Between the Gates

by laughingatthecrossroads

Summary

What if the Gates of Heaven and the Gates of Hell had been successfully slammed shut? The angels are locked in Heaven but Demons on Earth are locked out of Hell and Abaddon is still at large. Dean and Castiel must now deal with the fallout of their actions; Sam is gone and our favorite Angel of the Lord is Graceless. It takes months for the two of them to find a rhythm when some unexpected visitors turn their world upside down. It turns out that Cas hasn't been entirely forthcoming about what exactly happened while he was God. (Canon until the last moments of the Season 8 finale.)
Canon until the last moments of the Season 8 finale. This story also assumes that Castiel spent a bit more time as "God" before the Leviathan took control. I attempt to remain as canon compliant as possible, while the story line diverges from the Season 8 finale.
The Aftermath

It had been almost six months since the gates of both Heaven and Hell were so resolutely slammed shut. Dean tried to avoid the memories of those moments right after the deed was done. Sam evaporated in a painful, searing burst of light, not even leaving a body to burn, followed immediately by Crowley’s terrible, human wailing. The earth shook beneath their feet and only after the hunter wrestled the former King of Hell into the backseat of the Impala did he see the single streak of light cross the sky. It too, had wailed, with a voice he recognized. He watched in horror as the screaming light lost two, beautiful wings and landed with a strangely gentle sounding “poof” in the woods outside the church. A few moments later, the shockwave hit them and that “poof” didn’t seem so gentle anymore. Dean bolted into the trees, heedless of Crowley's calls and his own raging grief and found Cas at the bottom of a crater, as human and distraught as the former demon in his car.

They made their way back to the bunker in complete silence, too numb and raw to say a word. Even Crowley stayed quiet. Dean's eyes kept sliding to the still form in his front passenger seat, the trench coat streaked with dirt, the tie crusted with blood. The only movement he could detect was the repetitive clenching and unclenching of a fist. He wondered briefly if the former angel was trying to sense his absent wings and the thought lodged a cold shard of despair in his heart. Castiel's eyes finally met his on some empty road outside Hastings, Nebraska and they reflected all the things that Dean himself felt.

*I'm sorry. We did it. It's over. I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.*

Kevin was waiting for them when they finally made it back to the bunker and in horror, threw his own body over the Angel and Demon tablets when he saw Crowley. But to the former demon’s credit, