he knocks it over and begins to lick that spillage up as well.

"You're still cold," Castiel adds, and then he tilts his head the way he used to, that unspoken angel-language of his, softened now by the humanity in his eyes. "Are you alright, Dean?"

Dean's teeth are chattering, but, "I'm good," he evades. "It just comes and goes. I'm like a woman with menopause, y'know? Hot one minute, cold the next. Go ahead, make fun of it."

"That wasn't my intention," Castiel replies, and he puts a hand on the trunk, leaning into Dean. There can be no mistaking his intention now, it's clear in the way his eyes have lit up with a sudden, unexpected gleam.

Dean feels his throat grow tight and warm, flush with new blood; the excitement of Castiel bending over him and capturing him against the rough surface of the destroyed Impala is both predatory and intense and he doesn't want Castiel to know just yet that he has no real physical need for his warmth. "What are you going to do about it?" he challenges instead.

Castiel wastes no time, and his boots crunch on the ice as he moves in to nudge against Dean's legs, bold now. The tentative lover is gone; this is the angel-soldier come to claim the spoils of his war, like he did on Tu'ugamau Island, and he grips Dean by one knee to open him up and invade his personal space so they are interlocked like puzzle pieces. A sharp wind whips around the corner of the house almost at the same moment, and it's like being slapped against the back of the neck. Dean shivers for real, and Castiel smiles as he leans in closer.

"Keep you warm is what I'm going to do about it," Castiel answers finally, and even if his voice is flat enough to make Dean wonder if he's serious, the rough gravel undercurrent to it might mean that he's insinuating more. *Well, he has to be*, thinks Dean. *There's no way a guy gets between your legs because he's being literal about trading body heat*. But that's the thing with Castiel, he acknowledges inwardly. Sometimes, he *is* that literal.

"Well," Dean prompts, "maybe it's not as easy as you think."

"It's my understanding that persistent shivering indicates a low-level stage of hypothermia," Castiel responds smoothly. "As do fumbling hands. Your shivering mechanism is your body's own attempt to reheat your core. In extreme instances, if this fails to work, simple body-to-body rewarming may yield a faster recovery."

Dean swallows. "Oh yeah?"

He slides a hand up to the top button of the M-65, and this is going to be cold and he will regret it later, but there is something tantalizingly forbidden about doing it out here, in the early dawn. He knows Meg can't see them, knows they have maybe a half-hour before Bobby drags his ass out of bed. Everything is silent and still, and sleeping, and no one, *no one* will know about this except them. The privacy in the ice and the snow is what does it, this quiet wasteland that is just theirs, somewhere only they know, just like the waterfall cave they made love in. He thinks suddenly that he has craved that somewhere inside him for years, since Castiel walked in his dreams and found him alone and fishing.

He unfastens one button after the other and Castiel's eyes find the motion and lock in on it. A little breath of steam escapes the angel's lips as they part slightly, and it puffs into the air and dissipates. And then Dean is raking his hand over the frigid buttons faster, so they make a sound like tearing, and when he reaches for the zipper of the military drab, Castiel reacts blindingly fast, shoving him further up onto the trunk and knocking his hands out of the way to get to the tab and yank it down.

"I don't think stripping me naked is going to cure my hypothermia," Dean points out, and he wants to smirk and be sarcastic but the situation goes explosive in the space of seconds. This has always been the nature of their animal heat, like exposed fuel just waiting to combust and igniting from the dimmest spark, and Dean feels the kneejerk flash of desire snap through him so hard his abdomen tightens and those steadily heating muscles in his groin clench.

He helps to heave himself further onto the car, and Castiel is already chasing him up the slope of the vehicle's back-end, bracing one knee on the trunk to climb up after him. The struts are long-gone, and the Impala dips and bounces with the added weight, like a seesaw. Castiel's eyes are starving for this now, and Dean suddenly feels like he is nothing more than prey, being hunted by a whole pack of wolves, and that this is the split-second before the alpha-male leaps and fastens its jaws around his throat to pin him down.

"But stripping you naked means I can apply heat directly to your core..."

Even Castiel's answer is a breathy growl he cannot fit in the parameters of jest, and when he yanks the jacket zipper all the way open he doesn't stop there, but continues down a natural line of descent to the next zipper available, at the fly of Dean's jeans. It all happens in a quick succession, leaving Dean reeling with the change in temperature as the gaping jacket opens his torso up to a bitter breeze made even colder by the fact all his blood is presently flowing south, straight to the hard heaviness of his straining cock. It nips eagerly at the underside of the zipper until Castiel lets it burst free as if it's spring-loaded.

"Jeez, Cas—"

Castiel still doesn't wait, and all the while Dean is thinking *not really, you know*, out here, *dude*, where anyone can just come out onto the porch and see them like this. But if Dean's newly discovered concern is at all important, Castiel doesn't share it, because he's slapping a hand over Dean's mouth, and the next thing Dean feels is the hot warmth of the angel's lips closing in over the head of his cock.



The next sounds Dean makes aren't words, as he leans back and feels the violent tug of his jeans down his hips to make room for Castiel as he eats his way through Dean's flesh with no decorum, a satisfied hum vibrating at the back of his throat as he takes Dean's length along his tongue. When Dean vaguely hears the sound of the screen door slam up at the house he retains enough presence of mind to hope it's Meg abandoning her half-finished cigarette in favor of the relative warmth of the house, but part of him doesn't care. The rhythm of Castiel's tongue on his cock is sending him into a lull and all the building anxiety of the flashbacks that visit him in unexpected moments is gone now. He is lost in Castiel's mouth, and the way the angel looks with his eyes closed and his hair wild, and his face buried in Dean, nose to Dean's belly and lips slicking him to the root as he reaches to hold Dean there with a hand clamped around his thigh and the other slapping frantically at the Impala for purchase.

A flash of light erupts and pops beneath Castiel's fingers like a firecracker.

Castiel cries out, flinches and bucks so violently Dean thinks his friend is damn lucky he just happened to be gripping the collar of his shirt in his fist already, or Castiel would have cracked his skull open on the ice as he falls back, dragging Dean with him until they crash to the ground in an ungainly tangle.



Dean is left cold and unfinished, his bare ass sliding on ice, but even as he hisses and flexes up onto his knees to tug his shorts and jeans back up, his main concern is Castiel's sudden reaction and how he holds his hand in a fist, as though he just touched the surface of a hot stove.

"Is it Hell?" Dean asks, because he knows Hell; Hell is something he can understand and offer comfort for. But Castiel doesn't answer, and now he is the one shivering and staring at nothing, his sudden catatonia in utter contrast to his lust-blown pupils and lips swollen from blowing Dean with abandon seconds before.

Dean shakes his friend by the shoulders to snap him out of it. "Cas. What is it? Talk to me, goddammit. You've gone all T-2000 on me."

Castiel breathes hard, and then one hand comes up to grip Dean's, but he doesn't look at Dean; he looks past him, at the Impala, as though he fears she will rev and roar into life and run them down until her wheel rims track their blood over the ice.

"It's grace," Castiel breathes. "Dean...she has grace in her. I thought I imagined it, that I was going mad."

Castiel shakes Dean off, frowning as he rises, Dean pushing up beside him until they're standing together, shoulder to shoulder. Dean zips his jeans and tries not to think about the uncomfortable bulge down there, but Castiel just stares at the car for a moment before stepping forward, studying her a little dubiously as he circles around her to her front. He holds out a hand, hesitates before he takes the plunge and sets his fingers over the destroyed finish of her hood.

"Of course," he whispers, his eyes going wide. "Michael. Michael, he..."

Abruptly, Castiel brings a fist across the sheet metal and cries out again with his head bowed and his other hand streaking up to slam over his head. Dean skids on the ice in his sheer fright, grabs his friend by the sleeve, turning him around and pulling him in close. The wind is cold and each time Dean breathes in it hurts from the inside out, but he doles out reassurance interspersed with questions. "It's okay. Cas. It's okay. What is this? I got you, buddy, I'm here. But what are you talking about Michael for? He's down in the Cage weaving baskets with Lucy."

"No, this was before the Cage," Castiel breathes, his features creased in some mix of awe and agony. "I lay here, right here on this car, and..." He pauses a beat, as realization seeps into his expression. "It was when we went back to stop Anna. Michael must have wiped my memory clean. I only have – glimpses. Impressions. But I knew there was something there. There's no way she could have made it through the Lake of Fire, not without some measure of angelic, divine assistance."

Dean blanches. "Are you telling me my baby is hopped on angel-juice?"

Castiel's mouth moves a moment as though he is scrambling through discordant thoughts, giving organization to chaos, and his eyes light up fierce, cobalt. "A measure of my grace," he marvels. "Michael exorcised me...or he started to. Right here, and I remember clinging to the metal, remember my grace melting into it. It must have been here all along, sleeping. Of course, you wouldn't have known it. But the influence was there...you would have noticed it, in small ways. Maybe narrowly

missing an accident, or having an accident in which the harmful effect was lessened—"

"There was that time one of Yellow Eyes' drones plowed a truck into us," Dean cuts in, and he's caught for a moment in the *between*, the memory of wandering hospital hallways with a reaper on his tail, trying to communicate with his brother. His dad's deal too, and his voice is a little dry when he goes on. "We all got banged up bad."

Castiel's reply is soft, like he knows where Dean's recall ended up. "Without the *angel-juice*, as you so delicately put it, perhaps none of you would have made it."

Dean can't help his amazed huff. "Christ, you mean all these years, every time we took the car out for a spin, it was like – watching out for us?"

"Not quite," Castiel corrects him. "More like a lucky rabbit's foot."

That's a whole different story, and the tangent makes Dean scowl. "Dude, those aren't so lucky. This one time—"

Castiel sighs. "No, not like *that* lucky rabbit's foot. Like a talisman, a sacred relic. She has been imbued with angelic grace all this time, and exerting a powerful influence."

"Huh. Maybe that's why it keeps such great MPG for being an old clunker."

Castiel ignores this last and studies his hand, opening and closing his fingers where he touched the car. "We were connected, for a moment. Fragments of the memory came back, but..."

"What?" Dean prods.

"I'm just thinking about what will happen when I lose all the grace I have left," Castiel murmurs. "Anael tore hers out and chose a tree to harbor it, but what's left of mine seeps away like dregs into the soil." He laughs and it's tinged with a hint of hysteria. "Maybe this car is as good a memorial as any other." He winces again, his face draining of any remaining color as he scrunches his eyes closed and rubs at his temple. "My head," he whispers. "It's extremely painful."

Dean finds he's reaching out to snag Castiel by the sleeve and start him moving. "Bobby's got stuff for that," he soothes. "Stuff that'll nuke it out of existence, help you sleep too."

He thinks that when they get into the house he'll scour the cabinets. He's got a hiding spot in the pantry where he likes to keep a tin of Hershey's cocoa, and he'll make a mug for Castiel if Bobby didn't find his stash in the months they were gone. But as they head back in, past the charred butts Meg left behind in a clump of dirty snow, Dean glances back at the ramshackle remains of the Impala and thinks her corpse looks eerily like the one he found dumped and overgrown by the tall grass in 2014.

Two weeks later, and the sun rises and sets, and though the weather remains frigid Dean can sense the sun lasting a little longer, the hint of sap beginning to run back through the trees; all of life waiting to burst forth.

Except for human life, that is. That seems to be in short supply. Not that there ever were a lot of people this far out from the center of Sioux Falls, but these days the silence and sheer emptiness is even more weighted than before, when there was at least the distant drone of a plane overhead, or passing traffic on the road signaled the presence of others. Now all of that has disappeared, as though overnight.

Dean wakes most mornings to Castiel wrapped around him or setting a steaming mug of coffee down on the nightstand and crawling back under the blankets to pull Dean close. But some mornings, light falling across his face disturbs him and he cracks his eyes to see his friend pulling the drapes to one side and gazing out the window. He hasn't asked if Castiel is staring at the Impala or the gravesite.

This morning is one of those mornings, and Castiel is drinking his own coffee, buck-naked as he stands in front of the windowsill and surveys the junkyard below. Sunlight frames him and sets the yellow paintwork aglow, and as usual he has no shame or shyness in his nakedness. Dean runs his eyes up and down him, takes a moment to admire the curve of his back and the swell of his ass, the muscles of his thighs, the way his calf muscles chisel out from his lower legs into the backs of his knees, the hair that downs the skin. And, *mine*, Dean thinks, with a smug satisfaction he would never admit to.

He can hear sounds of the others downstairs, cautious chatter, Meg's higher-pitched tone, and Mira's following it, Bobby's low growl, the unmistakable sound of Sam asking a question or discussing strategy.

*Things he should be doing*, Dean thinks. Strategizing. Leading.

But he isn't ready.

He feels listless, aimless, feels as if he has been set down in some uncharted wilderness without a compass. He still shivers in the cold, and the lukewarm water he showers in when Bobby cranks up the generator still feels like burning, so much so that Castiel has to check the temperature for him before he steps under the flow.

He still dreams of Hell, but held secure in Castiel's arms he blinks himself blearily awake now instead of jack-knifing alert with a shriek. It's the usual ritual of post-traumatic stress disorder and it's like before, the initial sheer-horror dreams fading while the more subtle things stay for the long term. And what disturbs Dean the most now aren't the formless nightmares but the lucid dreams he has of holding Michael's sword, and the fire that streaks from the tip of the blade through the hilt, to light up his arm as far as the shoulder. Sometimes when he wakes from what he supposes must be a memory, he holds his hand up to the window, where the moon comes through fat and bright, and he flexes his fingers as though he holds the weapon still. Or maybe he just wants to, wants to find that moment of triumph wherever it is buried in his mind, so that it all doesn't feel like defeat, and failure, and *running*.

"Do you remember it?" he asks softly, without even really meaning to.

Castiel glances over his shoulder, one eyebrow raised in a question.

"When I ended the Beast," Dean elaborates. "Sometimes I think that if I could remember more, remember all of it, it might...I don't know. Make a difference."

"Make this seem more like victory," Castiel answers, and he sighs. "I don't remember. I don't remember much of anything really, except for the fact that I went there. I see flashes, but not many details. Perhaps it's because I'm near-human now. The human mind protects itself. Hides things." His expression goes far away for a moment then, his brow furrowing as if he's trying to find it himself, in his own memory. "It was wondrous," he says, and then his focus snaps back to Dean and he shrugs ruefully. "Well. I'm sure it was."

He takes a mouthful of his coffee, walks back to set his mug on the nightstand. He slides himself back under the covers then, and Dean folds him into a sweat-sticky cocoon of arms and legs, one hand across the knobs of Castiel's spine and his friend's chilled flesh pressing to his own heated skin.

Castiel nuzzles his way along the line of Dean's jaw, and his eyes are soft as he gazes down at Dean. "Sometimes I can't believe you're real," he murmurs, as he leans in.

Dean tilts his head back and bears his throat, and Castiel's kisses are soft, but his cock is hard as he pushes it into Dean's thigh, groaning lowly into Dean's ear as Dean angles his hips up. It's slow and delicious, makes Dean think how easily he could whisper that he wants his friend moving inside him instead of against him, but even with the memory of Castiel buried deep and coming undone in his arms, there is no real intent. There is just the need to be held and treasured, the feel of Castiel's heart beating against Dean's chest, the angel's lazy thrusts and rolls fading away to pliant weight that slumps on Dean. Lips brush, and pull, and worry at each other languidly, opening up for the warm, wet twist and curl of tongues, long unhurried moments, until Castiel pulls away and nips his way down to Dean's shoulder, rests his face there for a minute before rolling over and up.

"You should get some more sleep while you can," he says as he stands and reaches for his coffee again.

Dean grunts a negative, rising up out of the sheets himself. "I'm tired of sleeping," he responds, and swings his legs off the bed. As his feet make contact with the cold surface, a fist pounds at the door, rattling it on its hinges.

"You lovebirds decent in there?" Bobby asks.

"Uh, no," Dean is quick to point out, but Castiel only raises a single eyebrow, unruffled by the proposition of someone else intruding. As unruffled as the sly bastard was when he had his fingers up Dean's ass the last time Bobby snuck up on them, Dean recalls, and his cock gives a pleased twitch at the memory. "We aren't—"

Too late, Bobby has spent the last thirty seconds deliberating and deciding behind the relative safety of the door, and the knob turns as it opens.

"What the hell, Bobby," Dean protests, pulling a corner of the sheet over himself.

Bobby's face is puffy with sleep and he's wearing the same flannel from yesterday, like they all are

doing – recycling clothes to save on water and the labor of doing laundry in freezing South Dakota. They all smell on the ripe side some days, but Dean can't say he minds skipping showers, because it gives him time to forget the heat of burning.

"You haven't got nothing I don't already have, boy," Bobby says, and then stops when he considers Castiel, wearing a coffee mug and nothing else. Dean has to give the old man credit – he recovers with only a second's hesitation before he turns back to Dean.

"Car batteries, boy. We need 'em. I'd ask your brother, but he says he has a headache and Mira packed him away to bed to sleep it off."

Dean leers. "I'll bet she did." Then, "Batteries?" he queries. "Science project?"

"No, I like the way they set off the window treatments in the dining room," Bobby snipes back. "What do you think? We're getting scruffy around here and I got hair clippers that need juice, to say nothing of the radio I'd like to recharge—"

"It's okay, Bobby," Dean assures him, "I won't spill the beans on the cappuccino maker you have hidden away in the bunker."

Bobby holds up a finger. "That's not funny. Meg can smell it from the second floor, and I think she's onto me."

Dean winks and Bobby backs out and shuts the door. Dean looks back to where Castiel has a t-shirt in each hand, sniffing one after the other and frowning as he debates his choice, and sure, Dean could use the spare minutes between now and when Bobby expects them outside to seduce his friend back into bed for a swift blowjob, and maybe more than that. He thinks on it, the burn of Castiel as he pushed in, the thickness, the feeling of being filled, and it makes him shiver.

He had felt *safe* in that moment, the safest he has ever felt.

He loses himself for a while considering that, while Castiel pulls on a pair of old faded jeans, and sits on the end of the bed to lace his boots.

When his friend pads out of the room, Dean doesn't stop him.

## B

Meg flicks her cigarette butt at one of the dogs lounging on the porch.

Dean focuses on her for a moment as he lifts his mug to his lips for a gulp of coffee, ponders that he still can't wrap his head around how or why she's still here, not that he has really tried to so far. He wipes his mouth, sets the mug on the back end of a junked Geo Prism that saw better days back when Mulder and Scully were still looking for the truth. "Hey Cas, do you think—"

"Your Kurt Vonnegut reminds me of my Father."

That pulls Dean up, and he half-turns towards the mashed-up Tacoma truckbed where Castiel is sitting, absorbed in a battered paperback from Bobby's library. "How's that?" he asks.

The angel doesn't look up as he goes on. "He says here, be a sadist. No matter how sweet and innocent your leading characters, make awful things happen to them in order that the reader may see what they are made of." He grimaces. "I believe my Father may have been strongly influenced by this advice."

*You're fuckin' adorable, you know that?* Dean thinks, but he manages to rein it back to an eye-roll as his attention returns to the ex-demon. "Do you think she's kosher?" he asks, propping open the hood of a Chevy K1500 while he tries to ignore the fact its chrome grille looks like teeth.

Castiel does glance up from the book at that, and he blinks at Dean owlishly. "Excuse me?"

Dean tees it up again. "Meg. You think she's kosher?"

Castiel's expression goes puzzled. "You're asking me if she has been prepared for consumption according to Jewish dietary laws?"

"You're fuckin' adorable, you know that?" It slips out of Dean before he can help it this time, but he twists in mid-air and lands on his feet, going on swiftly. "No, I am not asking you that, moron. I mean, do you think she's for real? Genuine? That we can trust her?"

Castiel tracks Dean's gaze, frowns as he eyes the woman. "She told me about the Hellgate in Colt's cemetery," he throws out there offhandedly, and Dean swivels his head back around under cover of the Chevy's hood and gapes, because it's news to him.

"She told you how to get into Hell to find me?"

His friend shrugs. "Well. Not exactly. I knew the gate was there – the prophet spoke of it in the Winchester Gospels. But it hadn't occurred to me to use it. She planted the seed with something she said. Inadvertently, but even so." He looks back to Dean. "She's human, Dean..."

The *but* is waiting right there for Dean to hook it and reel it in, so he does just that. "But?"

"It's the fact she's still *Meg*, not the host," Castiel concedes thoughtfully. "She's human but she's soulless. There's no precedent for her, and—"

"There is," Dean snaps, suddenly belligerent because he's thinking of the *precedent* right now, with the hollow, sickly feeling he always gets when he remembers. "And Crowley said he would have sold me for a buck to buy soda."

Castiel's face falls as he makes the connection. "I feel regret about your brother, Dean," he says faintly. "And I'm sorry, more sorry than I can ever adequately express. But – Sam wasn't a demon."

Dean curls his lip up, and he knows his voice is undercut with accusation. "Soulless demon, soulless human. Same fuckin' difference."

There's a long, dragged-out silence then, made unwieldy by history, by good intentions gone wrong, and by mistakes; and all the while guilt shadows Castiel's eyes, along with something else Dean can't put a finger on until his friend lowers his gaze. "I'm falling, Dean," he says. "Hell sapped my grace even further. And when my fall is complete, I will be a soulless human."

*Fuck*, and regret stabs through Dean. "Cas, I'm sor—"

"No." Castiel's gaze switches to unnervingly intense even for him, and he shakes his head vehemently, his voice cracking a little. "You don't say sorry to me." He scrubs a hand through his hair, takes a few seconds to calm down.

Even if his friend doesn't want him saying the word itself, Dean persists. "When you fall, you'll be a fallen angel, Cas, like you were before Stull. Not a soulless human. Okay?"

Castiel sighs. He doesn't acknowledge Dean's assertion, backtracks the conversation instead. "Anyway. I was going to say that perhaps there is a risk her real nature could just be lying dormant..."

And there it is again, that unspoken doubt, and Dean hisses out between his teeth as he leans into the engine and knocks the green crust away from the battery with the ends of his pliers so he can begin to pry the connections apart. He flicks up a baleful stare. "You're butting me again aren't you?"

After meeting Dean's gaze again and lifting an eyebrow, Castiel repeats, "*But* for now, she's human. I can't see any trace of the demon behind her face, and it may indeed truly be dead. So..."

Dean leans into his hand for a second, kneads his temple. "If we dump her out in the middle of nowhere, we could be serving a defenseless human being up as monster chow. Dammit."

Castiel smiles at that, and the tension suddenly drains away. "I don't know if she'll ever be defenseless."

Dean hasn't had much to do with Meg since he came back, has avoided her if he's honest. Bobby has told him what precautions they're taking, along with all the other *world-in-the-shitter* stuff, and Meg hasn't bothered him save for a curt nod and a displeased look if she happens to pass by. As he leans in to pull the battery out like a lego piece and then set it down at the foot of the vehicle, he ponders what his friend said. "We know the tattoo can keep demons out, but do you think it could keep the demon down if it was still inside her?"

Castiel's eyes narrow. "That's an interesting point for debate."

Dean grins despite himself. "Understatement much?" He falls serious again then, as his eyes fall on the beat-up Dodge Tradesman Bobby has been stocking with canned goods, and its companion trailer, laden with tanks of gasoline. He thinks of the old man's plan, of how it could all go horrifically wrong with a cuckoo in the nest. "You know Bobby's talking about us pulling out of here, heading up to this hunter camp in Montana?" He ventures, and at Castiel's nod, he goes on. "It's risky taking Meg along for the ride if there's a chance she could turn. She could bring fuck knows what right to us." He reaches for his mug, takes another mouthful of his coffee, and makes his next point carefully. "I think maybe it's too risky."

Castiel's response is perfectly neutral. "Whatever you decide, I'm with you."

It's on the tip of Dean's tongue to say that he'd be more than happy for his friend to make the decision for him, as he watches Meg light up her second cancer stick. She stamps her boots on the wood to warm her feet, hacks out an impressive coughing fit, and hoiks phlegm into the dirt, and Dean studies her, tries to see a demon instead of a skinny, too-pale young woman who has been where he has, done what he has, survived like he has. "Smoking and drinking," he snipes. "Seems like all she does. As well as look down her nose at us."

Castiel is unfazed by the tangent. "Oh, she'll feel better soon," he confides. "I put saran wrap on the toilet for her."

Dean knows he doubletakes. "What?"

"Saran wrap," Castiel repeats patiently. "You know, clear plastic, it keeps food fresh—"

"Yeah, I know what saran wrap is, I'm just trying to figure out why you think putting saran wrap on the toilet is a good thing."

"Mira said it's a Bosnian folk remedy for people in a bad mood, and that it would perk Meg right up."

Dean stifles a laugh with his hand, and *fuck*, he needs to laugh. He thinks he'll have to tell Castiel at some point that clear saran wrap over a toilet bowl is an invitation to an ass-kicking Stateside, but for the time being he amuses himself with the thought of Meg squatting and getting a hell of a surprise from down under. In the frigid cold, no less.

"Why are you laughing?" Castiel inquires mildly. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No." Dean waves it off and bites his lower lip to keep from smiling, before getting his head back in the game. He turns to Castiel and hands him the pliers. "Tackle the next one?"

Castiel takes the pliers and looks around the sea of rusting car hoods as though he's surveying an orchard in the interest of picking ripe fruit. Most of the older cars will be worthless for their task, but there's more than a few that might have enough get-up-and-go left in their batteries to feed Bobby's cappuccino machine for one last hurrah. Though Dean wouldn't put it past him to try to take the damn thing with him to Montana. He points to a newer Buick Oldsmobile that he knows for a fact was one of the last cars to hit the salvage yard before they shipped out for Brazil. "That one should still have a few volts. Pretty new too, so it'll take a decent charge once Bobby boots up the generator."

Castiel has other ideas though, his eyes scanning the lot and resting on a totaled Mack tractor-trailer nearby. "That one," he decides. "The battery will be bigger, yes? More powerful?"

Dean snorts. "Heavy-duty. And weighing in at about ninety pounds. Sure you still got the juice to lift that?"

Castiel narrows his eyes and smirks. "I still have the juice, Dean."



*Maybe we can get a haircut out of it after all*, Dean thinks, as he watches Castiel amble over to the truck. He lifts a hand to run it across his skull, where his hair has grown shaggier than he has worn it in years, and even if he misses the ease of the buzz-cut, a part of him wonders what it might be like to have Castiel twist his fingers there as Dean swallows his dick down, the same way Dean fists handfuls of Castiel's tousled curls when he thrusts his dick in between Castiel's lips. He knows he's leering when he considers lying and telling Bobby there isn't enough battery power in the whole lot to run the clippers.

Cheney is investigating the nearby pile of batteries with a keen nose as Castiel clambers up onto the truck grille, plier handles gripped between his teeth, and bends in over the interior of the engine. Dean sticks out his foot and shoves the mutt away before it can piss all over the goods, before shuffling backwards to plant his butt on a nearby Prism and admire Castiel's ass.

"I have it."

Castiel huffs at the effort as he maneuvers the battery out onto the lip of the hood. He hops down nimbly, reaches up above himself to heft the large block down, and it happens so fast then that Dean can't really follow the sequence of events. As Castiel lifts the battery off the truck body, the dog gets tangled under his feet, yelping with alarm. Unbalanced, Castiel's arms flail out and then it goes to awful slow-motion, with Dean already bolting up and off of the Prism as the battery plummets down through space and onto Castiel's foot with a dull, ground-vibrating thud.

It would be comical; in fact, Dean thinks it would be *fuckin' hee-larious* but for the dry, brittle crunch of bone as the battery lands, and the breathy scream Castiel lets out, a cry that turns Dean into Antarctica, into a frozen stone, as he drops to his knees on the frozen gravel beside his friend while the dog races back towards the house.

Castiel is making a noise like a growl deep in his throat, as if he's biting back more cries behind the first, as Dean braces to lift and roll the battery off his foot. "Easy," Dean mutters as he surveys the damage. The extremity is at a twisted angle, appears flattened even inside the boot, and Dean can make out the lines of where the battery impacted at the end of its fall, imprinted into the leather in a ghostly shape. He bites his lip. "How does it feel?"

"Broken."

The response is raw, hurt, and it fills Dean with a sensation of helplessness, of fatalistic depression. Castiel is falling, and of course his foot is broken. And there's nothing Dean can do to stop it, this endless loop of returning time that comes to crush them, over and over again, because *we always end up here, Dean*—.

"No," Dean hisses to the long-ago voice from the future. "No, we don't."

He feels the bite of the cold through the knees of his jeans as he jerks his pigsticker out of his back pocket. If Castiel's foot is broken – and Dean knows in his gut that it is – he has to get the boot off to assess the damage before any swelling makes getting it off too much of an ordeal. He cuts through the tight knot of the lace, the blade reflecting frozen late winter sun into his eyes, and he wonders if this

was how it happened for the other them. He glances up when he feels Castiel staring at him, hesitates. "Don't look," he says softly, like he used to decades before, to his kid brother. "Hurts more if you look."

Castiel nods slightly, closes his eyes as he falls back. A muscle in his jaw flexes, and a vein pulses in his neck and forehead as Dean slices through the laces all the way down, and then saws through the leather at the sides. Blood is seeping sluggishly through the sock already and Dean's first instinct is to erupt into a frustrated curse, but he swallows it back. He shrugs his jacket down off of his shoulders, folds it up into a pad of fabric before sliding his fingers underneath the foot to lift it and start easing the remains of the boot off as carefully as he can. "I'm sorry," he says, as Castiel's whole leg locks rigid.

"No, it's..." Castiel bites into his sleeve, makes a choked sound he barely stifles. "Pain, *human* pain, transmitted through nerves...the quality is different from an injury to my grace. Sharper, more visceral. I'll get used to it."

"But you don't have to," Dean prompts, and he tries to keep his voice light as he maneuvers the makeshift cushion underneath the foot. "If you have enough mojo to lift that battery, I guess you have enough to fix this, huh? Like, right now?"

It takes Castiel a moment before he answers, struggling to keep his voice even. "I'm saving what's left of that particular skill for a rainy day."

Dean laughs, sort of. "Cas, it's raining man. Okay?"

"No. No, just..." Castiel cranes his neck, examines the foot critically. A faint sheen of sweat dots his brow, and his face is ashen. "How bad is it?" he asks thinly. "There's a...buzzing sensation."

Dean swallows. "You can't walk on it. Just a guess, but I'm thinking fractures in the smaller bones. Skin's cut up a bit, but there's no bone poking out." He can hear his voice speed up as he thinks himself through it. "But there could be nerve damage. And circulation is a problem. I mean, if we were living in first-world conditions we could get you to an ER, get the damage checked out, but we're back in the middle ages, Cas. People lose their feet over shit like this. So if you've got any spare mojo stashed in your back pocket, I think you should—"

"No!" Castiel snaps. "I'll tough it out. I have to save what's left. This is nothing. There could be worse up ahead, and you know it."

Dean lets out an explosive exhale. "You're thinking it about it, aren't you?"

Castiel looks at him with pain-clouded eyes, pauses to press his palm over them, and if he's hiding tears there Dean can't see them, he can only smell the acrid adrenaline rising up from their sweat as Castiel dips his head and sighs out a shuddering breath. "I broke my foot then," he continues, in a strained whisper. "You told me. And if it is—"

"Shut up," Dean hisses.

"It could mean that—"

"Did you hear what I said? Shut up, dammit! Nothing is set!"

Dean sits back on his haunches, scrubs a hand through his hair as he looks away, over the pile of batteries to Cheney, where the mutt is sitting and watching them forlornly. "It just means you tripped over a dog and that's it, that's all it means," he insists. "Doesn't add up to shit. Don't talk about 2014, you know why? Because it's 2012, and I say so. The world doesn't end until I fuckin' say it does, okay?"

He looks back, holds Castiel's eyes for a long moment and Castiel closes his own with something like relief and leans back again, while Dean's fingers plant feverish prints over the muscle of his friend's calf as it twitches out distress beneath his hand. "I need to move you, get you to the house," he warns. "If you're set on doing this the hard way, it'll hurt."

Castiel swallows, says, "Okay. Okay."

It comes out in a thin gasp that reminds Dean that Castiel had needed a couple of Bobby's horse pills for the migraine that followed the flash of grace from the Impala. He'd joked about it, teasing his friend for getting taken out by a simple headache. *No joking this time*, he thinks. "I'll get you something for the pain first," he says, and his tongue feels like a lethargic slug in his mouth. "Fetch Mira out here too. Lucky we got a doctor in the house, huh?"

Castiel grins weakly, and the dog creeps up closer and gives a guilty whine as Dean stands. "Look after him, mutt," Dean orders, and Cheney barks and settles down on the dirt there beside Castiel as Dean heads back to the house.

## B

Dean hollers for Mira as he slams indoors, but he knows Castiel needs something to knock out the sharper edge of his injury before they move him. There's morphine in the medkit, he knows, but – *no*.

He heads upstairs to Bobby's bathroom, flicks open the medicine cabinet, and starts poking through the crammed-in contents for the Oxycontin he last rooted out of there two weeks before. *Yahtzee*, and he plucks the bottle from the back of the shelf, twists to make his way back downstairs.

He's already outside the bathroom when it dawns on him that there is no telltale maraca-rattle of pills inside plastic like there was before.

He stops cold, steps back into the bathroom and holds the bottle up to the sunlight streaming in through the window, even though he doesn't actually need to look to confirm what he already knows: there's no more Oxy.

*Just a coincidence*, he thinks.

He lets the bottle slip from his fingers and into the wastebasket and turns back to the medicine cabinet. He knows there is Percocet in there, along with a half-full container of benzos, his own drug of choice

for sleeping through the nightmares after Stull, though he hasn't ever wanted to think why Bobby might have needed them. He shuffles through the cabinet again as he searches them out, clicks his tongue against his teeth as he finds the bottle and snatches it up between his thumb and forefinger.

*Empty.*

There is a numb second or two, followed by a familiar itch climbing up his spine and along the back of his neck, the feeling of betrayal that he remembers from bitter experience. It feels the way it did when his brother punched him in the face in some faraway motel before he left with Ruby to raise the devil, the way it did when he suddenly knew, *knew*, that Castiel had been lying to him for more than a year.

In the span of those seconds, all his Hell wounds are forgotten and faded in the face of a surge of anger, and he regresses, tumbling into the recesses of his memory through images that cut even deeper: the scent of brimstone heavy in the air, Alistair's face twisted like a knotted rag above him, the rack where he was once a helpless prisoner and then became the skilled apprentice. With effort, he brings this blind lightning-crack of fury back into line, and he hopes the fact he even can means he's growing, progressing, becoming a better person. Whatever the fuck that actually means.

He turns back to the medicine cabinet for the third time, and he kids himself he feels calmer.

But he isn't sure if he can maintain his composure when he finds the Percocet bottle, because he knows even as his fingers graze the surface that the damn thing is empty. "Fool me once," he mutters to himself, and he bends to fish out the first empty from the trashcan before spinning on his heel.

### B

The dog is still watching dutifully over Castiel when Dean gets back to the spot where he left his friend. Castiel lifts himself up on his elbows with some effort, and Dean can tell by the way his throat moves that he's suppressing another groan. He looks part-ill, part thankful, and relieved to see Dean.

It's everything Dean can do to keep from socking him in the face.

He crunches over the gravel and leans down without ceremony to grip Castiel under one arm and haul him up, broken foot and all. Castiel has pride enough to smother a shriek before he begins cursing in Enochian as he twists in Dean's arms. Dean lets him go, throwing his weight back onto his feet, and Castiel does yelp then, before crumpling unceremoniously back down on his ass. When he manages to get proper words out, his voice is rough with pain.

"Dean, what's wrong with you? It hurts to stand on it, you can't just lift me like that—"

Dean kicks viciously at the gravel underfoot, sending a shower of stones pinging off the stacked wall of salvaged batteries. "Honestly didn't think you'd feel it with so much fuckin' junk in your system," he snaps.

Castiel goggles up at him, presses a hand up to his head. "What are you talking about?"

Dean thrusts his hands into his back pockets, brings them out fisting the empty prescription bottles. He throws them at Castiel, and his friend doesn't even make a token effort to protect himself as they glance off his chest and jaw on their way to the ground.

Cheney whines uneasily and slinks off again, seeking shelter in the shadow of a nearby Toyota pickup.

Castiel winces as he shifts position on the ground, with his broken foot stuck out and leaving bloody streaks everywhere, and his other leg bent to gain traction as he reaches and snags a bottle. He holds it up to the light and then looks at Dean, his astonishment slowly fading into understanding. "Wait...you think – you think I—"

"No, I think the dog ate them, Cas."

And just like that, Castiel is gone.

It has been so long since the angel just disappeared into thin air with a subtle ruffle of wings that for once all Dean can do is stand in the middle of the junkyard, both flabbergasted and hollow of thought. Cold air buffets him as he stares down at the gravel where Castiel was lying seconds ago, and all that's left of his friend is a shredded boot and Dean's own jacket, splotted and streaked with blood.

Dean shivers and hugs himself tight to shut out the wind, but it doesn't help. He turns and tramps back up to the porch, where he can smell the stench of Camels, unfiltered. Meg is seated on an old lawn chair pushed into the space between the siding and the porch swing. Its gaudy nylon fabric is threading out at the seat so her denim-clad ass droops through, and the aluminum arm rests are scratched to shit and discolored where she stubs her cigarettes out and then lets them smolder on the lumber where they fall.

"You know, communication is key in any relationship," she remarks, and she takes a gulp from a bottle of Johnny Walker she has propped against her thigh. A long cylinder of ash is building from the tip of her cigarette, and she lets it, while a skinny plume of smoke whirls out in the chill breeze.

"I agree," Dean snaps back at her. "Got something to say about it?"

She laughs, says, "Talk to momma Meg," and pats the porch swing beside her.

Dean stares at her for a minute. Her dark hair hasn't been washed in days and it hangs stringy around the frame of a gaunt, pale face, and Dean thinks that despite her newfound humanity she exudes something, an unnatural tension. He can't shake the feeling that she's just a simmering nuclear bomb waiting to explode and take them all out in the process, even if he fed her that morning's cup of holy water himself just an hour or so earlier.

"I think I'm capable of fucking up my own relationships, thank you very much," he responds tersely.

She shrugs. "You could always use a little help in that department. Looks like a nasty one this time. Clarence didn't even stop to say goodbye. Where do you suppose he flew off to?"

"I'm sure he didn't go far," Dean huffs, paused with his hand on the knob of the door.

"You sure, this time?" Meg teases. "Maybe he finally decided he had enough of being blamed for things he didn't do, or of all those manly heroics you're so obsessed with."

"Because you've been so successful in your personal life," Dean mocks in turn. "Hey, who were you planning on calling when we got back from the Island of Doctor Moreau, before you shacked up with us? Boyfriends? Girlfriends? Sisterhood of the traveling pants?" He raises his eyebrows as she watches him, puts a hand to his ear as though he's hard of hearing. "I'm waiting. Come on, more cowbell."

Meg's lips pucker like she just sampled a lemon. The ash falls from her cigarette and layers a gentle burn across her fingers. She regards it with annoyance, as she lifts what's left of the butt to her lips to inhale smoke that wreathes out between her lips before answering.

"Oh, I wouldn't worry about me, Dean," she drawls with an eyeroll. "See, I really don't think I'm cut out for this kind of clean living. Besides, your brother's sweetie-pie keeps giving me the evil eye, and Bobby treats me like I personally killed his wife or something. So I'm thinking to mosey on out of here any day now."

"Well don't let the door hit your ass on the way," Dean retorts.

She pulls back her lips from small, sharp teeth. "I won't. But I'm thinking two along the road is better than one, and seeing as how you just broke up with your honeybunny maybe I'll see if Clarence wants to keep me company when—"

"You stop that thought right there," Dean jumps in, with a burst of rage similar to the one he just sent blasting out at his *honeybunny*. "He isn't hitching his cart to a fuckin' demon."

Meg's eyes go slitty and mean. "Now isn't that sweet. Thinking I was part of the human club, just to find out it's restricted." Her voice goes hard. "I never had a chance with you, did I? Nope, you already made up your mind before I set foot in this house."

After a derisive snort, Dean tells her, "My mind was made up back when you were still bottom feeding in Hell, and now you're not doing much better. Maybe if you stopped feeling sorry for yourself you could do something useful, be a part of the group. You know, sitting on a porch drinking your sorrows away won't undo anything Alistair did to you. I know it better than anyone. You got a golden chance to become something better, and you're just drowning it in Margaritaville."

She sets the back of her palm against her forehead in a theatrical demonstration of hurt. "And this is why I turn to smoking, and drinking, and snorting hillbilly heroin in the bathroom – why thank you, Dr. Phil, I was unaware of my emotional damage and thought I was pill-popping for, I don't know, more *mundane* reasons. Like that you suck, for instance."

Dean's mouth opens and closes, and he has to regroup as he looks at her again. "It was you?" he manages finally. "You've been eating the meds like they're Pez?"

"Aw, what's the matter Deano?" she answers. "You didn't think it was Clarence, did you?"

There is something Dean can sense in the syrup of her voice, a slow curl of molasses that suggests she knew exactly what she was doing and how those empty pill bottles might be misconstrued, and yes, she hoped he did think it was Clarence, very much indeed. Dean's brain is a starburst of emotion and thought then, as he filters through it all. Why do such a thing, why put empty pill bottles back when any ordinary person who used them up would throw them away? Why do it on purpose, to create a schism between two people?

He hears himself saying it aloud, his voice harsh with disbelief. "You did it on purpose."

She grins, wide and predatory. "Well, just like your boyfriend once said, I have only your welfare at heart, Dean," she replies. "Surely you know this by now?"

The reference back to R'lyeh only mystifies Dean more. "But he helped you," he protests, and she shrugs.

"This isn't about him." She forms the shape of a gun with her hand, purses her lips to make a wet, whooshing sound. "And you're damn lucky it isn't the super-soaker with the jet pack."

As she stares up at him, unrepentant, Dean is still grasping after a larger picture at work, attempting to pin down conspiracy theories tied to her demon nature, but on that sneered-out reference his brain burns rubber as it screeches to a halt and he realizes the truth: there is no grand scheme behind it. She did it just *because*. Just because she could. Because she still is a moral void even without her power, and in the absence of her ability to torture and kill, she has nothing else to keep her amused and occupied but petty spite. It makes Dean shiver because it makes him think of the dream-vision he had of his soulless brother curling his mouth up into a thoughtful smile as he was turned.

This isn't that, isn't anywhere near that, but Dean makes the decision in a split second, points down the path, towards the gate. "Ten seconds," he rasps out. "Shotgun."

"I'm sorry?" Meg says, as though she didn't hear him right. She leans forward in the chair, a hand up behind her ear to mimic Dean's gesture. "More cowbell, Deano."

But Dean is moving already, into the house and through the kitchen to the dining room, where he knows the Remington Bobby uses for deer hunting is on the top of the old wooden buffet. He leaps up, knocks the old shotgun into his hand, and pulls open the drawer to root out a box of shells. Some of them slip from his fingers and go rattling away from him, but all he needs are the two, as he slides back the action and jams the first one in.

He sees Meg's shadow from the screen door, where what little warm air that exists inside the house is swiftly funneling out into the heartless South Dakota landscape. She scratches at the screen, and tobacco smoke drifts in.

"Dean? Chillax, it was just a prank. You don't really mean—"

"Five," he announces, as he swings the shotgun muzzle in her direction until the sight falls over her silhouette. He doesn't know if it has in fact been five seconds, but he's certain he doesn't care as he takes the first steps back to the porch.

By the time he kicks open the screen door Meg is already backing down the steps, two spots of high color lighting up her cheekbones. "I can't believe I ever thought we had something in common, that we were brothers in arms," she blusters. "Back on the island, when your brother and your boyfriend were —"

"Start walking, or I *will* kick you in the pants," Dean clips out. "I got nothing in common with you. Nothing."

"Oh, you keep telling yourself that," she says, "and maybe one day you'll even believe it." She throws back her head and laughs then, transforms into the Meg he knows, her eyes flashing with life. "Maybe I'll scratch right through my tattoo once I hit the road, see if I can't recover my old vigor," she spits. "Maybe you're doing me a favor after all that. Because when I was bad, I was wicked." She finishes off with a wink. "Just like you."

She pirouettes, starts mincing away from him, swinging her hips at him. And there is a moment when Dean battles with himself, thinks that he should sink one between her shoulders for all the crap she has pulled.

*She's human.*

He keeps the gun trained on her retreating backside.

*She's human*, he tells himself again.

He can just about hear the stream of invective she's hurling back at him as she marches on, cigarette still in one hand and her bottle in the other. She whirls back around, takes a swig like a car refueling, yells at him some more.

"...*dipshit...motherfucker...low-down, cocksucking asshole...*"

She's human, and Dean lets the shotgun drop long enough to yell back, "Yeah, well, at least you got the cocksucking part right."

There's the sound of a tap at the screen door and Dean startles, turning with the shotgun trained on the floor, and he feels his cheeks heat to what he's full sure is hot pink.

Mira is standing behind the screen in a pair of rumpled sweat pants and one of Sam's old shirts. Her face is raw of eyeliner and piercings and the hard angles of her face have been softened by sleep, or maybe by love in its bloom, or maybe by Sam keeping her up all night with his big moose snores.

Dean hopes it's moose snores, because he so damn well doesn't want to think about his brother *doing it*.

Which brings him full circle to the last words that left his mouth, and Mira's stare as she tracks her eyes from Dean's face to the shotgun and back again, this time to his lips. Dean could swear her expression goes contemplative for just a second, before she breathes, "God, this family."



She looks past Dean then, to Meg as she approaches the gate. "She'll revert," she announces matter-of-factly. "It's what she is." She turns and starts padding back through the kitchen, "I would have ended her," floating back over her shoulder, before Dean remembers that he needs her help, and why.

Assuming Castiel even comes back.

*Fuck.*

He sighs, rubs his fingers hard across his brow and thinks about tearing his hair out, shooting random things, or maybe blowing up a car; or maybe all three at once, so he might feel better.

B

Dean doesn't find Castiel in the house.

He pokes his head into the bedrooms and even the attic before he heads back down the steps. Bobby gets in from checking the back perimeter of his property and asks where his batteries are on the way to milk the cow, but Dean waves him off before he stomps down to the iron bunker in the basement, in the hopes that perhaps Castiel is sulking on the old military cot in the corner.

Nothing, and Dean stands dejected in the dim glow of his flashlight, staring at the empty shadows thinking, *come out now, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it, I'm a fuckin' idiot, come on Cas, please.* But he knows damn well that there isn't a single thing he's gotten in life from begging for it, not on Alistair's table and not anywhere else, so he keeps his silence and after a moment he trudges back up the steps and realizes there's one last place he hasn't yet checked.

B

Dean finds him in the Impala.

He doesn't knock on the metal to signal his arrival, or open the door – the only working door his baby still has – but stands outside and watches Castiel where he reclines on the back seat, apparently in a futile attempt to steal some comfort for himself.

Dean was half-hoping that in the time that passed, Castiel might have fixed his foot but it seems he got no further than expending whatever is left of his magic on flight, and the extremity is resting on the center console between the two front seats, bare, its sock cast off who knows where. Dean winces as he studies the injury; the top bones look caved in, the skin is mashed to a bloody pulp, and the whole foot is badly swollen.

He sighs and leans down on the sill. Jagged edges of the blown-out back windshield refract light against Castiel's face and paint a rainbow. When the car's struts – or what remains of them – sag under Dean's weight, Castiel opens his eyes, but he doesn't look up.

"Where did you go?" Dean asks.

"Here," his friend mutters. "I was hiding. And sulking."

"I'm sorry," Dean returns, because he needs to get it out there right now.

The silence remains. It's far thicker now, the tension greater than before, and Dean can't place what it is, what dynamic has changed. There has been far too much shit for them to devolve into this, and he scrubs a hand across his chin, where his stubble itches, and wonders if this is how it happens; if it's one too many fights in a stormy relationship and it falls apart like stale bread, whole and then crumbling, and that's when 2014 comes riding down on them. He saw it in the complicated way *that* Dean and *that* Castiel looked at each other, a hardness in their eyes that bordered on hatred but softened when each thought the other couldn't see. It comes with the loss and disintegration of love, and Dean can barely hold his breath when he thinks of it like that; that love is the key, and to lose it is to change the course of everything, for the worse.

"I'll be back, okay?" he says, and he turns and walks away, boots scuffing through the dirt slowly, and it's another trip up the front steps, to the old hallway closet where the smell of mothballs permeates. He finds the cold steel frame of Bobby's wheelchair by touch, drags it out and shakes it, and the arms expand as it unfolds. He studies the empty form and shape of it, remembers when Bobby used to roll back and forth across the floor and it would make a steady rapping noise. Things were different then. His angel was different then, and so was he, and so was Sam. And they can never go back now.

He takes the wheelchair by the handles, steering it across the floor, through the doorway and down the steps, scouring a path through the gravel before he comes to a stop at the car. Castiel watches him and shivers in the cold.

"Did you use all of your mojo up when you took off?" Dean asks, gentle.

"No," Castiel whispers. "But it will take time to recover. It feels better here in the car, where some traces of it remain."

They do not speak of *grace*, like it was someone who passed away suddenly and without warning, and it hurts to say their name.

"Mira's getting some stuff set up inside so she can take a look at your foot," Dean diverts, and he spends a moment considering how to extricate Castiel from the car, until Castiel breaks into his thoughts.

"Prove you're really here..."

His expression is oddly wistful, the echo of Dean's own plea in the night is yearning, and Dean doesn't hesitate. He opens the door and crowds in to wedge himself onto the bench seat beside Castiel, and he threads his arms under his friend, pulling him close, fitting them tight together, so tight Dean can feel the expansion and contraction of Castiel's chest as he breathes, feel the radiant heat that creeps out of his skin.

"Tell me, love," Dean says softly. "Tell me everything."

Castiel sighs. "It's sharp, this humanity. The host was smooth, with no end and no real beginning, and it just *was*. It was effortless. But this...this *humanity* is messy and ill-fitting, it is hunger, it is exhaustion, it is apathy, misery, guilt."

He's just an inch away from Dean, his breath warm on Dean's lips as he goes on, and his eyes are suddenly steady and knowing. "We are the same, Dean, you and I. This humanity is like broken glass to us, so many shattered pieces, and we feel as if we are trying to fit them all back together to form a whole so that we can exist in this world. But this world turns like a knife in our wounds. And sometimes...sometimes..."

"It terrifies us." Dean picks up what he knows his friend is going to say, whispers it out. "Sometimes it terrifies us."

"Sometimes it terrifies us," Castiel echoes him faintly.

They stare at each other then, for a long time, until Castiel runs a thumb over Dean's lower lip. "Humanity is also this," he breathes. "And I would not be without it."



Dean reaches his hand up to brush back Castiel's hair, grown long and tousled, and here inside the Impala with his angel he feels safe and protected, feels like all of eternity could unfold here between them and this, this is good enough, because they are the same. "I'm going to make it right, all of it," he pledges, and words spill out, words Castiel wouldn't let him say in the other place where he felt the same sense of sanctuary. "Cas, there's times I've taken you for granted, and I—"

"Dean, stop—"

"No," Dean cuts his friend off. "You had your say back on Tu'ugamau." He locks their eyes together, smiles a little. "Don't put me on a pedestal, Cas. Fuck-ups are a two-way street, and I fucked us up too. I let you own yours, now you let me own mine. Okay? And I love you. Always."

Castiel returns his gaze steadily. "I know," he replies.

There is no hint of sentiment in their voices. There is a vein of controlled hurt and overlapping experience that wends through them, around them, binds them tight to each other. They can't be unknotted with words alone.

"I have to try to save what's left of it, you know," Castiel murmurs.

It takes Dean a moment to realize he's talking about his grace again. "You mentioned it."

"You never asked me why. I mean – specifically why."

Dean arches an eyebrow. "Specifically why?"

Castiel's eyes grow fond. "I'm saving it for you, Dean. For 2014. You said—"

"No," Dean jumps in decisively. "*No*. It's not happening. Period."

"Maybe not," Castiel concedes. "But I'm going to keep my grace like a loaded gun in my back pocket until I know we're safe. Maybe that other Castiel, the one Zachariah showed you, took shit from you and walked into the meat grinder on your say so, but *this* Castiel? Isn't going to take your shit. So you suck it up, and realize that I'm going to shoot down the first thing that comes for you. I won't be sticking my dick in everything with a pulse and toking up while you take the hits for the rest of us."

"I didn't—"

"What you're going to do is learn to take orders, Dean. Now, shut the hell up."

"What? I didn't—"

Castiel doesn't let him finish before he catches Dean's mouth with the hot press of his own and gyrates his hips into Dean's, pressing himself there and stealing Dean's breath from his lungs with an artful flick of his tongue in Dean's mouth. He retreats long enough to watch Dean splutter for breath, his eyes just a rim of blue as his pupils expand in onyx concentrics.

When Castiel lets out a hiss as he shifts, Dean opens his mouth to say something and Castiel holds up a finger in warning.

"Ah-ah...what did I say?"

And before Dean can speak again, Castiel closes his mouth with another kiss.

In the end, the pain is too much, and Dean withdraws and lift-hauls Castiel from the car into the wheelchair, all one hundred seventy-five pounds of stubborn, angry angel.

As Castiel stares tiredly at him, Dean isn't really sure if he's any less worried about any of it. But he can fake it with the best of them. "I'd like very much to take some orders from you later, actually," he leers. "But first, let's get you inside, get you patched up."

After some figuring, Dean decides that carrying Castiel into the house is more effective than trying to lug him up the porch steps in the wheelchair, and Mira comes out to help while Dean hauls the angel back into his arms. There is a moment when the wind plays with Castiel's hair gone long and Dean likes him there, seated in his arms. It's stupid and maybe a little girlish, but holding Castiel in his arms gives him the sense that he can hold him forever, defend him, ensure that nothing comes to hurt him. Castiel says nothing but Dean thinks he knows it; that this might have been the pose Castiel once took when he dragged him out of Hell.

Inside the house, Dean smells the astringent taint of antiseptic on the air, and sure enough Sam is in the kitchenette off of Bobby's study, standing guard over a pot of water bubbling on the stove. A spread of towels is on the table behind him, along with a cluster of military grade sterile bandages, and bottles of iodine and hydrogen peroxide.

"You're cooking my favorite meal, Sammy," Dean says and it earns him an amused sound from his brother as Sam ambles over.

Dean lays Castiel out on the broken-in couch and Sam rubs the side of his temple in deep thought as he surveys the damage and whistles. "Shit," he comments. "Can't you just tap into the mojo, Cas?"

"What? It's not that bad," Dean fences, even if he thinks it is, even if he thinks Castiel might not walk right again if he doesn't magic finger the bones back together. "He's saving the mojo for a real emergency."

Castiel says nothing but seems content to palm pain-sweat from his brow and then recline with one arm behind his head as he glances from Dean to Sam and back again. "You know, if it wasn't for the pain all this attention would be quite enjoyable," he observes, as Mira kneels beside the couch and carefully eases the hem of his jeans up and away from the swollen foot and ankle.

Hands gentle, she moves the foot, and Castiel bites back a groan. "Oh come on," she mocks mildly. "Don't be so wet. You've fought off God knows what in Hell twice now, taken on Lucifer even."

Her tone is sympathetic, but Dean still finds himself rocketing from zero to alpha-dog protectiveness at the speed of light. "He says human pain is different," he butts in, defensive. "He's trying to save his grace, and he isn't used to going cold turkey with something as bad as this."

Sam makes a barely discernible noise that might be amusement, but Mira snorts.

"I've seen women squat down to give birth in the dirt without making a sound, then lift up their newborn and start picking crops again," she says, as she twists the foot slightly, along to another stifled whimper.

Dean bristles. "Bobby told me you packed Sam off to bed for a simple headache."

His brother smirks at him. "I'm special, Dean. I get the full bedside manner."

Rolling her eyes, Mira says, "Can you wiggle your toes?"

Gritting his teeth, Castiel squints down at the end of his leg, seems to be willing the digits to move, but nothing happens and his head falls back onto the arm of the couch on a long drawn out gasp.

Mira sits back on her heels. "I can't confirm how extensive the damage is without an x-ray, but if the battery is as heavy as you say then the foot is broken. It's closed fractures, at least, but it'll compromise his mobility. The wheelchair's all right, but I'd hate to think what would happen if we needed to be on the move, and fast."

"That's the least of it," Sam points out. "What about infection? Without the power on twenty four-seven, we don't have the best hygiene now. Simple infections have killed more people than the plague. Get an infection in your foot..." He shakes his head. "Dad used to talk about it."

Dean can remember it, a distant memory, *tell us about the war, dad*, and John's voice a comforting rumble in the night, when they couldn't sleep because the car was freezing cold or too hot for breath. "He said that in 'Nam they used to get fungus on their feet," he recalls slowly, as it comes back to him. "He called it jungle rot, said it was vicious."

"If gangrene sets in and he doesn't have enough juice left to fix himself, we're talking amputation," Sam warns.

It might have crossed Dean's mind already, but hearing it stated so baldly still throws him off, and he flounders until Castiel takes pity on him.

"Don't everybody write me off all at once," the angel says dryly. "I'm sure I'll have plenty of time to chisel my tombstone and save you the trouble."

"That's the point, though," Mira informs him tartly. "This may not be a big problem now, but small problems become big problems fast. We've got antibiotics, but if you're doing this the hard way, we're going to need more just in case. And plaster of Paris or fiberglass for a cast, too." She frowns, adds, "fiberglass would be better, it's waterproof and more durable."

It's something to focus on that isn't the mental image of Castiel biting on a stick while they saw off his foot, and Dean seizes on it. "How about that medical supply drugstore just outside of town? Has that been looted?"

Sam jumps in. "From what Bobby's told me everywhere has been looted, but it's worth a shot. Maybe we can stock up. Painkillers, antibiotics, dressings. They might have crutches too. Could mean the difference between losing the foot and keeping it."

"That's a good idea," Castiel agrees. "I like feet."

Sam raises an eyebrow. "Kinky."

It's forced, because all of them are forcing it, Dean knows, but he plays along anyway and barfs quietly

to the side. "Dude, I will put a lot of things in my mouth, but—"

He's cut off mid-flow by Bobby's footsteps as they clump up the hall from the back of the house, and Sam is adroit at using the diversion. "Have to be going now," he announces, catching at Mira's sleeve and tugging her along with him. "How about you work out your feelings for Cas's feet while you tell Bobby what's up, Dean. We'll meet you at the truck."

Bobby is already glowering as Dean turns, and he stabs a finger towards Castiel as he carries his bucket of milk around them and into the kitchen. "What the hell happened?" he barks, his gruffness not quite disguising his dismay.

"I broke my foot," Castiel tells him glumly.

"He dropped one of your goddamn batteries on it," Dean adds. "I hope your cappuccino is worth it."

The old man fixes him with an unimpressed stare. "I'm sure he can fix it, boy."

"Except that he won't," Dean snaps. "He says he's saving his mojo for an emergency."

Bobby huffs, walks back around the couch to examine the injury, and turns a flat look on the angel. "Well who knows, maybe one will come up," he says acidly.

Castiel flicks his eyes to Dean, and Dean sees his friend's throat flex as he swallows, but then his jaw sets firm and as obstinate as before, out in the lot. His mind is clearly made up, and Dean sighs. "We're headed out to that medical supply store on the strip outside of town, hoping it hasn't been looted too badly."

As Dean turns to go, Castiel catches his hand. "Be careful," he murmurs.

Dean nods mutely, slants his eyes over to Bobby, and the old man rolls his eyes.

"He'll be fine."

And maybe he will, maybe it's nothing, not really. But Dean has a roiling in his gut he finds hard to shake off; a deep and persistent worry that nothing is going to be right ever again and that most of all, neither will he, and he won't be able to control the moment he turns from Castiel's everything, his *all*, into Alistair's most beloved student.

He heads out for the truck, glances back just once over his shoulder to stare into blue and notice abstractedly that Bobby has his hand resting on Castiel's shoulder, his fingers kneading the muscles there.

As Mira's truck, an old GMC with a grille like chromium teeth and mud splatters caked up its sides, jounces up through the lot, under the sign and onto the main road, Dean feels sick but he isn't sure why. Without being able to come up with a concrete reason, he doesn't say anything at all as he looks back at the mountain-mirage of the glamour, even if he wants to tell his brother he'd like a pass on this run. He imagines himself bleating it out, the fact he wants to stay with Castiel because he loves him and doesn't



want to leave his side. *Fuckin' idiot*, he scoffs at himself inwardly for his vulnerability. Now is not the time to back down. No, he has to man-up for this. There might be another time when he has to leave Castiel behind for the good of the group, and love just won't be enough.

### B

Even the outlying areas of the town look eerily dead and empty in the moonlight. Faded signs swing lethargically in the breeze, broken windows and kicked-in doors form jagged eyes and mouths in the storefronts, and abandoned cars dumped at crazy angles block the side streets and parking lots.

Mira steers them through the desolation with her hands sharp-knuckled on the wheel, and Sam points out the slew of parking tickets one last police officer left behind beneath the wipers, as though he were insistent on doing his job even at the final hour, when it was clear no one left to prosecute. "Probably thought he was keeping some semblance of order," he says. "Or maybe just went plain nuts at the end."

The roll slow and cautious down the main drag. There are shapes and silhouettes that might be bodies in the shadow of the store awnings, and a couple of definites beside a cluster of wrecked vehicles. What looks like a child's Barbie doll is lying in the gutter, and Dean fixates on it as Mira navigates around a gaping hole in the middle of the road, its manhole cover conspicuously absent.

"There's the drugstore," Sam points out, and Mira nods once, curt, as she pulls around to the back of the building. They are all on high-alert, eyes darting through brush, around the hulks of rusting cars, trying to see through walls and predict what might be lurking behind every shadow and broken piece of detritus that litters the street.

"I got a bad feeling about this," Sam says as the engine dies and they sit together in the front, contemplating the looming shadow of the local Chet's Emporium.

"You can buy me a postcard and write all about it," Dean retorts. "Let's make it quick, huh?"

### B

Inside, Sam catches a mouthful of spiderweb and spends a minute spitting out bits of dead firefly as his eyes adjust to the dim surroundings. He hears Mira close behind him and then both she and Dean fan out to his sides, flashlights aimed down at the floor as they pick their way through the debris of generic merchandise, junk food and hygiene products, cast aside and kicked around for no other purpose than destruction. Did fish-mutants do this? Or locals? Sam pauses to wonder just how different people are from monsters when they get desperate. Not very, as it turns out.

"Hey," his brother calls out as Mira forges ahead of him into the darkness. "Let's make it quick, right? And no prescription painkillers."

"No prescription painkillers?" Sam asks, sliding his duffel off his back as they duck down the pharmacy aisle. He grabs large bottles of peroxide and rubbing alcohol as he goes, band-aids, medical tape and gauze dressings too, tossing them into his pack. Surgical scissors, always handy; and then, since Dean hasn't answered him, Sam prods. "Why not?"

Before he can register a reply from his brother, his eye is briefly caught by the feminine hygiene shelf, and with a quick look at Mira, Sam shuffles over there, grabs a couple of jumbo boxes of tampons to go with it, ignoring the raised *getting pretty close, huh?* eyebrow Dean sends his way. He's just squatting down to investigate the lower shelves when he hears the muffled shatter of glass, and he turns to see Dean extricating the handle of his Maglite from a display case and using it to knock the remaining shards of glass out of the frame.

"You can't just grab and go. He needs the right size for his height."

Sam looks over to his left to see that Mira is pinning Dean in place with a hard eye as he tugs the nearest set of crutches out of the display.

"They'll do," Dean mutters back, and he sounds distracted because he has been drifting off since they pulled out of the lot. He's worried about more than Castiel's broken foot; Sam can see it in the way his brother's jaw clenches and the muscles in his cheeks twitch, and there's a vertical furrow between Dean's eyebrows that hasn't really let up since he hauled Castiel inside and hollered frantically for Mira.

Mira growls out something under her breath and stands her ground. "Dean, they won't. He's becoming more human every day isn't he? If they're too long, they could damage the nerves under his arms; too short and he'll hurt his back. Either pick the right size, or find some that adjust." She directs her flashlight along the length of the aluminum. "Those don't adjust."

Sam can see that Dean is barely holding it together, his fingers strumming the air, and he thinks he better cut the imminent explosion off at the pass. "Mira, why don't you go get the meds?" he suggests. "I got this."

She looks at him pointedly, and he shrugs. "Broke my ankle first year at Stanford, had to use a pair of crutches to keep the weight off of it."

She nods, runs her hand through his hair as she walks past him. "Stay sharp," she says, jerking her head towards the windows. "Looks deserted out there, but Bobby and I ran into trouble here a couple of months back."

Sam is pushing up when Dean calls out, low and strained.

"No oxy. I mean it. No perc either."

Mira pauses a moment. "We need to stock up on everything, especially if we're hitting the road soon," she responds neutrally, before she disappears back into the pharmacy.

Dean looks away from Sam as he steps up closer, busies himself rummaging through the display, but his shoulders are rigid.

"Okay," Sam broaches as he sets his flashlight on one of the lower shelves and reaches past his brother to poke through the crutches himself. "Far as I remember, the pad is supposed to fall about an inch and

half to two inches below your armpits, and the handgrips need to be even with the top of your hips, with your arms a little bent. He's what...an inch or two shorter than you?"

Dean grunts noncommittally, but he twists around, raises his arm, and lets Sam prop the crutch up against him. "I think these should do," Sam decides, as he gauges the height. "You want to tell me what this is all about?" he adds quietly. "I mean – I know you're worried about him and all, but—"

"Nothing he could get hooked on," Dean grates out. "I can't watch him all the time. So I don't want anything in the house that he could get hooked on."

And it dawns on Sam, and he knows his mouth drops open a little and his eyes widen. "This is about that future vision of Zachariah's..."

Words come tumbling out of his brother in a nervous, high-pitched torrent. "That Cas told me he broke his foot, said it laid him up for months. He didn't say it, but what if that was why he turned into a stoner? What if he started taking the hard stuff then, and that other me just let him? What if—"

"Wait," Sam chips in, hand coming down to grip Dean's shoulder and still the flow. "Just – calm down. Calm down, Dean. Okay?"

His brother stares at him, intense, finally blinks his eyes closed for a long moment.

"That other Cas, did he..." Sam trails off, not really sure of how to ask the question that springs to mind. But, what the hell, just go for it; it's not as if he doesn't know the deal between his brother and his friend, and Dean knows he knows. "Were he and the other you, were they – you know. Like you two are? *Together*?"

Dean's eyes snap open, a little haunted. "Jesus, I hope not." His hand comes up to rub at his brow. "Other-me sent other-Cas walking right into a trap." He sucks in his bottom lip, then shakes his head. "No. No, I don't think they were."

Sam cocks his head. "See?" he reassures gently. "You and our Cas being together, it's a *difference*, and that means something. We changed it all, Dean, we even changed you and Cas. That was just one possible future Zachariah showed you, and it's never going to happen because everything is different now. You and Cas – me too. Detroit..." Sam has to stop and swallow thickly past that memory, and the automatic recall of what followed it. "Me saying yes," he finally manages. "We're out the other side of all of that. It's done, *over*, and none of the stuff you saw in that future is even possible."

Dean loosens up, blows out long and slow, and Sam holds his brother's gaze for another moment. "Alright?"

After a weak grin, Dean nods. "Alright. I'm alright, Sammy."

Sam follows up with a light slap to his brother's cheek, turns to scan the shelves again. "Mira said we should pick up one of those cast boots for him. Same size feet as you, right? Or is he a size sm—"

Mira's low whistle from the back of the drugstore has them both dropping to their knees. She stabs a

finger at the front of the store, mouths, *company*, and Sam cranes his neck to peer cautiously up front. Dean is already on the move, crabbing his way along the aisle, and Sam crouches down to follow him.

"Demons," Dean mutters, motioning to Sam's left.

Sam squints out into the moonlit street, and he can barely see them there, a small group lounging against a car, three or four bulky guys and one smaller figure. He frowns. "How can you tell?"

Dean grimaces. "I can smell their stink. Sulfur. Fuck knows, I had enough time to get used to it down there." He jerks his head back in the direction they came. "Let's clear out, we don't want trouble..." He trails off then, shuffles right back up to the glass. "Jesus."

Sam presses his face up to the glass, scopes the street for whatever has caught Dean's attention. "Jesus," he echoes his brother, as he sees Meg marching up to the shadowy group.

She stops about ten feet away, hands on her hips, waits until the smaller demon peels away from the huddle and approaches her. The moon conveniently beams down a silvery ray of light as the two converge, the unknown demon wearing a dark haired young woman, and they circle each other slowly.

"What the hell is she doing?" Sam breathes.

He doesn't get an answer from his brother as such, just a sucked in breath of alarm. "Meg knows where we're hiding out," Dean says harshly. "We have to get back. *Now*."

Almost as he finishes speaking Dean is already up and running back through the store, knocking display stands flying, twisting mid-sprint to snatch up the crutches and his pack. Sam doesn't hesitate, sets off in pursuit, heaving his own bulging duffel up with him. Outside Mira is already in the truck, poised to crank the engine, and Sam spares a second to throw up a prayer of thanks for Bobby's vigilance in spray-painting the sigils that should protect them on the vehicle's hood and doors.

He piles in as the engine revs, slamming the door as they start moving. Mira guns it, crashes them down the street, and then all is pain, a blinding white-out of piercing agony, and his brother's shouts are drowned out by Sam's own strangled whine as he suffers, and—

*—The dogs are barking up a storm, eyes glowing like lanterns as the moon reflects off them, and the door is crashing open.*

*Castiel is right there, sitting in Bobby's wheelchair, and he looks up with that bird-like tilt of his head and a puzzled frown, and the black-eyed woman in the doorway smirks, strides over the sigils painted at the threshold as if they aren't even there, and kneels in front of him.*

*Something like recognition crosses Castiel's face, and, "You," he whispers. He reaches out as if to fend her off, lowers his brows as he concentrates, and then she's laughing, waving her hand, sending Castiel airborne so that he crashes head-first into Bobby's glass-fronted bookcase.*

*As the demon pushes up and turns, there is the blat of a gun, once, twice, three times in quick succession at point-blank range, and the impact knocks her back into the wheelchair. She casts her*

*eyes down to where blood blossoms scarlet across her chest, looks up again and smiles. "Ouch," she says, and she clenches her fist as she lounges there comfortably.*

*The movement sends furniture flying and splintering, turning the room into a tornado of its own contents that catches Bobby up in its crazed whirl, spinning him around and around like a rag doll until the demon tires of the sport and flicks her wrist, bouncing Bobby solidly into the wall. His knees buckle as he collapses down onto his butt and flops sideways onto the floor.*

*And now Castiel again, and the demon springs out of the chair grinning, prowls up to him, fists a handful of his hair and hauls him upright. Her other hand plays through the air until a vicious shard of glass from the shattered bookcase leaps up into her fingers, and she holds it up to the skin of Castiel's neck as he blinks dazedly at her, presses in until he is choking on his own blood, ribbons of it spilling out of his mouth, and—*

"Sam? Fuck, Sammy."

Dean sounds faraway and desperate, he's slapping Sam's cheek lightly, and they are jostling madly because they're in the truck and on the way back to Bobby's. Sam snakes his hand up, grips his brother's wrist. "Hurry," he gasps. "We have to hurry."

Dean nods. "Are you back? Come on, kiddo, not a good time to flash back. Count with me, twenty, nineteen, eight—"

"Not," Sam grinds out between the pains that lance right through his prefrontal lobe. "Not a flashback." His head must be splitting open, feels like it's about to explode, and he thuds it hard into the window next to him, vaguely hears Mira's cry of alarm at the impact. "Vision," he sobs out through his horror, and he is vaguely aware of his brother's eyes and mouth going comically round with astonishment and disappointment. "Dean...*vision*," he stutters again. "Bobby...Cas. Demon. And...no...*oh no, no, no.*"

## B

*Vision.*

That can't be, because his brother's visions died with Azazel, but Dean can't dwell on it now because the truck is finally screaming in through the gate, listing onto two wheels, and he can see that Bobby's front door is wide open, the dim light of the oil lamp shining out onto the porch.

"Pull up," he snaps to the woman at his side, and he's tumbling out of the passenger door before the truck stops, knife in his hand, *the* knife, because it was a *vision*, even though it can't have been, and his brother's visions were always right. And forget surveillance, forget stealth, forget his own safety; he's doing this quick and dirty because his family is in there, being hurt.

Dean pounds up the porch steps and through the gaping doorway into chaos, upturned furniture, paper, books, as if a hurricane blew through the house. Dead center is the wheelchair he settled Castiel into, lying on its side in the debris, and the familiarity of the image knocks the wind from him in a painful gasp of, "No."

He freezes, captivated for a fraction for a second by the holes torn through its back panel, the blood smeared wetly down the vinyl, before he hears the crunch of boots on gritted glass and he skids himself around so fast he almost loses his feet from under him.

The demon is vaguely recognizable but Dean's eyes range past her and down, to the floor, where Castiel is shifting, groaning and bringing a hand up to his head.

"Oh, don't worry, Dean, he's fine," the woman says dismissively. "I only just got started."

Dean tenses as he pulls his gaze back up to stare at her. "Who the fuck are you?" he growls through the same vague sense of déjà vu he felt when he first looked at her, as she starts to back away, and he raises the knife. "How did you get in here?"

She smiles, her teeth flashing white between glossy red lips, and her eyes dance insolently. "Trade secret," she teases, and she's opening her mouth to continue when a *melée* at the doorway announces Sam, gray-faced but upright and alert. He careens in much as Dean did, eyes darting about frantically, and he almost mows the demon down. She sidesteps gracefully as Sam gasps out names.

"Bobby? Cas?"

"Cas looks okay, I can't see Bobby," Dean says tersely, and Sam detours around him, makes a low sound in his throat. Dean spares a swift glance behind him, sees that his brother is on his knees beside the crumpled form of the old man.

"Is he alright?" Dean snaps. "Sam?"

"He's alright," Sam assures him finally, and Dean switches his attention back to the front, to where the woman is still standing.

Her grin doesn't undercut the contempt in her eyes. "What can I say, I got a soft spot for the old guy," she offers. "I got a soft spot for all of you, actually."

Dean is partway through, "What the fuck does that mean?" when he pulls up, looking at thin air. He doesn't hesitate, turns and flings himself to his knees beside Castiel, who is flat to the boards again and seems out cold, his hairline clotted with blood.

Mira appears behind him from the back of the house, squats and thumbs open the angel's eyes, before gently pushing his hair up and away from the gash. "He's lucky he has such thick hair," she says. "It cushioned the glass. The cut isn't deep, but he'll have a hell of a headache to go with his broken foot."

As she stands and steps around Dean, her boots crunch on broken glass that tells some of the story, and Sam confirms it faintly from his spot beside Bobby.

"She threw him head-first into the bookcase."

Dean's hand is shaking as he lays it on Castiel's cheek, before fixing his eyes on where Mira is

checking Bobby's pupils. "We'll have to keep an eye on both of them for concussion," she decides, before exhaling. "That was too close. How did it even get in here? The place is warded."

Sam coughs then, and Dean looks across to see his brother crawling away on his hands and knees to the trashcan, where he retches for a moment before flopping onto his ass and wiping his mouth, his jaw slack. "Fuck. Dean. She killed them both, I saw it all. Cas...she cut his throat and—"

"What the fuck was that?" Dean jumps in hoarsely before his brother can continue, because he doesn't ever want to think of what might have happened if they hadn't made it back here in time. "A vision? You're having visions again? How the fuck is that even possible?"

Sam stares at him for a minute before his eyes drop and his frame seems to slump. He scrubs a nervous hand through his hair, and Dean knows the damn signs well enough to grate out, "You have anything you need to tell me?"

His brother sighs, his gaze darting to points north, south, east and west before he pulls his huge feet back under himself and pushes to a stand. "There's something I need to show you," he says.

"Now?" Dean hears his voice catch a little in his throat, because he can already tell he isn't going to like this any more than the revelation about the vision. "In case you missed it, that demon had a bunch of co-stars with her back in town, and—"

"Please." Sam finally looks at Dean then, with something like desolation on his face. "It's important. It'll just take a minute."

There's a moment when they're all still, and there's a strange buzz of anticipation hanging in the air. Mira glances from Dean to Sam and back again. "I've got this if you're going to be quick," she says. "Let me just get the first-aid kit."

As she maneuvers past Dean, he reaches to the couch, snags a cushion and slides it under Castiel's head. He leans in close to brush his lips across the skin at Castiel's temple, before turning back to his brother. "This better be good," he gravels out wearily.

## B

Dean hasn't been to his grave, even though he has seen it from a distance, loose earth standing slightly proud of the surface under the tree Castiel ripped up for him so long ago. He could tell it had been filled in, assumes Bobby probably did it so his damn fool pack of dogs wouldn't all fall in there, but he has noticed large, solid objects strewn about it carelessly, even if he has shivered and turned away with no desire to look closer.

Now he is looking closer; in fact he's right up in his own grave's personal space, his brother standing opposite, wordless. Sam is slouching dejectedly, toeing one of the unidentified objects; wood, a short strip of lumber, and there are several other similar pieces flung over under the tree.

"What is this?" Dean asks guardedly, because even if they're within sprinting distance of the house he

doesn't want to be here, wants to be locked inside, safe behind every ward he can think up, lying under blankets with his lover sleeping in his arms. "What's going on?"

Sam speaks haltingly. "When I figured out what Cas had done, I raced right out here and I dug, like a crazy man." He laughs, and it sounds a little shocked at the recollection. "You know that already. And Bobby wasn't having any of it, but I kept at it, and I dug down as far as this wood."

Dean's trepidation only swells as Sam taps his boot on one of the planks, and he casts his eyes back towards the house, wants to walk away from this. "Look," he starts, "do we have to—"

"Bobby used it to cover you up, and all these small pieces..."

Sam looks down, and Dean can't help but track his gaze even if he is reluctant and unwilling, and his sense of foreboding is growing exponentially.

"All these small pieces add up to the top three feet of strips that were about seven feet long, I guess," Sam continues. "Because I dug down as fast as I could, but it was just me and a shovel, and when I hit the wood, I couldn't lift it up. There was all this earth still, weighing it down. But there wasn't time to dig out all the soil, and I was desperate. So I grabbed it and I pulled. With my bare hands. And I focused real hard. Real, *real* hard, Dean...and I felt this – surge. Inside me."

Dean's throat goes dry as he slides his eyes down again, notices how all the short lengths of wood are ragged and torn at one end. "Oh...Sammy, no."

His brother goes on, doggedly. "Anger, power. Like before. And I snapped the wood. It wasn't even that hard to do."

Sam pauses then, waiting for Dean's reaction, his eyes dark and watchful as if he's expecting Dean to explode, to tackle him and sink his fist into his face and maybe beat it out of him, like he tried to do before.

All Dean really feels is a dull lack of surprise and a hollow feeling in his belly. "You should have told me," he chokes out.

"I wasn't really sure," Sam tells him softly through the blanket of silence, and he's telling the truth, Dean can hear it in his voice. "I didn't want to think that it was this. I wanted it to just be faith, like Cas said it was. I wanted that so much. But maybe..." He puts his hands out, palm up. "Maybe this is just what I am."

*She'll revert. It's what she is.*

Mira's words stand out sharp and cutting in Dean's memory as Sam waits for a response.

Dean considers him; sees the boy Sam used to be, earnest and hopeful for better, sees the man who is walking as wounded as Dean is. He's well aware of how Sam's feet fidget and scuff the earth uneasily, how his expression goes even more wary and doubtful, the questions in his eyes more anxious and tentative the longer he waits for a reaction.



*He'll revert. It's what he is.*

No.

*No.*

They are both still here because of each other. There isn't time for rage and rejection, there never has been, not really, and Dean buries the whisper of suspicion that curls around his brain. Sam is a man, a man Dean is proud of; and the moment of reflection cuts through his despair and regret, leaving an incongruous sort of calm and acceptance in its wake. "What you are is my brother," he clarifies, quietly but emphatically. "And it'll be alright."

Sam's face falls from lines of strain into relief, and Dean motions him to follow, starts walking back towards the house, eyes alert for movement that might suggest any kind of attack. Sam falls in beside him, not talking. Dean nudges his shoulder against his brother's, clears his throat, asks, "How's the head?"

"Better. A little better anyway. I'll take something."

"Mira know about all that vision crap?"

After a disconsolate huff, Sam says, "Not in any detail. It was so long ago. She knows most of the other stuff."

Dean nods, speeding up now as they reach the porch steps, and his heartbeat quickens as his mind jumps ahead to the scene inside. "We need to talk about this, how to handle it. Figure out why it's happening again."

"I know."

Sam still sounds a little subdued, but Dean skips on. "But first we need to deal with this mess, work out how the hell that thing got past the wards. Any clues about that in the vision?"

Sam hums, reaches up to scrub a hand through his hair. "No, all I saw was..." He trails off, slows down a little, and Dean glances to his left to see his brother is chewing his lip thoughtfully.

"What?" he prods.

"Cas, he – in the vision, he looked at the demon, and he said, *you*." Sam frowns. "He knew her. I'm sure of it."

It makes no sense but it rings alarm bells inside Dean as he strides in through the door, because the demon had looked at him like she knew him. Bobby is conscious and sitting up on the couch, an icepack pressed to his head and he grimaces at the question in Dean's eyes.

"Head feels like a mule kicked it, but I'll live."

"Did you see how she got in?" Dean asks as he drops to his knees on the floor. "Did Cas let her in?" He slips his hand under Castiel's head, lifting it off the cushion so that it rests on his thigh instead, brushing Castiel's hair away from the patch of gauze taped to the cut on his brow.

Bobby throws him a quizzical look. "Why would he let her in?"

Dean casts his eyes over at his brother before taking the leap. "Sam says that in the vision it seemed like Cas knew her."

The reaction is as aghast as he expected; a high-pitched, squawked out, "*Vision?*"

Dean lifts a weary hand up, placating the old man as best he can, says, "Look, not now, okay? Did he let her in?" while he tries to ignore Mira's sharp gaze from him to Sam and back again as she roots through her bag of medical supplies.

Bobby's face creases in bewilderment. "I got no idea...she was already in here when I showed up." He tugs at his beard, and his face goes thoughtful. "Could he know her from when he was in cahoots with Crowley?"

That's a memory Dean can well do without, but he supposes it's a possibility, and maybe the demon knows him from the courtesy call they made to Crowley's mansion to try to force the bastard to hand over his brother's soul. He's pondering it when a small bottle slides across the floor towards him.

"Only one way to find out for sure," Mira tells him. "We need to wake him anyway, in case of concussion."

Dean can smell the pungent odor of the smelling salts as soon as he unscrews the lid, and Castiel's nose twitches with the first sniff. A second pass back under his nostrils has his eyelids fluttering frantically and he jolts to consciousness with a low cry of alarm. "Dean," he slurs as he blinks confusedly, and then his eyebrows tent. "That's...uh. Ammonia. And eucalyptus."

"Easy, tiger." Dean lets the bottle fall to the floor and strokes a calming hand across his friend's cheek. "You need to snap out of it, Cas. Okay? Everything's fine...but the demon, Sam says—"

"Ruby," Castiel croaks out dryly. "It was Ruby."

The name hits Dean like the concussive blast from an A-bomb. He feels himself tremble, feels cold wash through him, feels freezing sweat suddenly pearl on his spine and start trickling down the hollow at the small of his back, feels a weakness start up at his center and seep out and through his limbs.

He slants his eyes over to see that his brother's face has fallen into a sort of bleak stupor, and he doesn't even know how he speaks while he's trying to swallow his stomach back down his throat, but he knows the words come out, a little winded because he hasn't taken a decent-sized lungful of oxygen in a full minute. "How. How...how is that possible?"

When he looks back down, Castiel's eyes are wider and cautious, fixed unerringly on him, and Dean

realizes he has wound his fingers tight in Castiel's hair at the side, that he's pulling on it, furious, that his rage is charging the air around him as if it's building up to streak out of him like a bolt of lightning, and his lover in the line of fire. He looses his fingers, swallows, lick his lips, and tamps down the desire to holler out obscenities. "How is that possible?" he asks again, softer.

Castiel shifts himself uncomfortably upright in Dean's embrace, his eyes far away and distracted again. "Osmosis," he murmurs. "Osmosis, it's osmosis." He closes his eyes for moment, groans as his breathing speeds up, and Dean has to bite back the sudden horror of what might have been as it hits again.

He pulls Castiel into himself, wraps his arm around him tighter, his hand splayed out where he knows his mark is on Castiel's chest, and he dips his head so he can rub his chin across the top of his friend's head to ground himself. He exhales to steady his voice, glances over again to their audience, three sets of transfixed eyes. "Bobby, do you think it's even possible?" he asks, even though he knows in his gut that it must be because every instinct had screamed at him that the demon was familiar.

The old man throws up his hands. "I don't even—"

"It shouldn't be possible," Castiel cuts in. "But in Hell, Vassago and Gabriel told me that Cthulhu had torn holes between the dimensions, that Purgatory and Hell were seeping into each other, and into the World."

Dean laughs, bitter and humorless. "So what, we're living on the planet Hellgatory? And you're only telling us this now?"

"I didn't remember it until I saw her," Castiel replies, a little testily. "You know things are coming back to both of us slowly."

The angel is squinting a little, as if Dean isn't really in focus, as if he's stoned. *Head injury*, Dean reminds himself. *Not stoned*, and never that if he has anything to do with it. He takes another deep breath, tries to calm himself. "Okay. Okay. But how does this link to Ruby?"

"When monsters like her die, they go to Purgatory," Castiel tells him, a little distractedly because he's floating a hand up to pat at his temple and he's blinking even more slowly than before, like it's an effort to keep his eyes open. "And now Purgatory is leaking into Hell. And we know there are ways out of Hell."

Bobby makes a frustrated sound. "So not only did Cthulhu turbo-charge the bad guys that were here already, but now every single one of the sonsofbitches we've ganked could be on the loose?"

*And this time it's personal*, Dean thinks, and dread anticipation is curdling his gut again as he meets the old man's frank gaze and then darts his eyes to his brother. "They're coming back, Sammy," he says breathlessly. "All of them. Gordon, Crowley. Fuck...*Alastair*."

The chill of deep, instinctive terror he feels at the possibility makes Dean gasp, and Castiel brings a hand up to grip onto his arm where it crosses his body. But Dean is already joining his line of thought to the next dot, and his senses are prickling with foreboding. "The vision," he says. "When you were

having visions before, they went away after we killed—"

"Yellow Eyes." Sam's expression is dark and intense, his tone incredulous. "And now they're back. Jesus."

There is a moment of silence filled with repressed horror, where Dean feels as adrift and confused as he ever has, where he doesn't know what to say or do. He can feel his breathing go irregular and his heartbeat turn staccato, he can hear the blood pulse in his ears. He can see his brother's eyes set on him, Bobby's and Mira's too, and they're waiting for something, waiting for a decision. Time slows down to a crawl, and he can almost see himself, a deer in the headlights, as if he's outside his body.

And then there is Castiel's hand on his arm, pulling him back inside himself with a snap, the squeeze of his fingers dependable and loyal. And trusting, Dean realizes. They're all looking at him with expectation, with the belief that he will think of something, get them out of this, *lead* them.

And lead them he will.

His faked calm is so steely it surprises even him. "We're out of here," he announces bluntly. "The RV's well-stocked already, just grab what you need and load it up. We'll take the truck too. Sam, you got weapons duty, bedding too. Bobby, if there's any books you don't want to leave behind, get them packed up now."

Bobby is already pushing up, but he pauses, rueful. "We'll be sitting ducks out there."

"We're sitting ducks in here." Dean jerks his head towards the window. "She's out there right now, rounding up Team Free Ruby. And there could be worse than her headed here." Even the thought of *worse* gets his gut roiling again, and he stops, forces the fear that bleeds through his bravado back into its dark space before it starts spewing like a slashed artery, puts himself back together again. "Just make sure the RV and the truck are properly warded."

There is a tug at his sleeve then, and, "She was a witch, wasn't she?" Castiel murmurs exhaustedly from where he reclines.

"It must be how she got through the wards," Mira offers with a frown. "Spell work."

Castiel pulls on Dean's arm again, stares up through half-lidded eyes, slurs, "Hexbags...to hide us."

Sam thumps the table lightly with his fist at the reminder, suddenly enervated. "She showed me how to make them."

And she did, but even so Dean is skeptical. "You think they're Ruby-proof? They could be her version of catnip."

Sam huffs. "Well...she always needed to call to find out where I was. So maybe they're worth a try."

"Lavender, hemp, chicken bones, and goofer dust." Dean examines the small glass jars spread out on the table, huffs at the sudden memory of Balthazar, his pale blue eyes avid as they scoured Bobby's refrigerator, and echoes the angel's words wryly. "Bobby sure keeps a beautiful pantry."

Opposite him, Sam picks up a small bottle of tiny, pearl-colored pellets and squints at them. "Spider eggs too. Unbroken."

Dean shudders as he spreads the small fabric squares out across the kitchen table. "They won't hatch while we're wearing these, will they?"

Sam smiles wanly. "They didn't when she made them."

Eyeing his brother for a moment, Dean looks for signs, for that chewing on the insides of his cheeks thing Sam does when he's worried, looks for his eyes going distant, but Sam works on steadily, dividing up the ingredients into equal piles on the cloth scraps. "I'm alright," he mutters after a moment of Dean's regard, though he doesn't look up.

"You need to tell me any time you're not," Dean says softly, and Sam does look up then.

"Anything. Headaches, cravings..." Dean trails off and doesn't clarify what he means by that, but the muscle jumping in his brother's cheek signals the message went through loud and clear. "You're already shining at us," Dean goes on neutrally. "You think you might have powered up when you were digging me out of my grave. If what we think is going down is going down, there's no telling what effect it could have."

After a beat, Sam clears his throat. "I'm afraid."

Out in Bobby's lot, standing beside his grave, Dean looked at Sam and saw a man. Now he sees a scared kid, the same scared kid he has tried to look out for and take care of since he stumbled out of their home carrying his infant brother as their mother burned. "Yellow Eyes got mom and dad," Dean whispers. "He isn't having you. Do you hear me? And neither is Ruby."

Sam stares at him for a moment before he sighs. "What about you?"

"Me?" Dean covers, but he knows what Sam is after and sure enough his brother persists.

"Alastair could be out there, Dean. And what he did to you..." Sam breaks off, passes a hand through his hair and Dean can see it's shaking. "He isn't having *you*." Sam's voice is a curious flat calm as he returns to filling the hexbags. "Do you hear me? If I have to take the bastard out the same way I did before, he isn't having you."

If the chill Dean has been feeling wasn't bone deep before it is now, and Bobby creaking past, his arms laden with books and scrolls, is a welcome distraction.

"We're about packed up," the old man declares, with a regretful glance at what's left on his bookshelves as he deposits his pile into a cardboard box on the floor. He looks back at Dean then, points a finger

behind him, at nothing in particular. "Got something to show you. Sam knows about this already. It's just in case."

Dean knows what it is the minute Bobby detours around the couch, where Castiel is lying dead to the world, his foot encased in a lurid hot-pink fiberglass cast that makes Dean wince every time he looks at it. Bobby heads for the fireplace, but it isn't his journal the old man pulls out of the hidden compartment this time, so there's that at least, Dean muses. It's a small lockbox, and Bobby flips open the top to reveal a thick roll of banknotes, several passports, and a neat stack of business cards secured by a rubber band. "Like I said," he tells Dean earnestly. "Just in case you ever need them and I'm not around, they'll be here. There's no telling what could happen in the future."

"No," Dean says flatly, while his mind's eye flips through vivid snapshots of exactly that. "There's no telling."

He turns as Bobby starts maneuvering the box back into the hollow space, steps over to the couch and squats down beside it, trails his fingertips across Castiel's cheek, and the angel blinks awake gradually. "Up and at it, soldier," Dean says. "Practice riding your crutches before we head out."

Castiel groans and flinches as he pushes himself up, and Dean sighs through the moment it takes for him to get to a point where he knows he can trust his voice to come out steady. "You need something for the pain?"

Castiel considers Dean for a moment before he replies. "I'll manage. It's just a broken foot. Not the end of the world."

The words are simple enough but they're an iceberg, nine-tenths of their importance, their *subtext* hidden below the surface, and Castiel's eyes are tired, shadowed with nightmare visions.

Dean manages a tight smile. "No," he says softly. "It's not the end of the world." He leans in to brush his lips across Castiel's. "There's oatmeal keeping hot on the stove. You need to eat."

"And you?" Castiel prods, frowning. "Have you eaten? Rested?"

He is hungry, Dean realizes, even a little light-headed with it; thirsty too. "I'll get a bowl," he says. "I just have to go see something first."

### B

Outside is cold, and Dean's breath puffs out warm on the frosty air. In the back of his mind he supposes that Ruby could be lying in wait for him but he isn't really sure if he cares, and some small part of him wonders if he might welcome the oblivion of death at her hands, even if he's beginning to think he may never rest in peace or otherwise without someone waking him.

He stands and stares at his car, his eyes running over her battered carcass. He swallows thickly, thinks abstractedly of the *differences* his brother spoke of and wonders if leaving his baby here might be

another deviation that could change it all.

When he hears the scuff of footsteps, the *deja vu* is so strong he swings around on a yelped-out expletive, half-expecting his 2014 doppelganger to loom up out of the night and clock him. When he sees who it is he jumps back like a scalded cat, because there's only one angel whose no-fly zone he has any business being in and this isn't him.

"You made it out then," he offers, once he can find his voice. "We weren't sure."

Gabriel ignores the question, just jerks his head towards the battered hulk of the Impala. "You're thinking of leaving her behind, aren't you?"

After taking a second to compose himself, Dean goes for false bravado and counters harshly, "It's not like I have a choice, is it?" And he doesn't, not really, and he isn't going to dwell on the fact that some small part of him wants to walk away from her ruined corpse. "I mean, I can't—"

"Know what I think?"

Gabriel's eyes are gleaming bright with something Dean damn well hopes isn't mischief. "Enlighten me," he says reluctantly.

"I think it'd be a big mistake." Gabriel leans to look around Dean, and scrunches up his face in mock sympathy. "Oh, I can see why you would, don't get me wrong. Ghost of 2014."

Dean feels a flare of anger sear through him again. "You know about that?" he snaps instead.

"Hive mind," Gabriel trips back easily. "And I was banging the same drum as Zachariah there for a while, don't forget." He airquotes, "Play your roles," before flapping his hands up and out. "Anyhoo. You think walking away from her can change the future, give you that easy ending wrapped up in a bow. But don't make the mistake of thinking geography makes a difference. It isn't where she is. It's *what* she is."

Dean snorts. "Which is?" He doesn't really know what he's expecting to hear, but he definitely isn't expecting the mocking tone in the angel's voice to suddenly turn melancholy.

"Home. Family. A symbol of everything you hold dear, everything you love." Gabriel tilts his head, his eyes narrowing to serious. "And that other Dean let her rot, let all of that rot. Are you going to do the same?"

Stung by that, Dean huffs out his annoyance. "Exactly how am I supposed to—"

"Mind you, fixing her...man, it'd be a chore." Gabriel studies the car, hisses through bared teeth. "Now, I could do it for you. I've been back upstairs, I'm fully charged. I could make her mint, make her look like she just rolled off the production line."

There's a second when Dean is tempted, when he thinks it would be so easy, when he imagines himself tooling out under the gate of Bobby's lot for one last time, *in fuckin' style*; and the picture is undercut

with sheer wrongness, for some reason he can't fathom. But before he can reject the offer or even make the decision that he will, Gabriel starts in again, like he's reading exactly what's on Dean's mind.

"But this is your fate, something *you* have to work at. All of you. Don't just sit there and take it, be proactive. This is your redemption, kiddo. So use some of that free will you love so much to make sure it plays out different from what Zachariah showed you."

A whole *what the fuck?* cascade of thoughts explodes in Dean's mind at the angel's words, and he has to cast his mental net wide to snag his disbelief, his dismay, his disappointment and his derision, and gather them all into something vaguely coherent as whatever adrenaline high has been driving him for the last few hours finally crashes and burns.

"Redemption?" he asks, and he can hear the raw, bitter edge of resentment in his tone. "This world is screwed sideways and dry because of me, because I didn't kill that thing when I was supposed to. I screwed it all up, like I always do. And you call—"

Gabriel cuts him off with an exasperated clucking sound. "This world is still here. It's different, and it's harder, but it's something to be going on with. And, hey – what doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Dean can feel his blood pressure spiking even higher as Gabriel speaks, and he finds he's having to subdue the desire for fast, savage violence, the urge to let rip a right hook into the angel's jaw even if he knows the blow would likely shatter his hand. "And you call this my redemption?" he continues, caustic and uncaring if it gets his ass smited. "Is that some kind of fuckin' joke?"

Gabriel's eyes are oddly knowledgeable in a way that makes Dean wonder if this angel can get inside his head too, see all the crap that is laid and overlaid in there. And maybe he can, because he puts up a hand as Dean starts to burst out another bitter protest, and his tone goes abruptly menacing, like he's crossing the threshold of his tolerance.

"You finished what you started. Better late than never." Gabriel pauses then, contemplates Dean for a few seconds, and then awards him a cheerful, lopsided grin that is at odds with his previous coldness. "You gave yourself, for us. You paid the price. And down there, you were worthy."

All it does is spark that same pang of confused need to know, to remember that this time it was different, that he didn't grow a yellow streak a mile wide down his back. "I was *worthy?*" Dean chokes out. "All I can remember is being shit-scared. All I can remember is running away and hiding."

Gabriel tilts his head, so like Castiel, rocks back and forth on the balls of his feet for a moment, and Dean sees something he never expected to see in this angel's eyes. It's sympathy, and before Dean can react, can reach his hand up to deflect the touch, Gabriel's hand is streaking out and up, fingers extended, and Dean is—

*—jump-starting into motion, hurtling through time and space unfettered, like a comet, until he comes to a skittering halt in the memory of Hell and he sees the Beast.*

*It is made of flames, its orange-red glow reflecting off the sword in Dean's hand, and its lipless mouth is stretched out like a jagged horizon line, its teeth bared to swallow Dean whole. Beyond it, Dean sees*



*Castiel, struggling frenziedly in his brothers' arms, fighting to follow Dean into the fire, his eyes molten but his face set serene with intent.*

*There is a shout, "light the sword, Righteous Man," but it rings meaningless through Dean's fear-muddled head, for the Righteous Man is long dead and buried in the feral half-demon creature he is now, running from shadow to shadow and rock to rock, the heat of the conflagration burning holes into him. He is a tattered, terrified primitive, a sword slapped into his hand as though any part of him could rise up from his atavism to understand what he was meant to do.*

*"You don't have to be the Righteous Man, Dean. You can be your own man. It will be enough..."*

*With those words, something significant, something sentient, floods back into what remains of him. It reawakens a vague recall of his human self, fractured and worn away to trace elements by centuries spent lost in the Lake of Fire; reawakens a dormant memory of love too, and he remembers that he always defined love by action, not words. When he carried Sam from the burning building, it was love. When he spent night after night scouring the land for his father, it was love. When he sold his soul to bring his brother back, it was love. His damnation was proof of love. And his redemption from Hell was love, a love that will gather the broken fragments of his soul together and bring him home again as it did before; and as Dean realizes this and remembers, the scalding flames of Hell blur into the warm, peaceful glow that radiated from the angel who gripped him tight and raised him from Perdition.*

*It isn't anger that surges from Dean's heart through his arm and into the blade. It is love, the elemental spark that soldered an angel's grace to his soul, and for a moment it unites them in a ring of blinding light and thunder, a flash that shines bright over the darkest planes of Hell, silencing the distant cries of demon-things loping through the desolate landscape.*

*"You can be your own man..."*

*There is no ending this on a sobbed out yes and a demon blade pressed lovingly into his hand. He will take up this sword and fight, and go down fighting if he has to, and as Dean's mind forms the thought, the sword bursts into flame. He has no time to marvel that it doesn't burn, because it feels perfect and balanced in his fist as he turns to face the monster and says, "No."*

*He is his own man, and he's going to cut a path into the center of this thing and drive it back into the dark, to end the hurt, to end the pain; and when he is finished, he's going to have the fucking thing stuffed and mounted, and he's going to give it Castiel as a fucking birthday present.*

*He senses a shared inhalation from the angels, as though they pool together an invisible strength, and he siphons it from them with a breath, uses it and is intoxicated by it, as he drives forward and sinks the sword into the monster. He cauterizes its evil with love, and it throws itself forward into the path of the blade as though it has been waiting for this, as though it has been expecting Dean and dreaming of this moment. And Dean realizes that this is what the monster has wanted all along: rest. Peace, and in his confusion and his guilt, he could not intuit it, could not comprehend the hurt inside the monster; the hurt in every monster, including his own self.*

*The blade cuts deep and flames erupt and buffet outwards in a howling wind that rises up like a tornado. Dean feels the crushing embrace of Castiel's arms, yanking him out of the blaze as it*

*detonates, plucking him from the whirlwind, and the backdraft scatters them like kites cutting away into the wind. Dean is boneless and delirious with the power of the sword, the knowledge of what it is like to be an archangel, to be Michael, the one who is like God. He isn't afraid anymore; he laughs wildly in Castiel's arms, even if they are to be lost here in perpetuity, for there is no fear. Why should there be? No matter where he ends up, he will just start over. He will plant his flag in the land and declare it his kingdom, even if that kingdom is Hell, and make it new, in his name, in his image—*

"Careful, there," a voice is saying, its tone sing-song and mocking. "That sounds an awful lot like God to me. That's what too much angel mojo can do to you if you don't know how to hold it—"

"Jesus."

Dean comes back to himself off-kilter, dizzy and dazed, one hand on his car and the other, his right hand, held out in front of him. He looks at it as he swallows back his gasp and tries to get a hold of his racing heart and breath, the hand that held Michael's sword and slew the Beast, and he flexes his fist, thinks of sanctified fire, a fire that does not burn. "I was worthy," he marvels in a whisper. "I was in control. I was myself. And I ended it."

When he looks up, Gabriel is watching him, smiling in a way that seems genuine, maybe even affectionate, his sharp features softened. "You saved us all, Dean," he says again. "You faced down the monster and you said no. And so, we're redeemed. All of us. Including you. And here..."

The angel snaps his fingers, and suddenly there are four wheels and a car door lying on the ground a few feet away from Dean, along with a motley pile of smaller metal parts. "Didn't say I wouldn't give you a head start," Gabriel offers, and he folds his arms and smirks. "Call it an apology for all those Tuesdays."

Dean doesn't thank him, doesn't thank him for the memory, vision, flashback or whatever it was either, because he somehow knows his thanks is unnecessary and out of place. "Will it work?" he asks instead. He's not really sure if he wants to hear the answer, but he plows on regardless. "Are there enough differences? Will it change anything? What Zachariah showed me..." He has to stop as his voice runs dry and cracks on the vision of his brother but *not*; Lucifer, his soft tone dripping contempt. He pulls his control back. "Lucifer told me that no matter what I did, no matter what details I altered, we'd always end up there."

Gabriel shrugs. "Lucifer is in the cage. So there's that."

It's an answer, Dean supposes, but at the same time it isn't. "Until one of his demon drones decides to let him out again," he retorts. "Or one of you guys does."

"Always in motion is the future," the archangel bats back amiably, and his slight frame is already tensing in the way Castiel's does before he takes flight. "We'll drive off that bridge when we get to it."

"What about Cas?" Dean blurts out, just as the air starts to bend. "In the future he was fallen, human. He was..." *Hapless, hopeless*, and the memory hurts Dean as much as his recall of how the devil studied him so clinically through his brother's eyes. "Will he lose his grace?" he manages. "All of it? That other Cas said it was because the angels flew home and pulled up the ladder."

Gabriel pauses, considers Dean for a long moment before he responds. "He won't ever be what he was. He'll hurt, he'll get sick. If he chooses to stay here, he'll age. But we aren't going anywhere, so he won't lose all of it. I'll see to that."

"What about—" The sudden thickness in his throat squeezes the words back down for a second, before Dean swallows and forces them back up and out of himself, even if the thought of what the answer might be terrifies him. "What about the end? What happens to him? He has no soul, and even if he's still got some of his grace, he'll be fallen. A traitor, and—"

"He's not headed back to the Lake of Fire," Gabriel says. "He's redeemed, like we all are. At the end, you'll be together."

It's said with a gentle openness Dean didn't see coming at all, and the gratitude he feels swell inside him is pathetic, but he doesn't honestly give a shit. "Thank you," he croaks, before he carries on, a little breathless. "And is it true? About the planes bleeding into each other?"

On a sigh that seems like genuine regret, Gabriel nods. "It looks that way."

"What can we do about it? Is there a way to stop it, to reverse it?" Dean ignores how the angel's features fall into seriousness, presses him again. "There's always a way, isn't there?"

Gabriel gives him a measured look. "Where there's a will."

*Jesus*, Dean thinks, and it's an unpleasant reminder of this angel's modus operandi. "Cryptic much?" he snaps before he can help himself.

The angel stiffens, his nostrils flare a little, and he bristles obvious annoyance. "I'll be in touch when I know more."

He half-turns, shoulders going taut again. It reminds Dean that there is no real trust here and there might even still be some dislike, but he doesn't let himself be intimidated. He takes a step closer, says, "We're pulling out of here, tonight. And we'll be warded against everything we can think of, including you guys. So – Swan River wildlife refuge, Montana. Hunter camp near Flathead Lake. That's where we're headed. That's the plan, anyway."

Maybe Dean is doing it for when the angel *knows more*, or maybe he's doing it for Castiel, he doesn't really know, but Gabriel nods slowly, so Dean keeps going. "What will you do?"

The grin that flashes back at him is sly. "Use my time more wisely than before."

He's gone then, in a flurry of dust.

Dean looks at the air the archangel filled for a moment, runs Gabriel's words through his mind a couple more times, before he packages them neatly and ships them out to the Nome, Alaska of his brain so he can focus on something he has some degree of control over. He shuffles over to the haphazard collection of metal Gabriel left behind, toes it with his boot, and then glances at his car. Out of

nowhere, it occurs to him that her curb weight is four thousand, three hundred forty pounds or thereabouts, and he slants his eyes over to the two-ramp trailer Bobby keeps parked in the lot and sighs. "Could have loaded her up for me," he grouses. "Douchenozzle."

He's making his way back towards the house when he scents the demon's sulfur taint, and a split second afterwards he feels the same twitching feeling between his shoulder blades that he felt the first time she snuck up on him, in a motel parking lot three months before his deal came due.

He turns, and she's leaning on his baby's remains, waiting. She pushes up and takes a few steps away from the car as he approaches, her teeth flashing white as he slows to a stop and they face each other.

There's a skitter of nerves at the base of his spine, but Dean forces himself to ignore it. "Pretty risky," he notes, "showing up here when there's an archangel flapping about up there."

She puts a hand up to her neck, hooks a small cloth bag on a cord out from under her shirt. "It's the extra-crunchy kind."

Dean didn't really need the confirmation, and he doesn't dwell on the paradox that is his brother sitting in Bobby's kitchen, carefully preparing the same small cloth pouches that might just wipe them off her demonic radar once they hit the road.

He came out here prepared, and he reaches behind himself to ease the Colt out the back of his jeans, even though he knows she will vanish if he does so much as raise it. "Push my buttons," he dares her. "I will go off like a Patriot fuckin' missile, and I will take you out."

She studies him, her expression bored. "You can send me back to Monsterville as often as you like, Dean," she replies casually. "It might buy you some time, but there are so many paths now and you can forget immigration control. I'll be crawling out of there and skipping through Hell to the nearest exit before you know it. And then I'll be coming for you, when you least expect it. I'll toss you back down into the Pit so fast you won't know what hit you, and as for Sam..."

She smiles almost fondly, and some tiny, detached part of Dean's brain notices that she's pretty this time round too, that she's gone for that sultry, dark look his brother seems to have leaned towards since Jess died, and he wonders if that's why she chose the body she's wearing. The thought of her anywhere near Sam is enough to unbalance him for a second, and he has to take another one to breathe through it, to regain his equilibrium and make her his mission. And he does it, because this is about control and he's taking that back, just like he did down in the Pit when he used the sword.

"Oh, you'll be coming for me?" he taunts, his voice dangerous. "Well take a number and wait in line. You don't faze me...not you, not Yellow Eyes, not Alastair. You give me purpose, and fuck knows, I needed it. You give me clarity. You remind me why I'm here, which is to hunt and kill as many of you sonsofbitches as I can." There is a sterility in the pure bloodthirst that sweeps through Dean at the realization, and it hits him then, the sheer irony of the fact that her rebirth doesn't matter. Only his own does, and he gives a wry chuckle at how ridiculous and perfect it is. "The family business...and that fucked-up world out there? That's my killing field as much as it is yours."

He cocks his head, revels in the satisfaction he feels as her expression betrays a flicker of unease. "So

you can send me back to Monsterville as often as you like," he continues, wickedly soft. "It might buy you some time, but like you said, there's a shit-ton of paths out of there now and I'll be skipping through Hell to the nearest exit before you know it. And then I'll be coming for *you*. When you least expect it."

He swings the gun up, squeezing the trigger, and like he knew she would, she flickers and is gone before the hammer clicks on the empty chamber.

### B

The world is on fire.

A '76 Pontiac Firebird purrs down the broken pavement of an old county road that cuts through fields of burning corn and wheat. No one knows who set the fires but they turn the sky from red to orange to yellow to pink.

The man at the wheel of the car doesn't drive her like a sports car, he does her good, like a Sunday ride, like the world isn't going up in flames around them all, like his straight course isn't blocked every now and then by a stumbling figure made of fish scales and sucking lips, or by some warped, grotesque nightmare-beast that crawled from another dimension to prey on everything in its path. He doesn't let them bother his leisurely road trip, just guns the engine and mows them down, and if that doesn't do the job, he aims the flat snub of his Sig Sauer out the window and fires, adding more color to the post-apocalyptic atmosphere.

He's a happy man, a man at home in a world falling apart. And while he can't say for sure what his destination is, he veers down side roads and back onto main drags as though he knows exactly where he's going, no matter how circuitous the route, straightening the car and making a center line over the double-yellow stripes with reckless abandon.

A crystal angel dangles from the rear view mirror. Every once in a while he taps it and laughs to himself, a private joke between him and the figurine that swings back and forth.

Like he knew it would, the day comes when an improbable hourglass curve of a woman in a red dress appears on the road ahead of him. She walks along the shoulder with a jacket slung over her back, and there's a come-hither sway to her hips that speaks of dances long forgotten, dances that shake it out and shake the world. She's got movements in her to charm snakes and cull fire, and the wind that curls around her lifts the aroma of cardamom and cinnamon from her skin, old-world scents in a new world setting. The man doesn't have to see her up close to know that her eyes are ancient, a testament to the fact her roots are somewhere in the cradle of civilization, or maybe even older than it.

The man pulls past her, swirls the car around in a screech of brakes and a cloud of road dust and rolls down his window, grinning like a boy who can barely contain his excitement.

The woman stiffens, reaches up to pull away the dark veil that hangs over her face like a shroud of smoke, and her lips part like the petals of a flower.

"Need a lift, lady?" Gabriel asks. He gestures with his hand and the car door opens itself to her with a creak of metal and chrome.

Turns out, it's just the ride she's been looking for.

13



13

The shattered world they find themselves driving through is no real surprise, because Dean has seen these derelict, burnt-out buildings, looted storefronts, abandoned cars, and deserted streets before. The barbed-wire National Guard Checkpoint Charlies they encounter at regular intervals as they journey are no surprise either; nor are the armored personnel carriers patrolling the smaller towns along the route, where a scattering of real live people, who stare at them with crazy eyes, still eke out an existence in the new world alongside the funeral pyres where the bodies of their dead friends and relatives burn.

Outside of Rapid City they get pulled over by a platoon of trigger-happy airmen running guerrilla ops out of Ellsworth Air Force Base under a commander who's gone totally Kurtz, and they spend a tense half-day trying to convince him they're harmless civilians who just happen to be packing an armory with them as they travel. Dean lock-picks his way out of his cell at two in the morning and breaks the rest of them out within ten minutes, but Sam takes a slug in the right shoulder as they high-tail it out of there. Mira digs it out of him in Rufus Turner's cabin, while Dean holds his brother down on the same mattress where he first turned to Castiel and reached out in the darkness with love in his heart.

Over the border and into Wyoming, they meander through a landscape gone barren and lunar, where sudden downpours turn the road into glutinous tire-sucking mud that threatens to bog them down. One day a fog rolls in, so thick their vehicles labor to cut a path through it. It clears just as abruptly to reveal they are tracking along the lip of an sheer, giddy abyss that shouldn't be there; a jagged Rift Valley

of a crack more than two-hundred feet wide and dropping into endless black, that winds on into the distance and belches steam and smoldering ash. After a couple of miles they get detoured all the way down to Cheyenne by wary marines who don't look old enough to shave, and who point at signs that read *quarantine*. When one of the kids throws a fifty-one-fifty and starts screaming about monsters and zombies crawling out of Hell, his own sergeant shoots him on the spot.

They press on westward, through a landscape changed into something off-world and marked by more nooks and crannies that split the earth's surface and vomit red-hot lava. The atmosphere is heavy with sulfur and a sense of dread that makes the dogs whine and huddle together in the truckbed.

They strike lucky on I-80 when they come across a deserted gas station with a Shell tanker parked on the forefront, its door swinging open and its driver's half-eaten body nearby, gun still gripped tight in his hand. They fill up, top up their supplies and veer north again, towards Kemmerer, and then northwest into Idaho. They keep to the back roads, where it's quieter and there are no troops at all, but the land still yawns wide open at them from time to time, and Dean shivers to think of what might have crawled out of the sinkholes.

Some of the small towns they drive through as they head north still have electricity for a couple of hours a day, even if there are hardly any people left. Roach motels that used to charge thirty bucks a night but now cost five hundred loudly advertise hot running water instead of free wi-fi, and they throw caution to the wind and check into a couple along the road. As soon as the door closes behind them and the wards are laid, Dean slams Castiel up against the wall, and they feverishly tear at clothes, purr their lust and their love into each other's mouths, wrestle each other into the bathroom and under the showerhead. There is no constraint, only want and need; soap-slippery bodies and straining cocks, fingers and tongues on each other and in each other, the air going steamy and muggy while they render each other shivering and useless, before Dean contritely helps Castiel hobble out to the bed.

It's just under four weeks before they grind up the track to the camp, at dead of night.

The moonlit sign over the gate chills Dean, but he sets it aside, mentally vows to climb up there first chance he gets and paint the letter S over the letter C. Catching a glimpse of Risa, her eyes narrowed and suspicious as they drive through the front checkpoint, is no real surprise; and neither is Chuck, clipboard in hand as he waves them along rutted mud-tracks to a group of three wooden cabins towards the back of the fenced compound.

"How's the toilet paper situation?" Dean asks him dryly as he debarks the truck, and Chuck blinks confusedly at him.

"Uh. Under control."

"You should start stockpiling that stuff. Just in case."

Chuck frowns. "Yeah," he mutters, and he jots it down on his list. "You never know."

"Nope, you never do," Dean says.

But even alongside the depressing *deja vu* familiarity of the place, it turns out there are some surprises.

Jonas Harper is one of them, striding up to greet them, and the prospect doesn't bother Dean in the slightest, because he's never letting go of Castiel and Castiel is never letting go of him. He shakes the man's hand, pulls him into a businesslike embrace, and claps him on the back. "Good to see you here, my friend," he says, and he means it.

The high, thin cry he hears as Castiel gingerly eases himself out of the passenger seat of the truck is another thing Dean didn't expect, along with the slightly built figure who is racing up through the trees ahead of Jody Mills, and hurling herself at Castiel. Claire Novak, and Castiel enfolds her in his arms, kisses the top of her head. When he looks up at Dean, his cheeks are shining wet.

"Missouri told her we were coming," he whispers to Dean, after Mills guides Claire back through the camp. "Her mother is here too," he adds, and his eyes are astonished.

There is a second where Dean thinks of warm brown eyes instead of Pacific blue, of soft curves instead of angles and solid muscle, when he remembers baseball games, barbecues, and yardwork; and the memories tighten his chest. He tamps them down, focuses on the fact Amelia and Claire Novak are a difference and he still wants to think that maybe these differences mean something, even if Gabriel left him in the dark on that.

## 13

On the morning after they arrive, Dean wakes at six-fifteen. He's warm, comfortable, and the drape of Castiel's arm across his belly is heavy and reassuring. He feels safe for the first time in weeks, and he savors the knowledge that there is a camp full of hunters outside, that he can relax his guard and just *be*, for a while at least.

It's dead quiet but for the steady breathing next to him, and after Dean's eyes adapt to the gloom he spends a few minutes gazing at the rough pine beams overhead before he twists his head to watch Castiel sleep, studying the thick black fringe of his lover's lashes, the line of his jaw, his loose-limbed unconsciousness. He slides stealthily out from under Castiel's arm, and then out of their bed after that brief benediction, pulls one of the blankets with him and pads into the bathroom to take a leak before sneaking outside, still bare-ass naked under the fabric.

The sun is just rising, but it's light enough for Dean to scope their surroundings as he stands on the rough wood porch. Spruce trees surround them, their dark green foliage a reminder of his own tree, back in Sioux Falls; and there is a cluster of smaller cherry trees to the right. Through their branches, in the distance, he can see the lead-gray lake, bordered by the Salish Mountains on the western horizon, and he admires them for a moment, muses that this place feels oddly peaceful, that he feels safe.

Smoke is rising up in plumes from the chimneys of some of the other lodges, and Dean makes a mental note to shove a couple of logs in their own stove before he crawls back into bed. Their own cabin is set back, surrounded by grass and shrubs that remind Dean of how he helped Castiel plant seedlings in Missouri's garden. She's here somewhere, he knows, and he grins at the thought that she's probably known they were on the road and headed this way for days.

His gaze tracks to the bones and moldering skin of his car then, where she languishes on the trailer



Bobby and Sam helped him load her on to before they pulled out of Singer Salvage for the last time. It's *what* she is that matters, and, "I will fix you," he pledges.

"We'll fix her together," Castiel says from behind him. He's yawning as he steps up behind Dean and leans in to nuzzle at the back of Dean's neck, but he's wide awake lower down, and Dean can feel the jab of his dick as it pokes inquisitively at his ass through the blanket, feel the vibration of Castiel's lips as the angel growls possessively into his nape.

Dean turns with a grin, opens his arms wide, and wraps Castiel in a blanket-warmed embrace. He feels his own semi hard-on throb as it collides with the hard bone of Castiel's hip, and there is something in Castiel's eyes right then, a softness that makes Dean feel suddenly shaky with want, makes his heart do a swooping barrel roll inside his ribs. "I feel like I'm exactly where I was meant to be," he says, impulsive. "With exactly the person I was meant to be with."

Castiel's eyes widen in response, his mouth curving into a smile that looks delighted. And they haven't, not since before the Beast; but now, here, with the future opening out ahead of them, Dean wants it, wants to be *past him*, because that Castiel had liked *past him*. He leans in, snatches at Castiel's lower lip with his teeth. "I want you inside me," he murmurs. "I want you to—"

*Shut the fuckin' door*, comes bellowing in from outside, followed by raucous hooting and cheering.

Dean jumps a foot off the ground, whirls at the same time as his blanket falls away, to see Risa and a couple of burly, bearded guys spectating through the wide open door from ground level. Risa's eyes go round as her gaze drops down to Dean's crotch, and she nods in approval and gives him a thumbs-up sign.

Dean vaguely thinks she's never getting near his dick, *fuck, no*, because his only connection is with the man behind him, and then Castiel is laughing, swinging him around and slamming the door on their audience.

Castiel clumsily bustles Dean back to tumble them onto the bed, where the early sunlight is playing weak gold rays across the quilts, and he starts to rain kisses down on Dean until Dean squirms, before he rolls them so Dean is above him. He clamps his hand to his mark on Dean's shoulder and stares up then, eyes brilliant, hair mussed chaotically, mouth wet and flushed, and the line of his cock like steel along Dean's belly. He blinks slow enough for it to be flirtatious, even if Dean isn't sure if it's consciously so, hooks one leg around the back of Dean's thighs and grinds up into Dean, humming a sweet note of obscene pleasure as he does. "You should lock the door," he suggests.

*Hell yes*, and Dean scrambles up and away, almost sprints back to the door to throw the bolts across, top and bottom. He swivels back around, and for a moment he's lost in appreciating his lover's body; his long, muscled form spread out diagonally across the bed, one leg bent and his good foot braced on the bed end, his dick bobbing lazily in Dean's direction as he waits. Dean doesn't suppress his low wolf-whistle, and Castiel pushes up onto his elbows, his expression quizzical.

"Are you coming?" he asks, and Dean smirks.

"I will be."

Castiel studies Dean, his gaze as calculated as if he's taking Dean's measure, and any remaining subtlety is gone as he reaches down to grasp himself and strip his cock once, twice, three times, slow and deliberate, while he licks his lips. It's debauched, and Dean corrupted this angel of the Lord himself, and *fuck*, he feels a sharp throb in his own dick as his face splits in a smile he can't help. "Horny little bastard," he notes appreciatively. "You're damn lucky I love your cock."

He pads back to the bed, crawls up as far as he has to, leans down and seals his mouth around Castiel, smirking at the angel's whimper as he slaps the flat of his tongue under the ridge and suckles so hard he tastes salty droplets. He pulls off with a pop, presses a gentle kiss to the tip, looks up to where Castiel is blinking hazily at him, and grins. "I packed the tattoo gun," he says huskily. "I love this cock so much, I'm thinking to tattoo property of Dean Winchester along the side."

Castiel's eyes widen and Dean chuckles, swallows him down again. Teeth, a blunt scrape along the spine, thick satin-smooth hardness in between Dean's lips, and Dean will never get tired of this kind of worship. He exhales as he swallows Castiel as far as the root, the head butting up against his soft palate. Castiel's fingers card convulsively through his hair and he starts making shallow thrusts, uncoordinated and jerky. The taste, the smell, the heavy, full feel of Castiel on his tongue, and the steady, needy keening Dean can hear from the other end of the bed are intoxicating and so erotic Dean's own dick throbs painfully, but he holds off his lust. He slides his fingers back behind Castiel's balls and into the cut of his ass, back and forth, keeps mouthing and sucking at his friend's cock, relishes it until it swells succulent and surges up aggressively.

A garbled cry signals Castiel's release and warm, brackish fluid hits the back of Dean's throat. He drinks his fill for a moment, until he is hauled up and Castiel is licking into his mouth, a savage, forceful kiss that abruptly turns to a slow, reverent brush of lips and curving, twisting slow-dance of tongues that lights sparks in Dean, makes his chest tighten and his heart skip. He doesn't want to face the world, wants to hang onto this for as long as he can, so, "We should call in sick today," he murmurs. "Stay in bed. We have coffee, soup in those cans. We'll tell Sam and Bobby we're infectious. Quarantine ourselves for their own good."

Castiel hums, stretches like a lazy cat underneath him, and his fingers trace an idle, meandering path up the ridges of Dean's back. "I take it sex is the cure?"

Dean smirks. "Your dick is sick. It'll be needing the kiss of life. Frequently."

"But you're not really going to tattoo it are you?"

Partway through nipping at the hinge of Castiel's jaw, Dean snorts. "Trust me. I got a steady hand. You know that already."

Castiel's hand is spread on Dean's right ass cheek, his fingers massaging into its curve. "I do trust you," he says thoughtfully. "It's just that—"

"How much?" Dean asks him, pulling up to fix his friend with a stare.

Raising an eyebrow a little suspiciously, Castiel tells him, "Considerably. But...possibly not *that*

considerably."

But Dean has already moved on, and he curls his lips up into a sly smile. "I got a better idea anyway."

In Dean's back pocket he keeps a blue kerchief; it's the sort of thing that's just a staple of life, useful for wiping motor grease off his hands or lighting a Molotov cocktail in a pinch. He keeps them in the glove box and the trunk and in jacket pockets. The one poking out of the careless puddle of denim his jeans make on the floor next to the bed is clean, and he reaches down to hook the corner of fabric and whip it out. He stretches it between his hands before he looks to Castiel. "Do you still trust me?" he asks softly.

Castiel's features are absolutely still, impassive. "Of course."

Dean pushes up to stand, moves to the window, pulls the heavy curtains across to cut the beam of morning sunlight off. He pads back to the bed in the semi-darkness and knees his way up it so that he's back on all-fours and gazing down. He slips a hand under the back of his friend's neck, pulls Castiel up as he leans down for another long, slow slide and press of lips and tangle of tongues, warm and wet and gentle, before he nuzzles his way around to the shell of Castiel's ear. "Let me blindfold you."

Castiel tenses from instinct but Dean doesn't wait for protest, he pulls back, swoops the bandana deftly around the band of his friend's skull and ties the end into a neat, comfortable knot. There is a runnel of sweat now on Castiel's brow, and his throat flexes as he swallows.

"Dean?" he broaches uncertainly.

"I'm here," Dean soothes him, even as he shifts away, plants his feet back on the rag rug beside the bed, and takes a few steps backward. "Just a sec..." He knows Castiel is utterly familiar with his hungry, insatiable nature, knows too that the sudden distance must be confusing, but for Dean it's all going according to plan, and he shivers with a quiet excitement as he concentrates and closes his own eyes from the dark corner of the cabin. "I just—"

"Didn't you go when you woke up?" Castiel interrupts, with the irritable patience he has patented.

Dean snorts. "Not that. Idiot." He drags his voice down to a whisper he hopes is seductive. "Just put your hand over your chest."

Castiel tilts his head, hesitates, and then his hand trails slowly up across his belly and ribs to map his chest, where Dean's handprint marks his skin. His fingers fit into the shallow grooves and stay there.

Dean closes his eyes as he reaches up to settle his palm over his own mark, where Castiel once pulled him from Hell in another lifetime. When his fingers find the outline like a glove, there is a sensation of free fall, of continuous darkness that is meaningless, and for a moment Dean thinks it won't work, that Gabriel lied, that there is nothing left of Castiel's grace and that the thread that linked them frayed and disintegrated with it.

*Damn you*, he's thinking at the precise second his flesh tingles; a buzzing sensation in his fingers signaling that something is happening, not only deep in the nerve fibers of skin and muscle, but on another dimension of sensation. In the next second, the distance between where Dean stands and where

Castiel reclines recedes as they connect through their scars, and Castiel hisses sharply.

"Damn me?" he asks balefully. "Really, Dean?"

Dean grins, his eyes still closed. "Not you. Never you."

"You should know better," Castiel reproves him. "This is my realm."

Dean's eyes are still closed, his hand still planted over his mark. "I thought it might be fun to experiment with, you know?" he defends. "But I didn't know how much mojo it would take to—"

"Do something like *this*?" Castiel offers, and suddenly Dean feels the hot press of lips against his mouth, splitting his open and seeking the warmth there.

The lips withdraw long enough for Dean to gasp out, and then the ghostly mouth is at his chin, flowing down the angle of his jaw, where the skin is tender and sensitive. Teeth track their way through nips and bites, until Dean is shuddering with it all, gulping in great swallows of air without meaning to. He knows that if he opens his eyes, there will be no mouth there at all, that Castiel will still be on the bed without ever having moved. They need only think of something and they can make it possible through their shared link.

"Yeah," he croaks. "Something like that. One of those weird *you* things. But, you know, with your tank running on fumes..."

"Shhhhh, love," Castiel hushes him softly. "Picture this cabin. But don't open your eyes, or the link will break."

Dean nods, sets himself to imagining their new home in all of its defects: the knots in the woodwork, the draughty casement windows, the four-pack of toilet paper at the door, and the box of canned and dried foods and MREs beside that, the rat droppings he noticed under the bed from when one made a home there over the winter. Its comforts too – the kitchenette with the old wood stove where Castiel can cook up meaty stews and bake pies, the overstuffed couch in the corner, the thick piled quilts and blankets, and the warm body that will meet and match him there.

"Now, picture the cabin without the roof."

Dean takes the roof apart inside his head one shingle at a time, dropping them onto the ground in the surrounding area, followed by the joists that support the long slats of particle board. He casts each element one by one onto the grass as though a team of day laborers is doing it for a massive roofing job, until the sun pours in and drenches him, so real in his vision that he can feel its warmth and red-golden glow on his face.

He thinks of Castiel and his mind turns to his friend laid out on the bed, his hands behind his head, the kerchief still covering his eyes and his lips curved into a contented smile. Beneath Castiel is a dark-colored down comforter that Dean can't remember having seen before, because it's ripped open and bleeding sable-hued feathers. In the next instant he realizes it's not a comforter at all – it's Castiel's wings, folded behind him. They are faded and diminished compared to how they looked when Dean

combed his fingers through them as Castiel rocked his hips and drove himself hard into Dean in the waterfall cave, but still there, despite everything. How much longer he will be able to unfurl them is a question for the future but for now, Dean puts it out of his mind for fear the entire world as they have constructed it together will fall apart.

"You're beautiful," Dean whispers.

Castiel reaches a hand to Dean, beckons. "Come here."

It has the note of order, and Dean grins. "You telling me what to do, now?" He can tell Castiel is rolling his eyes behind the bandana even though his own eyes stay scrunched tight-closed, but his tone is softer and indulgent when he speaks again.

"Do you remember how we joined back in the cave Dean?"

The memory of the pleasure that flashed through every cell as Castiel's light flooded into him makes Dean shiver, sends a delicious thrill of electricity zipping down to the tip of his cock and curling its way around his balls. "Fuck, yes," he replies faintly.

Castiel smiles. "There is so much more we can do. But you have to keep your eyes closed."

There are several seconds of time when Dean is suddenly so sexually excited that his dick throbs almost painfully and all rational thought empties out of his head, but he has the presence of mind to hold his ground in this daydream land supported by their shared link, his mind's eye staring agog as Castiel's grin widens. "More?" he replies, and if it comes out as a raw gasp, he doesn't even really care.

"Human lovemaking is enjoyable because it's physical, Dean," Castiel murmurs. "But that physicality can be limiting simply because it's physical. With this link, we just eliminated all the constrictions of matter, and molecules, and elements. So...do you want to know what it's like to make love without limits?"

Dean feels the breath punch out of him and a scorching flood of heat travels from his chest to his groin, like someone just laid a hot muffler on his belly. He has never thought of the metaphysics of sex and this began as a fun experiment, but it hasn't ever occurred to him that maybe this is the sort of thing Castiel might have fantasized about, that there were other ways to make love, and *holy shit* he's thinking, *like, more than human?*

"What does that even mean?" he marvels, his eyes still glued shut. "Is this how the angels cloud seed? And won't it wear you out?"

The angel pushes up to sit on the bed, flexes and stretches his bad foot luxuriously before setting it on the floor without a wince, gently tugs the kerchief down and away from his eyes, and leaves it in a loose ring around his neck. "We have time," he tells Dean. "We can *quarantine* ourselves afterwards. Until we recover."

His wings are still raised up behind him, flaring soft and rippling brown, gray and teal, like a giant hawk's, and Dean can remember how gossamer soft they felt as he carded his fingertips through them,

the way Castiel shuddered and moaned as he groomed them, the way they cocooned him and he felt warm, protected. *Safe*.

And that's it. He is *safe*, and, "show me," he croaks.

Castiel is still there on the bed one second, and then in front of Dean the next and Dean hears the faint echo of his wings beating the air before silence falls. Castiel's eyes make blue circles inside rings of smoky gray, his lashes like charcoal marks on an art drawing.

"Are you afraid?" he whispers.

"A little," Dean concedes.

"There's a part of you that likes that."

"I didn't always," Dean mutters, even if he's aware that Castiel knows. "I didn't *before*."

Castiel tilts his head and Dean experiences a dizzy sensation, a whiffle of air in the still room. He feels as though a hand is caressing the back of his head even though Castiel is in front of him and not even touching him yet; it's like his brain is a file cabinet and Castiel is flipping through inventory cards.

"Find anything?" Dean manages.

"Just your memories of Hell," Castiel confirms, before adding more darkly, "The things that happened to you. They things you did. They are still resonant."

And with that, Dean senses the mental filing cabinet slamming shut, the clink of steel as the padlock closes, and he lifts his chin, crosses his arms over his chest, defiant. "Which ones are strongest?"

Castiel's features soften. "The memories of the people you tortured."

Dean closes his eyes for a moment before opening them and looking at Castiel. "Maybe because I need to hold on to those closely, to remember what happened. To remember what I became. Show me them."

Castiel crosses his arms in a mirror of Dean's own stance, and his wings bristle and flare in what Dean thinks might be frustration. For a long moment, he fixes Dean with a hard stare that makes his caving in all the more unexpected. "I will. But in remembering, maybe you also need to forgive yourself."

Just like a lifetime ago, Castiel raises his hand and pushes two fingers into Dean's forehead. The second they touch home, it feels like a starburst, an engine revving and combusting behind Dean's eyes. Every unwanted memory from infancy to adulthood has been buried there in hidden spaces, in bricked-up nooks and crannies; but they explode out now, and in a fraction of a second Dean discovers the forgotten fragments of himself, for he is a creature of many parts, like his beloved car, restored twenty times over now.

He peers back through the territory of years, through a childhood spent barricaded in sleazy motel rooms caring for his brother while John Winchester was out chasing shadows in the night. He sees

himself rocking a fretful infant in his arms, helping a toddler take his first steps, teaching a preschooler his letters using the funny pages, poring over homework with a shaggy-haired tween who doesn't want the life they lead. He sees himself in a field in the middle of nowhere on the Fourth of July, showing Sammy how to light the fuse on a firecracker and run like hell, watching his brother leap and dance under cascading sparks, while Bob Dylan rings out through the night from the cassette player.

He sees himself sitting and watching the door, waiting for the fumbling of the key on the other side, because *goddammit*, he had wanted a father as much as he wanted his mother, and instead he got a broken shell of man eaten through by revenge, like wood decimated rotten by termites.

*His real father found him in Hell.*

A new father, a father who knew what Dean needed and knew what he was; knew he was a worthless shit of a man, not a man at all, *less than a man* even, who couldn't save his brother without fucking that up and selling his soul in the process. This father knew Dean didn't deserve love, gave Dean what he did deserve, and when he was done giving Dean his discipline and his due diligence, he started to take things *away* from Dean; flesh and bone, dignity, self-respect, sanity, all pared away, in perpetuity.

When his new father had given him every hurt, and stain, and scar he deserved, Dean was ready.

Dean was prime.

Dean was a new animal.

He sees his true self now; a demon crawling from the broken, discarded human chrysalis where he pupated, ready to hurt, ready to slice. His eyes are black pools he sees reflected in his father's eyes each time Alastair leans in for a kiss, and his mouth cracks and splits at the corners with its grin as he circles his rack and cuts deep, slices away the soul's humanity and in doing so, his own. The soul he has nailed there is screaming so loud and hard he can't tell if was man, woman or child, but no matter. They all sound exactly the same whatever they were up in the World, and their sweet song carries —

His cry rips out of him, louder even than the soundtrack of Hell.

B

Castiel slaps Dean across the face.

It's all he can think to do to bring his friend back from the shock and horror, as he stands there with his mouth agape and his eyes fixed in a thousand-yard stare. With the sharp snap of the impact, their imaginary world shatters and they are their human and vulnerable selves again, back in the rough wooden cabin, with Dean's hand streaking up to press to the scarlet patch burning his cheek.

"What'd you do that for?" he gasps.

Castiel feels a sudden fury, at Dean, at himself for giving in, because some things are better off kept secret. "You were supposed to remember, not lose yourself in it. There's a difference."

Dean has turned back as Castiel speaks, but he's quiet. One hand reaches up to scratch at his neck while he stares obstinately at the floor and chews on his bottom lip. "They'll be looking for us now," he says finally, haltingly. "All of everything that ever walked the Pit, everything we ever put there...all the souls I tortured down there, crawling back up to the World to end it and end us. Alastair too, maybe." His shoulders slump, and he sighs. "The tab is too big, Cas. Fuck, this is my fault. If I had just held on back then, if I had been stronger, if—"

"No. No you don't."

Castiel is done with Dean's guilt, surges forward almost reflexively. He swallows Dean's words down into himself, a feverish clash of lips and teeth, hands pulling Dean in against him; and Dean is already meeting him, grinding against him, panting hot breath into his mouth as he paints fingerprints down Castiel's spine.

"Never say that, ever," Castiel growls into Dean's open mouth, as he separates them for long enough to suck in a breath and say what he wants to. "You held on. You were strong. It wasn't your fault, any of it. And this is not the end, Dean, it's the beginning. We start over. There is no past in the future...there is no guilt, no pain, no destiny, no God. There's just us, you and I, and now we get to do something about our crimes and our sins..."

Dean groans into Castiel's mouth and his hands are swift and skillful as they find Castiel, hard and hot at his center, eager and wet at his tip. The sensation Dean's touch arouses is all-human, complete with the many autonomous intricacies that Castiel still cannot recover from and struggles to keep up with and comprehend; how his skin flexes and molds and tingles, how it perspires and shivers as Dean strokes and squeezes, how the blood races in his veins and his heartbeat pulses and pounds out of control in his ears, how he craves Dean with a passion that is carnal. This humanity is base and filthy, and all the more glorious for that, and Castiel's need is raw and dark, and when he presses his hand to his mark on Dean's shoulder and leans in to suck at the tender skin under Dean's ear, Dean makes a sound in response deep in his throat.

"I want you inside me, Dean," Castiel breathes into the skin under his lips, and Dean locks tight under his hand, before there is a wild, horrifying flood of more recent memories cascading through their link; of the boat, of frenzied, painfully dry thrusting and Dean's teeth breaking the skin of Castiel's neck as he clung on. It makes Dean flinch, but Castiel's palm is pressed to his cheek then, his head dipping forward until their brows meet.

"You don't belong to Alastair," Castiel whispers, and his mouth is gentle then as it plays across Dean's. "You belong to me. Make love to me. Make love to me, Dean. I need to feel you inside me, like I did then."

It must wake something inside Dean, because he gives a low, rasping cry and spins Castiel around so he faces the cabin wall, his hands spread over the old pine. Dean's fingers are like iron vises gripping the slide of skin over bone at Castiel's hips, and his lips seem to dance everywhere at once across Castiel's skin and down his spine as he sinks to his knees, teeth grazing Castiel's vertebrae as though he could locate a seam he might tear into, one that would open him up to the angel buried inside. His thumbs are sliding across Castiel's ass then, pulling the globes apart, and his tongue is blistering hot as it licks



intimately up and down, across and in-in-in, its sharp point slick and torrid. And Castiel *wants*, as much as he ever has, and he gives himself up to the heat that is searing through his groin, leans back into Dean. But Dean is pulling away suddenly, his fingers falling loose and trembling at Castiel's hips, and from behind him Castiel hears the sound of a choked sob, as though his friend can't bring himself to continue.

"You belong to me, Dean," Castiel reiterates firmly. "We belong to each other."

Dean sighs as though Castiel's rumbling command has snapped something in him with sound alone, severing the bonds of hurtful memory and breaking their hold over Dean the loyal son, the hammer, the obedient student, the demon he became. Just like he did in Hell, as the Beast loomed up to swallow Dean whole, Castiel gives Dean something he has never known – permission to trust himself.

Dean moves behind him and there is a moment of reaching and rummaging, the click of a plastic cap echoing loud in the silence, before a hand snakes around and up Castiel's abdomen to fit itself to the brand on his chest while cool, slick fingertips track their way into the crease at the base of his spine, to the rim of him, his small, tight core. Dean paints a trail there with his touch, spreading the muscle like butter, easing Castiel open carefully with one finger, two, three, crooning and nuzzling at the nape of Castiel's neck as Castiel grits out a needful, "Yes...yes."

It goes on for long moments, Dean's fingers insistent, the sting of them subsiding to a dull ache of want, until they slide out and Dean presses himself the length of Castiel, so that he can feel the smooth dome of Dean's cock press at him before Dean hesitates.

"This is where I belong," he whispers.

And then the arrow of Dean is there; solid, iron-hard length pressing up through the flesh, too much, too thick, too full. The heavy drag of it electrifies Castiel in the ecstatic borderline between pain and discomfort that serves as the prelude to pleasure; and still it isn't enough and he hears himself moan wantonly as he pushes back onto Dean, needs to feel every inch of Dean split him apart and plug the wound.

Dean drives in to meet him with a hoarse grunt, and slaps a hand into Castiel's hair, tangling his fingers in it so he can pull Castiel's head back to suckle at his neck while Castiel shudders and adjusts around him. Castiel opens his mouth, and when he does Dean covers it, smothers his cry, and Castiel bites into the webbing of Dean's thumb, licks his way to the delicate skin of Dean's wrist. Dean's other hand makes a path from his chest to his hip, and from there to the patch of dark hair that rings Castiel's straining cock, and he grips the shaft, strips it in a loose fist. The motion tears gasps out of Castiel, as he gazes down at the pad of Dean's thumb rolling languidly up and over the cap, gliding slick through the dew drop at its seam and spreading the liquid across the glossy purple skin there.

"Aren't you afraid of me?" Dean whispers, his breath skittering giddy across Castiel's skin.

Castiel smiles against Dean's palm. "I want it all," he breathes. "All of you. Always."

Dean husks out a possessive sounding snarl that might be Castiel's name, pulls away and thrusts forward, and Castiel feels the golden tap against the inner spot as Dean claims him, thrums with the

sensation as it bursts and spasms inside him, and then again, as Dean finds it with purpose and rams into it over and over. The ache of it is blissful, and already the edges of Castiel's vision are blurring, the world gone white-hot as his orgasm swells up and explodes, seismic waves rippling out. He comes with a stuttering cry, his forehead pressed against the wall and his legs shaking, blinks down at the milky liquid that spurts, and coils, and trickles lazily over Dean's fingers. He doesn't have to ask to know that Dean is doing the same, his rhythm faltering and a breathless whine ripping out of him as he pushes forward and expends himself in a last slam-thrust of energy, followed by a flood of liquid heat Castiel can feel pulsing inside him.

Dean slumps against Castiel's back for a moment, breath heaving in and out, mouth damp and slack on Castiel's skin, his arms dangling loose, and aftershocks sending tremors through him, before he presses a row of kisses to the line of Castiel's shoulder and pulls out with a soft hiss. He takes the few steps to the bed in a weary shuffle and flops backwards onto the mattress.

It's Castiel's turn to drink in the sight now, as he knows Dean did when he himself lay there. Dean looks worn out, eyes half lidded as his chest rises and falls rapidly, one arm thrown out across the bed and the other curled loosely across his groin where his cock lies, well-used and utterly spent. "I'm keeping you," he manages, his voice faint with effort. "All of you. Always."

Castiel flicks his gaze down to his own cock, still hard and not at all ready to sink back into oblivion as it bobs enthusiastically, seeking something like the raw, wet warmth it enjoyed earlier. He clears his throat as he moves towards the bed. "I hope you don't think we're done."

"Wha?" Dean groans. "Can't a guy take a breather—"

"Touch the mark again," Castiel says.

Wryly, Dean reminds him, "We went bad places when we did that just now, Cas."

Castiel smiles. "Not this time. I promise."

"Whatever." Dean gives up, too tired to fight it, and the drowsy flop of his fingers on the reddened skin is half-hearted at best.

"Close your eyes," Castiel whispers. "Picture everything as it is now. And—"

*—can you hear me now?*

*Loud and clear. I could fall asleep like this, on the bed.*

*Not yet, Dean. Not yet.*



The link between them sizzles with energy Castiel can feel on his fingers as he slides them up over the mark on his chest and settles his weight on the bed beside Dean. His lover moves grudgingly, allowing him room without opening his eyes. Dean's face is tilted up to the ceiling and the light that streams in above the curtains now that the sun is riding higher in the sky burnishes him in tones of pale winter gold. "You are beautiful, my love," Castiel breathes out, and he leans down and kisses Dean as though he were a hummingbird dipping in to drink from a flower. He imagines that the tongue he winnows into Dean's mouth is golden with honey, and Dean rumbles out a laugh as he tastes it.

*You like that...*

*Oh yeah. Think you can bring us cheeseburgers like that too?*

*Don't be so limited. We can do more than that, for the time we have.*

*Like what?*

Castiel smothers Dean with another honeyed kiss, and this time he does not relent and give Dean time to breathe. He makes sweeping passes around Dean's palate, sucks at Dean's lips until they swell, nips red marks into Dean's jaw, licks a line down the ligament of Dean's neck. He wraps himself around Dean, closer, *closer*, until they are inseparable and he is lifting Dean's leg so he can glide purposeful fingers along skin still slippery with semen that turns Castiel's fingers fluid-slick, and all the while Dean clutches at the scar on his shoulder, breath coming fast and heavy.

Castiel circles the puckered indent and nudges in, slowly, carefully, diligently, twisting and circling his finger, bending to swallow Dean's moans. He imagines the crackle of pleasure he can sense inside Dean firing into bursts of electricity that spark through every synapse at once, and Dean responds, thrashing and incoherent, overcome with the tidal wave of ecstasy that threatens to drown him, eyes moving frantically behind his closed lids. Still Castiel gives him no quarter and no relief, only a second finger and a third, as Dean did for him, curling and stroking deep inside until Dean is ready, his cock rigid again and blood-red at the tip, and he's straining up out of the sheets.

Castiel rises to kneel, reaches for the tube of oil Dean had used, and squeezes a pool of it onto his hand. He strips himself, slots in between Dean's legs, and for a moment he holds himself there, watching in fascination as the circle of muscle stretches around the head of his cock to let him in, lipping at him and clinging greedily as he teases it. He rocks back, pushes in again, again, again, seating himself further inside with each gentle nudge.

There is the tight vise of velvet heat Castiel remembers from before, and Dean moans, Dean whimpers, Dean is unfettered in their bed, where nothing has a claim on him but Castiel alone as he coaxes out one golden cry after another. There is the clench and tug of flesh around Castiel, there is friction, chafing, pleasure that strobes through him and makes him growl and unfurl his wings as he did the first time he claimed this right, and he can feel the pulse of Dean's heart through it. Dean flexes up to meet him, fingernails raking furrows across Castiel's backside, furrows Castiel imagines are the bars of the cage Dean locked his heart in, to keep for himself.

"God, Cas," Dean gasps. "Let me open my eyes."

"As you wish," Castiel whispers, and Dean opens his eyes and cries out.

"It's safe," Castiel murmurs. "I have you. I won't let us fall."

While Castiel has been making a ferocious kind of love to Dean, he has been insensate to everything but his euphoria, until the moment he opens his eyes and realizes that they are floating on air, the mattress and its twisted sheets trailing below them into empty space as Castiel's wings beat gently.

"We can make love with the stars, Dean," Castiel whispers, and scrapes a bite into Dean's collarbone as he thrusts in. "You just have to want to go there. Remember how you pictured this cabin without its roof?"

Dean closes his eyes again and gives himself. He shatters, and breaks, and reforms, and Castiel senses the moment Dean realizes gravity is an illusion, that he can break it with a thought in this private world; and in that second, he feels the heat of the sun that drenches them as they rise up, up, into the blue.

"It's not real," Dean whispers.

"No," Castiel murmurs. "It's within our...*innerspace*."

"No one else can see us?"

"Not unless you want them to."

Dean says nothing else, but Castiel covers him with kisses and presses him close so there is no space between their bodies as he finds his rhythm and takes Dean, over and over again, until Dean's body and soul are singing with pleasure, with the golden sun, with the clouds and mist above it, with hidden rainbows in the refracting light of every raindrop, with the moon and the stars. This is the divine geometry interwoven in the world, and when they come, the synergy of the moment threatens the bounds of limitless space.

⌘

In the darkness, Gabriel comes awake, and Kali shifts beside him the dark.

"Mmmm, what is it?"

Gabriel smirks. He plants a kiss in her hair and breathes in cardamom, tastes garam masala there.

"Nothing, babe. Some people just don't know how to keep it down, is all."

⌘

They come down from the stars in their own time, but Castiel can already feel the stinging pain of his broken foot taking on a fresh resonance with his remaining grace too exhausted to mitigate it. He knows this must be his last indiscretion, this trivial use of whatever latent angelic power he has left, power he should save for an emergency. But maybe that's what love is – a dire emergency, occurring around them all the time, without end.

Dean is draped on top of Castiel, face down and lax, and he clears his throat from deep in the juncture between Castiel's neck and shoulder. "Do you think I can change the future?"

The question is unexpected. It's also resigned; weighted heavy with responsibility, regret, and the residue of old guilt that Castiel knows will never truly recede. "That burden isn't yours alone, Dean," he says quietly. "I won't let it be. It's up to all of us to make sure that future never happens."

After sighing into Castiel's skin, Dean goes on, "This place...someone must be running it all, making the decisions. So maybe I don't have to lead these people. Maybe we can just *be* here. Without...any of that other stuff."

Castiel traces his fingertip along Dean's spine, etches circles around the notches of his vertebrae. "Maybe," he agrees diplomatically. "But we can't hide in here forever."

"I love you, Castiel," Dean whispers after a brief silence. "So damn much. You make me happy, even if the world is in the shitter. Never change. And never leave me, *never*."

Castiel startles, but he thinks he shouldn't be surprised. He knows this is Dean trying to make sure that future never happens; but it's academic, because he also knows Dean loves him. Dean need never say it, not really, and that faith seems far more important than the spoken words. He doesn't respond in kind, but something comes to him, something he read in a dog-eared paperback he found on Bobby's bookshelves. "You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed," he murmurs into Dean's hair. "I read this in one of Bobby's books. The—"

"Little Prince." Dean kisses the pulse point in Castiel's throat, and Castiel can feel the way his friend's heartbeat speeds up, fluttering against the scar on his own chest as Dean continues. "That's my book." He rolls away onto his side then, tugging Castiel into the concave of his chest, curling his leg across Castiel's bad one in a moment of ill-considered comfort.

Castiel hisses, a flame of agony shooting up his calf. "Careful!"

Dean's eyes go round. "Shit. Sorry, man. But I'm still not letting you get away."

He pulls Castiel close, and Castiel frowns, notes, "It must be very convenient for you."

"That you can't run?" Dean huffs. "You bet I'll take full advantage of that. Too bad Bobby's wheelchair is all messed up, we could have used it."

"I don't think Bobby's wheelchair is the best venue for sex, Dean."

"You're such a pain in the ass, you know that?" Dean chides. "Oh sure, fucking in the stratosphere is perfectly acceptable even if it drains you dry, but you draw the line at a wheelchair?"

Castiel wants to say something clever and effortless, but he discovers that even with a millennia of logic and rational thought at his disposal, Dean trumped his argument in a fraction of a second. Instead, he settles into their tired, sweaty, come-sticky tangle of limbs, gazes into green for a long while, and then he does voice what is in his heart.

"You are the last perfect thing, Dean," he says, tender as a kiss. "And I love you. With all of my heart, with all of my body, with all of my grace. With every part of me, always."

Dean puts his hand on Castiel's face, strokes his thumb along Castiel's cheekbone, his expression gone soft and fond. "Yeah," he says hoarsely. "Yeah. Okay, Cas. That." He swallows. "Maybe I'm not worth it."

"You don't think you deserve to be saved," Castiel whispers in return, and he sees how his friend's eyes widen at the words he spoke so long ago. "But you do. Maybe we both do. Maybe we can save each other."

Dean's lips curve into a smile. "Maybe we can," he murmurs. He's brushing Castiel's hair away from his forehead as he speaks, and his eyes narrow into curiosity, and a crease forms between his brows.

Castiel knows this look. "What?" he prompts dubiously.

Dean reaches up and pokes at Castiel's temple for a second or two, before Castiel feels a sharp snag of discomfort. He has to pull back, away from Dean's thumb and forefinger as it looms up between them.

There is a white hair caught there, and Dean is entranced by it, turns it this way and that as he studies it, his bottom lip pulled in under his teeth.

"When my grace fades completely, I will grow old," Castiel acknowledges quietly. "It's already starting." He thinks about it for a moment; how he will slow down and become stooped, how his vision will blur and his hearing will muffle, how his joints will stiffen and his bones will creak, how his muscles will soften and waste away, how his skin will grow crepey and fragile.

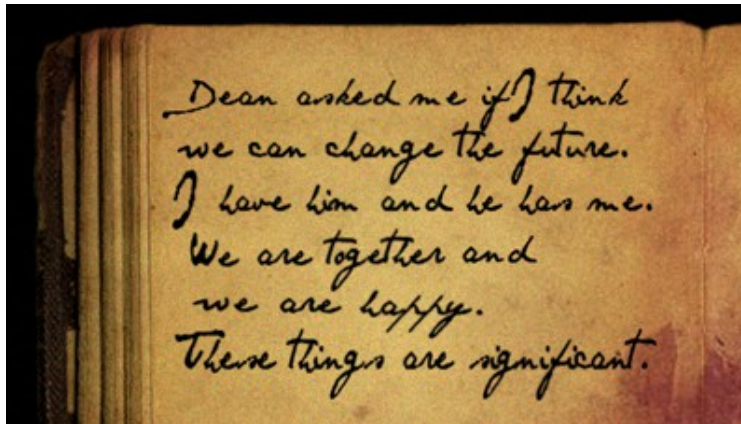
And his hair will turn gray.

"I had this – I don't know. Call it a dream." Dean's voice is halting as he continues. "That we'd have a home, and that when your mojo was all used up we'd sit on the porch swing and drink beer, and be grumpy old-timers together."

Dean grins a lopsided grin then, and his eyes suddenly shine so bright that Castiel wonders if it might be his last glimpse of Dean's soul before that second-sight is lost to him, along with perpetual youth.

"You'll grow old," Dean echoes him softly. "You'll grow old with *me*."

13



THE END

### REDEMPTION

by  [swordofmymouth](#) and  [zatnikatel](#)

THANKS TO ALL OF YOU WHO HAVE HUNG IN THERE, ESPECIALLY THOSE WHO HAVE COMMENTED REGULARLY, AND TO ALL OUR WONDERFUL READERS ON TUMBLR FOR YOUR DEDICATED, ONGOING SUPPORT OF THIS PROJECT – WE REALLY COULDN'T HAVE SEEN THIS THROUGH TO THE END WITHOUT YOUR ENCOURAGEMENT...



## Redemption: Epilogue (Director's Cut)

Authors: Swordofmymouth & Zatnikatel



### B

The shattered world they find themselves driving through is no real surprise, because Dean has seen these derelict, burnt-out buildings, looted storefronts, abandoned cars and deserted streets before. The barbed-wire National Guard Checkpoint Charlies they encounter at regular intervals as they journey are no surprise either; nor are the armored personnel carriers patrolling the smaller towns along the route, where a scattering of real live people, who stare at them with crazy eyes, still eke out an existence in the new world alongside the funeral pyres where the bodies of their dead friends and relatives burn.

Outside of Rapid City they get pulled over by a platoon of trigger-happy airmen running guerrilla ops out of Ellsworth Air Force Base under a commander who's gone totally Kurtz, and they spend a tense half-day trying to convince him they're harmless civilians who just happen to be packing an armory with them as they travel. Dean lock-picks his way out of his cell at two in the morning and breaks the rest of them out within ten minutes, but Sam takes a slug in the right shoulder as they high-tail it out of there. Mira digs it out of him in Rufus Turner's cabin, while Dean holds his brother down on the same mattress where he first turned to Castiel and reached out in the darkness with love in his heart.

Over the border and into Wyoming, they meander through a landscape gone barren and lunar, where sudden downpours turn the road into glutinous tire-sucking mud that threatens to bog them down. One day a fog rolls in, so thick their vehicles labor to cut a path through it. It clears just as abruptly to reveal they are tracking along the lip of an sheer, giddy abyss that shouldn't be there; a jagged Rift Valley of a crack more than two-hundred feet wide and dropping into endless black, that winds on into the distance and belches steam and smoldering ash. After a couple of miles they get detoured all the way down to Cheyenne by wary marines who don't look old enough to shave, and who point at signs that read *quarantine*. When one of the kids throws a fifty-one-fifty and starts screaming about monsters and zombies crawling out of Hell, his own sergeant shoots him on the spot.

They press on westward, through a landscape changed into something off-world and marked by more

nooks and crannies that split the earth's surface and vomit red-hot lava. The atmosphere is heavy with sulfur and a sense of dread that makes the dogs whine and huddle together in the truckbed.

They strike lucky on I-80 when they come across a deserted gas station with a Shell tanker parked on the forefront, its door swinging open and its driver's half-eaten body nearby, gun still gripped tight in his hand. They fill up, top up their supplies and veer north again, towards Kemmerer, and then northwest into Idaho. They keep to the back roads, where it's quieter and there are no troops at all, but the land still yawns wide open at them from time to time, and Dean shivers to think of what might have crawled out of the sinkholes.

Some of the small towns they drive through as they head north still have electricity for a couple of hours a day, even if there are hardly any people left. Roach motels that used to charge thirty bucks a night but now cost five hundred loudly advertise hot running water instead of free wi-fi, and they throw caution to the wind and check into a couple along the road. As soon as the door closes behind them and the wards are laid, Dean slams Castiel up against the wall, and they feverishly tear at clothes, purr their lust and their love into each other's mouths, wrestle each other into the bathroom and under the showerhead. There is no constraint, only want and need; soap-slippery bodies and straining cocks, fingers and tongues on each other and in each other, the air going steamy and muggy while they render each other shivering and useless, before Dean contritely helps Castiel hobble out to the bed.

It's just under four weeks before they grind up the track to the camp, at dead of night.

The moonlit sign over the gate chills Dean, but he sets it aside, mentally vows to climb up there first chance he gets and paint the letter S over the letter C. Catching a glimpse of Risa, her eyes narrowed and suspicious as they drive through the front checkpoint, is no real surprise; and neither is Chuck, clipboard in hand as he waves them along rutted mud-tracks to a group of three wooden cabins towards the back of the fenced compound.

"How's the toilet paper situation?" Dean asks him dryly as he debarks the truck, and Chuck blinks confusedly at him.

"Uh. Under control."

"You should start stockpiling that stuff. Just in case."

Chuck frowns. "Yeah," he mutters, and he jots it down on his list. "You never know."

"Nope, you never do," Dean says.

But even alongside the depressing déjà vu familiarity of the place, it turns out there are some surprises. Jonas Harper is one of them, striding up to greet them, and the prospect doesn't bother Dean in the slightest, because he's never letting go of Castiel and Castiel is never letting go of him. He shakes the man's hand, pulls him into a businesslike embrace, and claps him on the back. "Good to see you here, my friend," he says, and he means it.

The high, thin cry he hears as Castiel gingerly eases himself out of the passenger seat of the truck is another thing Dean didn't expect, along with the slightly built figure who is racing up through the trees ahead of Jody Mills, and hurling herself at Castiel. Claire Novak, and Castiel enfolds her in his arms, kisses the top of her head. When he looks up at Dean, his cheeks are shining wet.

"Missouri told her we were coming," he whispers to Dean, after Mills guides Claire back through the camp. "Her mother is here too," he adds, and his eyes are astonished.

There is a second where Dean thinks of warm brown eyes instead of Pacific blue, of soft curves instead

of angles and solid muscle, when he remembers baseball games, barbecues, and yardwork; and the memories tighten his chest. He tamps them down, focuses on the fact Amelia and Claire Novak are a difference and he still wants to think that maybe these differences mean something, even if Gabriel left him in the dark on that.

## B

On the morning after they arrive, Dean wakes at six-fifteen. He's warm, comfortable, and the drape of Castiel's arm across his belly is heavy and reassuring. He feels safe for the first time in weeks, and he savors the knowledge that there is a camp full of hunters outside, that he can relax his guard and just *be*, for a while at least.

It's dead quiet but for the steady breathing next to him, and after Dean's eyes adapt to the gloom he spends a few minutes gazing at the rough pine beams overhead before he twists his head to watch Castiel sleep, studying the thick black fringe of his lover's lashes, the line of his jaw, his loose-limbed unconsciousness. He slides stealthily out from under Castiel's arm, and then out of their bed after that brief benediction, pulls one of the blankets with him and pads into the bathroom to take a leak before sneaking outside, still bare-ass naked under the fabric.

The sun is just rising, but it's light enough for Dean to scope their surroundings as he stands on the rough wood porch. Spruce trees surround them, their dark green foliage a reminder of his own tree, back in Sioux Falls; and there is a cluster of smaller cherry trees to the right. Through their branches, in the distance, he can see the lead-gray lake, bordered by the Salish Mountains on the western horizon, and he admires them for a moment, muses that this place feels oddly peaceful, that he feels safe.

Smoke is rising up in plumes from the chimneys of some of the other lodges, and Dean makes a mental note to shove a couple of logs in their own stove before he crawls back into bed. Their own cabin is set back, surrounded by grass and shrubs that remind Dean of how he helped Castiel plant seedlings in Missouri's garden. She's here somewhere, he knows, and he grins at the thought that she's probably known they were on the road and headed this way for days.

His gaze tracks to the bones and moldering skin of his car then, where she languishes on the trailer Bobby and Sam helped him load her on to before they pulled out of Singer Salvage for the last time. It's *what* she is that matters, and, "I will fix you," he pledges.

"We'll fix her together," Castiel says from behind him. He's yawning as he steps up behind Dean and leans in to nuzzle at the back of Dean's neck, but he's wide awake lower down, and Dean can feel the jab of his dick as it pokes inquisitively at his ass through the blanket, feel the vibration of Castiel's lips as the angel growls possessively into his nape.

Dean turns with a grin, opens his arms wide, and wraps Castiel in a blanket-warmed embrace. He feels his own semi hard-on throb as it collides with the hard bone of Castiel's hip, and there is something in Castiel's eyes right then, a softness that makes Dean feel suddenly shaky with want, makes his heart do a swooping barrel roll inside his ribs. "I feel like I'm exactly where I was meant to be," he says, impulsive. "With exactly the person I was meant to be with."

Castiel's eyes widen in response, his mouth curving into a smile that looks delighted. And they haven't, not since before the Beast; but now, here, with the future opening out ahead of them, Dean wants it, wants to be *past him*, because that Castiel had liked *past him*. He leans in, snatches at Castiel's lower lip with his teeth. "I want you inside me," he murmurs. "I want you to—"

*Shut the fuckin' door*, comes bellowing in from outside, followed by raucous hooting and cheering.

Dean jumps a foot off the ground, whirls at the same time as his blanket falls away, to see Risa and a couple of burly, bearded guys spectating through the wide open door from ground level. Risa's eyes go round as her gaze drops down to Dean's crotch, and she nods in approval and gives him a thumbs-up sign.

Dean vaguely thinks she's never getting near his dick, *fuck, no*, because his only connection is with the man behind him, and then Castiel is laughing, swinging him around and slamming the door on their audience.

Castiel clumsily bustles Dean back to tumble them onto the bed, where the early sunlight is playing weak gold rays across the quilts, and he starts to rain kisses down on Dean until Dean squirms, before he rolls them so Dean is above him. He clamps his hand to his mark on Dean's shoulder and stares up then, eyes brilliant, hair mussed chaotically, mouth wet and flushed, and the line of his cock like steel along Dean's belly. He blinks slow enough for it to be flirtatious, even if Dean isn't sure if it's consciously so, hooks one leg around the back of Dean's thighs and grinds up into Dean, humming a sweet note of obscene pleasure as he does. "You should lock the door," he suggests.

*Hell yes*, and Dean scrambles up and away, almost sprints back to the door to throw the bolts across, top and bottom. He swivels back around, and for a moment he's lost in appreciating his lover's body; his long, muscled form spread out diagonally across the bed, one leg bent and his good foot braced on the bed end, his dick bobbing lazily in Dean's direction as he waits. Dean doesn't suppress his low wolf-whistle, and Castiel pushes up onto his elbows, his expression quizzical.

"Are you coming?" he asks, and Dean smirks.

"I will be."

Castiel studies Dean, his gaze as calculated as if he's taking Dean's measure, and any remaining subtlety is gone as he reaches down to grasp himself and strip his cock once, twice, three times, slow and deliberate, while he licks his lips. It's debauched, and Dean corrupted this angel of the Lord himself, and *fuck*, he feels a sharp throb in his own dick as his face splits in a smile he can't help. "Horny little bastard," he notes appreciatively. "You're damn lucky I love your cock."

He pads back to the bed, crawls up as far as he has to, leans down and seals his mouth around Castiel, smirking at the angel's whimper as he slaps the flat of his tongue under the ridge and suckles so hard he tastes salty droplets. He pulls off with a pop, presses a gentle kiss to the tip, looks up to where Castiel is blinking hazily at him, and grins. "I packed the tattoo gun," he says huskily. "I love this cock so much, I'm thinking to tattoo property of Dean Winchester along the side."

Castiel's eyes widen and Dean chuckles, swallows him down again. Teeth, a blunt scrape along the spine, thick satin-smooth hardness in between Dean's lips, and Dean will never get tired of this kind of worship. He exhales as he swallows Castiel as far as the root, the head butting up against his soft palate. Castiel's fingers card convulsively through his hair and he starts making shallow thrusts, uncoordinated and jerky. The taste, the smell, the heavy, full feel of Castiel on his tongue, and the steady, needy keening Dean can hear from the other end of the bed are intoxicating and so erotic Dean's own dick throbs painfully, but he holds off his lust. He slides his fingers back behind Castiel's balls and into the cut of his ass, back and forth, keeps mouthing and sucking at his friend's cock, relishes it until it swells succulent and surges up aggressively.

A garbled cry signals Castiel's release and warm, brackish fluid hits the back of Dean's throat. He

drinks his fill for a moment, until he is hauled up and Castiel is licking into his mouth, a savage, forceful kiss that abruptly turns to a slow, reverent brush of lips and curving, twisting slow-dance of tongues that lights sparks in Dean, makes his chest tighten and his heart skip. He doesn't want to face the world, wants to hang onto this for as long as he can, so, "We should call in sick today," he murmurs. "Stay in bed. We have coffee, soup in those cans. We'll tell Sam and Bobby we're infectious. Quarantine ourselves for their own good."

Castiel hums, stretches like a lazy cat underneath him, and his fingers trace an idle, meandering path up the ridges of Dean's back. "I take it sex is the cure?"

Dean smirks. "Your dick is sick. It'll be needing the kiss of life. Frequently."

"But you're not really going to tattoo it are you?"

Partway through nipping at the hinge of Castiel's jaw, Dean snorts. "Trust me. I got a steady hand. You know that already."

Castiel's hand is spread on Dean's right ass cheek, his fingers massaging into its curve. "I do trust you," he says thoughtfully. "It's just that—"

"How much?" Dean asks him, pulling up to fix his friend with a stare.

Raising an eyebrow a little suspiciously, Castiel tells him, "Considerably. But...possibly not *that* considerably."

But Dean has already moved on, and he curls his lips up into a sly smile. "I got a better idea anyway."

In Dean's back pocket he keeps a blue kerchief; it's the sort of thing that's just a staple of life, useful for wiping motor grease off his hands or lighting a Molotov cocktail in a pinch. He keeps them in the glove box and the trunk and in jacket pockets. The one poking out of the careless puddle of denim his jeans make on the floor next to the bed is clean, and he reaches down to hook the corner of fabric and whip it out. He stretches it between his hands before he looks to Castiel. "Do you still trust me?" he asks softly.

Castiel's features are absolutely still, impassive. "Of course."

Dean pushes up to stand, moves to the window, pulls the heavy curtains across to cut the beam of morning sunlight off. He pads back to the bed in the semi-darkness and knees his way up it so that he's back on all-fours and gazing down. He slips a hand under the back of his friend's neck, pulls Castiel up as he leans down for another long, slow slide and press of lips and tangle of tongues, warm and wet and gentle, before he nuzzles his way around to the shell of Castiel's ear. "Let me blindfold you."

Castiel tenses from instinct but Dean doesn't wait for protest, he pulls back, swoops the bandana deftly around the band of his friend's skull and ties the end into a neat, comfortable knot. There is a runnel of sweat now on Castiel's brow, and his throat flexes as he swallows.

"Dean?" he broaches uncertainly.

"I'm here," Dean soothes him, even as he shifts away, plants his feet back on the rag rug beside the bed, and takes a few steps backward. "Just a sec..." He knows Castiel is utterly familiar with his hungry, insatiable nature, knows too that the sudden distance must be confusing, but for Dean it's all going according to plan, and he shivers with a quiet excitement as he concentrates and closes his own eyes from the dark corner of the cabin. "I just—"

"Didn't you go when you woke up?" Castiel interrupts, with the irritable patience he has patented.

Dean snorts. "Not that. Idiot." He drags his voice down to a whisper he hopes is seductive. "Just put

your hand over your chest."

Castiel tilts his head, hesitates, and then his hand trails slowly up across his belly and ribs to map his chest, where Dean's handprint marks his skin. His fingers fit into the shallow grooves and stay there.

Dean closes his eyes as he reaches up to settle his palm over his own mark, where Castiel once pulled him from Hell in another lifetime. When his fingers find the outline like a glove, there is a sensation of free fall, of continuous darkness that is meaningless, and for a moment Dean thinks it won't work, that Gabriel lied, that there is nothing left of Castiel's grace and that the thread that linked them frayed and disintegrated with it.

*Damn you*, he's thinking at the precise second his flesh tingles; a buzzing sensation in his fingers signaling that something is happening, not only deep in the nerve fibers of skin and muscle, but on another dimension of sensation. In the next second, the distance between where Dean stands and where Castiel reclines recedes as they connect through their scars, and Castiel hisses sharply.

"Damn me?" he asks balefully. "Really, Dean?"

Dean grins, his eyes still closed. "Not you. Never you."

"You should know better," Castiel reproves him. "This is my realm."

Dean's eyes are still closed, his hand still planted over his mark. "I thought it might be fun to experiment with, you know?" he defends. "But I didn't know how much mojo it would take to—"

"Do something like *this*?" Castiel offers, and suddenly Dean feels the hot press of lips against his mouth, splitting his open and seeking the warmth there.

The lips withdraw long enough for Dean to gasp out, and then the ghostly mouth is at his chin, flowing down the angle of his jaw, where the skin is tender and sensitive. Teeth track their way through nips and bites, until Dean is shuddering with it all, gulping in great swallows of air without meaning to. He knows that if he opens his eyes, there will be no mouth there at all, that Castiel will still be on the bed without ever having moved. They need only think of something and they can make it possible through their shared link.

"Yeah," he croaks. "Something like that. One of those weird *you* things. But, you know, with your tank running on fumes..."

"Shhhhh, love," Castiel hushes him softly. "Picture this cabin. But don't open your eyes, or the link will break."

Dean nods, sets himself to imagining their new home in all of its defects: the knots in the woodwork, the draughty casement windows, the four-pack of toilet paper at the door, and the box of canned and dried foods and MREs beside that, the rat droppings he noticed under the bed from when one made a home there over the winter. Its comforts too – the kitchenette with the old wood stove where Castiel can cook up meaty stews and bake pies, the overstuffed couch in the corner, the thick piled quilts and blankets, and the warm body that will meet and match him there.

"Now, picture the cabin without the roof."

Dean takes the roof apart inside his head one shingle at a time, dropping them onto the ground in the surrounding area, followed by the joists that support the long slats of particle board. He casts each element one by one onto the grass as though a team of day laborers is doing it for a massive roofing job, until the sun pours in and drenches him, so real in his vision that he can feel its warmth and red-golden glow on his face.

He thinks of Castiel and his mind turns to his friend laid out on the bed, his hands behind his head, the kerchief still covering his eyes and his lips curved into a contented smile. Beneath Castiel is a dark-colored down comforter that Dean can't remember having seen before, because it's ripped open and bleeding sable-hued feathers. In the next instant he realizes it's not a comforter at all – it's Castiel's wings, folded behind him. They are faded and diminished compared to how they looked when Dean combed his fingers through them as Castiel rocked his hips and drove himself hard into Dean in the waterfall cave, but still there, despite everything. How much longer he will be able to unfurl them is a question for the future but for now, Dean puts it out of his mind for fear the entire world as they have constructed it together will fall apart.

"You're beautiful," Dean whispers.

Castiel reaches a hand to Dean, beckons. "Come here."

It has the note of order, and Dean grins. "You telling me what to do, now?" He can tell Castiel is rolling his eyes behind the bandana even though his own eyes stay scrunched tight-closed, but his tone is softer and indulgent when he speaks again.

"Do you remember how we joined back in the cave Dean?"

The memory of the pleasure that flashed through every cell as Castiel's light flooded into him makes Dean shiver, sends a delicious thrill of electricity zipping down to the tip of his cock and curling its way around his balls. "Fuck, yes," he replies faintly.

Castiel smiles. "There is so much more we can do. But you have to keep your eyes closed."

There are several seconds of time when Dean is suddenly so sexually excited that his dick throbs almost painfully and all rational thought empties out of his head, but he has the presence of mind to hold his ground in this daydream land supported by their shared link, his mind's eye staring agog as Castiel's grin widens. "More?" he replies, and if it comes out as a raw gasp, he doesn't even really care.

"Human lovemaking is enjoyable because it's physical, Dean," Castiel murmurs. "But that physicality can be limiting simply because it's physical. With this link, we just eliminated all the constrictions of matter, and molecules, and elements. So...do you want to know what it's like to make love without limits?"

Dean feels the breath punch out of him and a scorching flood of heat travels from his chest to his groin, like someone just laid a hot muffler on his belly. He has never thought of the metaphysics of sex and this began as a fun experiment, but it hasn't ever occurred to him that maybe this is the sort of thing Castiel might have fantasized about, that there were other ways to make love, and *holy shit* he's thinking, *like, more than human?*

"What does that even mean?" he marvels, his eyes still glued shut. "Is this how the angels cloud seed? And won't it wear you out?"

The angel pushes up to sit on the bed, flexes and stretches his bad foot luxuriously before setting it on the floor without a wince, gently tugs the kerchief down and away from his eyes, and leaves it in a loose ring around his neck. "We have time," he tells Dean, his tone amused. "We can *quarantine* ourselves afterwards. Until we recover."

His wings are still raised up behind him, flaring soft and rippling brown, gray and teal, like a giant hawk's, and Dean can remember how gossamer soft they felt as he carded his fingertips through them, the way Castiel shuddered and moaned as he groomed them, the way they cocooned him and he felt

warm, protected. *Safe*.

And that's it. He is *safe*, and, "show me," he croaks.

Castiel is still there on the bed one second, and then in front of Dean the next and Dean hears the faint echo of his wings beating the air before silence falls. Castiel's eyes make blue circles inside rings of smoky gray, his lashes like charcoal marks on an art drawing.

"Are you afraid?" he whispers.

"A little," Dean concedes.

"There's a part of you that likes that."

"I didn't always," Dean mutters, even if he's aware that Castiel knows. "I didn't *before*."

Castiel tilts his head and Dean experiences a dizzy sensation, a whiffle of air in the still room. He feels as though a hand is caressing the back of his head even though Castiel is in front of him and not even touching him yet; it's like his brain is a file cabinet and Castiel is flipping through inventory cards.

"Find anything?" Dean manages.

"Memories you've forgotten," Castiel confirms, before adding more darkly, "Things you don't want to know."

And with that, Dean senses the mental filing cabinet slamming shut, the clink of steel as the padlock closes, and he lifts his chin, crosses his arms over his chest, defiant. "What is it? I want to know."

Castiel's features soften. "Oh, Dean. You don't want to know."

Dean provokes him, because *fuck that noise* after what they've been through this past year. "Are we going to argue about this? Are you keeping stuff from me again? Like that worked for you the last time?"

Castiel crosses his arms in a mirror of Dean's own stance, and his wings bristle and flare in what Dean thinks might be annoyance. For a long moment, he fixes Dean with a hard stare that makes his caving in all the more unexpected. "Fine. But I said you don't want to know."

Just like a lifetime ago, Castiel raises his hand and pushes two fingers into Dean's forehead. The second they touch home it feels like a starburst, an engine revving and combusting behind Dean's eyes. Every unwanted memory from infancy to adulthood has been buried there in hidden spaces, in bricked-up nooks and crannies; but they explode out now, and in a fraction of a second Dean discovers the forgotten fragments of himself, for he is a creature of many parts, like his beloved car, restored twenty times over now.

He peers back through the territory of years, through a childhood spent barricaded in sleazy motel rooms caring for his brother while John Winchester was out chasing shadows in the night. He sees himself rocking a fretful infant in his arms, helping a toddler take his first steps, teaching a preschooler his letters using the funny pages, poring over homework with a shaggy-haired tween who doesn't want the life they lead. He sees himself in a field in the middle of nowhere on the Fourth of July, showing Sammy how to light the fuse on a firecracker and run like hell, watching his brother leap and dance under cascading sparks, while Bob Dylan rings out through the night from the cassette player.

He sees himself sitting and watching the door, waiting for the fumbling of the key on the other side, because *goddammit*, he had wanted a father as much as he wanted his mother, and instead he got a broken shell of man eaten through by revenge, like wood decimated rotten by termites.



*His real father found him in Hell.*

A new father, a father who knew what Dean needed and knew what he was; knew he was a worthless shit of a man, not a man at all, *less than a man* even, who couldn't save his brother without fucking that up and selling his soul in the process. This father knew Dean didn't deserve love, gave Dean what he did deserve, and when he was done giving Dean his discipline and his due diligence, he started to take things *away* from Dean; flesh and bone, dignity, self-respect, sanity, all pared away, in perpetuity.

When his new father had given him every hurt, and stain, and scar he deserved, Dean was ready.

Dean was prime.

Dean was a new animal.

He sees his true self now; a demon crawling from the broken, discarded human chrysalis where he pupated, ready to give back in return, to share what he has learned and hone his skills. His eyes are black pools he sees reflected in his father's eyes each time Alastair leans in for a kiss, and his mouth cracks and splits at the corners with its grin as he circles his rack. The soul he has nailed there is screaming so loud and hard he can't tell if was man, woman or child, but no matter. They all sound exactly the same whatever they were up in the World, and their sweet song has him hard and aching as he unzips his pants, slow and easy, and—

His cry rips out of him, louder even than the soundtrack of Hell.

"What did I do? Christ, what did I do?"

## B

Castiel slaps Dean across the face.

It's all he can think to do to bring his friend back from the shock and horror of realization, as he stands there with his mouth agape and his eyes fixed in a thousand-yard stare. With the sharp snap of the impact, their imaginary world shatters and they are their human and vulnerable selves again, back in the rough wooden cabin, with Dean's hand streaking up to press to the scarlet patch burning his cheek.

"What'd you do that for?" he gasps.

Castiel feels a sudden fury, at Dean, at himself for giving in, because some things are better off kept secret. "You were supposed to remember, not lose yourself in it. There's a difference."

Dean's face goes stricken at his words, and his reply is paper-thin. "You know what I did...you know."

And Castiel always has, can remember his reconnaissance; endless, lonely, furious and grief-stricken waiting through Alastair's pleasure and Dean's torture, poised for that moment when the demon's attention wandered and he could steal in and offer salvation, if the thing that was the Righteous Man even wanted to be saved. "What do you want, Dean?" he says quietly. "You want me to tell you how many times Alistair used you until you were nothing more than slop? That you did the same to others?"

Dean is desperate and wide-eyed. "Go ahead. Say it. Say the fuckin' word."

His friend's pain is almost too much, but Castiel keeps his voice steady. "Dean, I don't want to—"

"Rape, Cas," Dean almost-shrieks. "It was fuckin' *rape*. Did you think you were going to spare me, do me a favor by dancing around it, leaving it buried? I raped souls, Cas."

"And so did I," Castiel snaps back. "And I chose it. But you had no choice."

Dean reels and stumbles away, hands clamped to his head, words choking out of him harshly. "How am I supposed to... what am I supposed to do. With this. What? What do I do now?"

Castiel ramps down his anger, reaches out his hands. "Now we get to do something about it, we get to try to make it right. I was God, Dean, and I fucked up. But I'm here, and I'm trying to make it right. I'm doing my best, even if it goes wrong sometimes." He stops, takes a breath. "You taught me that," he goes on, gentle now. "Or else I would have ended it a long time ago. Because in case you forgot, my tab outweighs yours by thousands of souls."

Dean has turned back as Castiel speaks, but he's quiet. One hand scratches at his neck while he stares at the floor and chews on his bottom lip. "They'll be looking for us now," he says finally, haltingly. "All of everything that ever walked the Pit, everything we ever put there... all the souls I tortured down there, crawling back up to the World to end it and end us. Alastair too, maybe." His shoulders slump, and he sighs. "The tab is too big, Cas. Fuck, this is my fault. If I had just held on back then, if I had been stronger, if—"

"No. No you don't."

Castiel is done with Dean's guilt, surges forward almost reflexively. He swallows Dean's words down into himself, a feverish clash of lips and teeth, hands pulling Dean in against him; and Dean is already meeting him, driven by pure instinct, grinding against him, panting hot breath into his mouth as he paints fingerprints down Castiel's spine.

"Never say that, ever," Castiel growls into Dean's open mouth, as he separates them for long enough to suck in a breath and say what he wants to. "You held on. You were strong. It wasn't your fault, any of it. And this is not the end Dean, it's the beginning. We start over. There is no past in the future... there is no guilt, no pain, no destiny, no God. There's just us, you and I."

Dean groans into Castiel's mouth and his hands are swift and skillful as they find Castiel, hard and hot at his center, eager and wet at his tip. The sensation Dean's touch arouses is all-human, complete with the many autonomous intricacies that Castiel still cannot recover from and struggles to keep up with and comprehend; how his skin flexes and molds and tingles, how it perspires and shivers as Dean strokes and squeezes, how the blood races in his veins and his heartbeat pulses and pounds out of control in his ears, how he craves Dean with a passion that is carnal. This humanity is base and filthy, and all the more glorious for that, and Castiel's need is raw and dark, and when he presses his hand to his mark on Dean's shoulder and leans in to suck at the tender skin under Dean's ear, Dean makes a sound in response deep in his throat.

"I want you inside me, Dean," Castiel breathes into the skin under his lips, and Dean locks tight under his hand, before there is a wild, horrifying flood of more recent memories cascading through their link; of the boat, of frenzied, painfully dry thrusting and Dean's teeth breaking the skin of Castiel's neck as he clung on. It makes Dean flinch, but Castiel's palm is pressed to his cheek then, his head dipping forward until their brows meet.

"It doesn't make you him," Castiel whispers, and his mouth is gentle then as it plays across Dean's. "Make love to me. Make love to me, Dean... I need to feel you inside me, like I did then."

It must wake something inside Dean, because he gives a low, rasping cry and spins Castiel around so he faces the cabin wall, his hands spread over the old pine. Dean's fingers are like iron vises gripping the slide of skin over bone at Castiel's hips, and his lips seem to dance everywhere at once across Castiel's skin and down his spine as he sinks to his knees, teeth grazing Castiel's vertebrae as though he could locate a seam he might tear into, one that would open him up to the angel buried inside. His thumbs are

sliding across Castiel's ass then, pulling the globes apart, and his tongue is blistering hot as it licks intimately up and down, across and in-in-in, its sharp point slick and torrid. And Castiel *wants*, as much as he ever has, and he gives himself up to the heat that is searing through his groin, leans back into Dean. But Dean is pulling away suddenly, his fingers falling loose and trembling at Castiel's hips, and from behind him Castiel hears the sound of a choked sob, as though his friend can't bring himself to continue.

"It doesn't make you him, Dean," Castiel reiterates firmly. "And you aren't his. Remember what I said. Be your own man."

Dean sighs as though Castiel's rumbling command has snapped something in him with sound alone, severing the bonds of hurtful memory and breaking their hold over Dean the loyal son, the hammer, the obedient student, the demon he became. Just like he did in Hell, as the Beast loomed up to swallow Dean whole, Castiel gives Dean something he has never known – permission to be himself.

Dean moves behind him and there is a moment of reaching and rummaging, the click of a plastic cap echoing loud in the silence, before a hand snakes around and up Castiel's abdomen to fit itself to the brand on his chest while cool, slick fingertips track their way into the crease at the base of his spine, to the rim of him, his small, tight core. Dean paints a trail there with his touch, spreading the muscle like butter, easing Castiel open carefully with one finger, two, three, crooning and nuzzling at the nape of Castiel's neck as Castiel grits out a needful, "Yes...yes."

It goes on for long moments, Dean's fingers insistent, the sting of them subsiding to a dull ache of want, until they slide out and Dean presses himself the length of Castiel, so that he can feel the smooth dome of Dean's cock press at him before Dean hesitates.

"This is who I am," he whispers.

And then the arrow of Dean is there; solid, iron-hard length pressing up through the flesh, too much, too thick, too full. The heavy drag of it electrifies Castiel in the ecstatic borderline between pain and discomfort that serves as the prelude to pleasure; and still it isn't enough and he hears himself moan wantonly as he pushes back onto Dean, needs to feel every inch of Dean split him apart and plug the wound.

Dean drives in to meet him with a hoarse grunt, and slaps a hand into Castiel's hair, tangling his fingers in it so he can pull Castiel's head back to suckle at his neck while Castiel shudders and adjusts around him. Castiel opens his mouth, and when he does Dean covers it, smothers his cry, and Castiel bites into the webbing of Dean's thumb, licks his way to the delicate skin of Dean's wrist. Dean's other hand makes a path from his chest to his hip, and from there to the patch of dark hair that rings Castiel's straining cock, and he grips the shaft, strips it in a loose fist. The motion tears gasps out of Castiel, as he gazes down at the pad of Dean's thumb rolling languidly up and over the cap, gliding slick through the dew drop at its seam and spreading the liquid across the glossy purple skin there.

"Aren't you afraid of me?" Dean whispers, his breath skittering giddy across Castiel's skin.

Castiel smiles against Dean's palm. "I want it all," he breathes. "All of you. Always."

Dean husks out a possessive sounding snarl that might be Castiel's name, pulls away and thrusts forward, and Castiel feels the golden tap against the inner spot as Dean claims him, thrums with the sensation as it bursts and spasms inside him, and then again, as Dean finds it with purpose and rams into it over and over. The ache of it is blissful, and already the edges of Castiel's vision are blurring, the world gone white-hot as his orgasm swells up and explodes, seismic waves rippling out. He comes with

a stuttering cry, his forehead pressed against the wall and his legs shaking, blinks down at the milky liquid that spurts, and coils, and trickles lazily over Dean's fingers. He doesn't have to ask to know that Dean is doing the same, his rhythm faltering and a breathless whine ripping out of him as he pushes forward and expends himself in a last slam-thrust of energy, followed by a flood of liquid heat Castiel can feel pulsing inside him.

Dean slumps against Castiel's back for a moment, breath heaving in and out, mouth damp and slack on Castiel's skin, his arms dangling loose, and aftershocks sending tremors through him, before he presses a row of kisses to the line of Castiel's shoulder and pulls out with a soft hiss. He takes the few steps to the bed in a weary shuffle and flops backwards onto the mattress.

It's Castiel's turn to drink in the sight now, as he knows Dean did when he himself lay there. Dean looks worn out, eyes half lidded as his chest rises and falls rapidly, one arm thrown out across the bed and the other curled loosely across his groin where his cock lies, well-used and utterly spent. "I'm keeping you," he manages, his voice faint with effort. "All of you. Always."

Castiel flicks his gaze down to his own cock, still hard and not at all ready to sink back into oblivion as it bobs enthusiastically, seeking something like the raw, wet warmth it enjoyed earlier. He clears his throat as he moves towards the bed. "I hope you don't think we're done."

"Wha?" Dean groans. "Can't a guy take a breather—"

"Touch the mark again," Castiel says.

Wryly, Dean reminds him, "We went bad places when we did that just now, Cas."

Castiel smiles. "Not this time. I promise."

"Whatever." Dean gives up, too tired to fight it, and the drowsy flop of his fingers on the reddened skin is half-hearted at best.

"Close your eyes," Castiel whispers. "Picture everything as it is now. And—"

*—can you hear me now?*

*Loud and clear. I could fall asleep like this, on the bed.*

*Not yet, Dean. Not yet.*



The link between them sizzles with energy Castiel can feel on his fingers as he slides them up over the mark on his chest and settles his weight on the bed beside Dean. His lover moves grudgingly, allowing him room without opening his eyes. Dean's face is tilted up to the ceiling and the light that streams in above the curtains now that the sun is riding higher in the sky burnishes him in tones of pale winter gold. "You are beautiful, my love," Castiel breathes out, and he leans down and kisses Dean as though he were a hummingbird dipping in to drink from a flower. He imagines that the tongue he winnows into Dean's mouth is golden with honey, and Dean rumbles out a weary laugh as he tastes it.

*You like that...*

*Oh yeah. Think you can bring us cheeseburgers like that too?*

*Don't be so limited. We can do more than that, for the time we have.*

*Like what?*

Castiel smothers Dean with another honeyed kiss, and this time he does not relent and give Dean time to breathe. He makes sweeping passes around Dean's palate, sucks at Dean's lips until they swell, nips red marks into Dean's jaw, licks a line down the ligament of Dean's neck. He wraps himself around Dean, closer, *closer*, until they are inseparable and he is lifting Dean's leg so he can glide purposeful fingers along skin still slippery with semen that turns Castiel's fingers fluid-slick, and all the while Dean clutches at the scar on his shoulder, breath coming fast and heavy.

Castiel circles the puckered indent and nudges in, slowly, carefully, diligently, twisting and circling his finger, bending to swallow Dean's moans. He imagines the crackle of pleasure he can sense inside Dean firing into bursts of electricity that spark through every synapse at once, and Dean responds, thrashing and incoherent, overcome with the tidal wave of ecstasy that threatens to drown him, eyes moving frantically behind his closed lids. Still Castiel gives him no quarter and no relief, only a second finger and a third, as Dean did for him, curling and stroking deep inside until Dean is ready, his cock rigid again and blood-red at the tip, and he's straining up out of the sheets.

Castiel rises to kneel, reaches for the tube of oil Dean had used, and squeezes a pool of it onto his hand. He strips himself, slots in between Dean's legs, and for a moment he holds himself there, watching in fascination as the circle of muscle stretches around the head of his cock to let him in, lipping at him and clinging greedily as he teases it. He rocks back, pushes in again, again, again, seating himself further inside with each gentle nudge.

There is the tight vise of velvet heat Castiel remembers from before, and Dean moans, Dean whimpers, Dean is unfettered in their bed, where nothing has a claim on him but Castiel alone as he coaxes out one golden cry after another. There is the clench and tug of flesh around Castiel, there is friction, chafing, pleasure that strobes through him and makes him growl and unfurl his wings as he did the first time he claimed this right, and he can feel the pulse of Dean's heart through it. Dean flexes up to meet him, fingernails raking furrows across Castiel's backside, furrows Castiel imagines are the bars of the cage Dean locked his heart in, to keep for himself.

"God, Cas," Dean gasps. "Let me open my eyes."

"As you wish," Castiel whispers, and Dean opens his eyes and cries out.

"It's safe," Castiel murmurs. "I have you. I won't let us fall."

While Castiel has been making a ferocious kind of love to Dean, he has been insensate to everything but his euphoria, until the moment he opens his eyes and realizes that they are floating on air, the mattress and its twisted sheets trailing below them into empty space as Castiel's wings beat gently.

"We can make love with the stars, Dean," Castiel whispers, and scrapes a bite into Dean's collarbone as he thrusts in. "You just have to want to go there. Remember how you pictured this cabin without its roof?"

Dean closes his eyes again and gives himself. He shatters, and breaks, and reforms, and Castiel senses the moment Dean realizes gravity is an illusion, that he can break it with a thought in this private world; and in that second, he feels the heat of the sun that drenches them as they rise up, up, into the blue.

"It's not real," Dean whispers.

"No," Castiel murmurs. "It's within our...*innerspace*."

"No one else can see us?"

"Not unless you want them to."

Dean says nothing else, but Castiel covers him with kisses and presses him close so there is no space between their bodies as he finds his rhythm and takes Dean, over and over again, until Dean's body and soul are singing with pleasure, with the golden sun, with the clouds and mist above it, with hidden rainbows in the refracting light of every raindrop, with the moon and the stars. This is the divine geometry interwoven in the world, and when they come, the synergy of the moment threatens the bounds of limitless space.

### B

In the darkness, Gabriel comes awake, and Kali shifts beside him the dark.

"Mmmm, what is it?"

Gabriel smirks. He plants a kiss in her hair and breathes in cardamom, tastes garam masala there.

"Nothing, babe. Some people just don't know how to keep it down, is all."

### B

They come down from the stars in their own time, but Castiel can already feel the stinging pain of his broken foot taking on a fresh resonance with his remaining grace too exhausted to mitigate it. He knows this must be his last indiscretion, this trivial use of whatever latent angelic power he has left, power he should save for an emergency. But maybe that's what love is – a dire emergency, occurring around them all the time, without end.

Dean is draped on top of Castiel, face down and lax, and he clears his throat from deep in the juncture between Castiel's neck and shoulder. "Do you think I can change the future?"

The question is unexpected. It's also resigned; weighted heavy with responsibility, regret, and the residue of old guilt that Castiel knows will never truly recede. "That burden isn't yours alone, Dean," he says quietly. "I won't let it be. It's up to all of us to make sure that future never happens." He waits a moment before he asks his own question. "I can take it away. That memory. If you want me to."

Dean tenses in his arms, and there is the flex of his throat as he swallows, and then a brief silence before he answers. "No. I need to know." His voice is strained as he goes on. "That future me was torturing. And maybe he didn't know what I know...maybe this is a difference, maybe it'll stop me. Knowing what I'm capable of. Know thyself, right?"

"What you became," Castiel whispers, "is what you became, Dean. It wasn't *you*. It was never you."

After sighing into Castiel's skin, Dean sidetracks, "This place...someone must be running it all, making the decisions. So maybe I don't have to lead these people. Maybe we can just *be* here. Without...any of that other stuff."

Castiel traces his fingertip along Dean's spine, etches circles around the notches of his vertebrae.

"Maybe," he agrees diplomatically. "But we can't hide in here forever."

"I love you, Castiel," Dean whispers after a brief silence. "So damn much. You make me happy, even if

the world is in the shitter. Never change. And never leave me, *never*."

Castiel startles, but he thinks he shouldn't be surprised. He knows this is Dean trying to make sure that future never happens; but it's academic, because he also knows Dean loves him. Dean need never say it, not really, and that faith seems far more important than the spoken words. He doesn't respond in kind, but something comes to him, something he read in a dog-eared paperback he found on Bobby's bookshelves. "You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed," he murmurs into Dean's hair. "I read this in one of Bobby's books. The—"

"Little Prince." Dean kisses the pulse point in Castiel's throat, and Castiel can feel the way his friend's heartbeat speeds up, fluttering against the scar on his own chest as Dean continues. "That's my book." He rolls away onto his side then, tugging Castiel into the concave of his chest, curling his leg across Castiel's bad one in a moment of ill-considered comfort.

Castiel hisses, a flame of agony shooting up his calf. "Careful!"

Dean's eyes go round. "Shit. Sorry, man. But I'm still not letting you get away."

He pulls Castiel close, and Castiel frowns, notes, "It must be very convenient for you."

"That you can't run?" Dean huffs. "You bet I'll take full advantage of that. Too bad Bobby's wheelchair is all messed up, we could have used it."

"I don't think Bobby's wheelchair is the best venue for sex, Dean."

"You're such a pain in the ass, you know that?" Dean chides. "Oh sure, fucking in the stratosphere is perfectly acceptable even if it drains you dry, but you draw the line at a wheelchair?"

Castiel wants to say something clever and effortless, but he discovers that even with a millennia of logic and rational thought at his disposal, Dean trumped his argument in a fraction of a second. Instead, he settles into their tired, sweaty, come-sticky tangle of limbs, gazes into green for a long while, and then he does voice what is in his heart.

"You are the last perfect thing, Dean," he says, tender as a kiss. "And I love you. With all of my heart, with all of my body, with all of my grace. With every part of me, always."

Dean puts his hand on Castiel's face, strokes his thumb along Castiel's cheekbone, his expression gone soft and fond. "Yeah," he says hoarsely. "Yeah. Okay, Cas. That." He swallows. "Maybe I'm not worth it."

"You don't think you deserve to be saved," Castiel whispers in return, and he sees how his friend's eyes widen at the words he spoke so long ago. "But you do. Maybe we both do. Maybe we can save each other."

Dean's lips curve into a smile. "Maybe we can," he murmurs. He's brushing Castiel's hair away from his forehead as he speaks, and his eyes narrow into curiosity, and a crease forms between his brows.

Castiel knows this look. "What?" he prompts dubiously.

Dean reaches up and pokes at Castiel's temple for a second or two, before Castiel feels a sharp snag of discomfort. He has to pull back, away from Dean's thumb and forefinger as it looms up between them.

There is a white hair caught there, and Dean is entranced by it, turns it this way and that as he studies it, his bottom lip pulled in under his teeth.



starting." He thinks about it for a moment; how he will slow down and become stooped, how his vision will blur and his hearing will muffle, how his joints will stiffen and his bones will creak, how his muscles will soften and waste away, how his skin will grow crepey and fragile.

And his hair will turn gray.

"I had this – I don't know. Call it a dream." Dean's voice is halting as he continues. "That we'd have a home, and that when your mojo was all used up we'd sit on the porch swing and drink beer, and be grumpy old-timers together."

Dean grins a lopsided grin then, and his eyes suddenly shine so bright that Castiel wonders if it might be his last glimpse of Dean's soul before that second-sight is lost to him, along with perpetual youth.

"You'll grow old," Dean echoes him softly. "You'll grow old with *me*."

B

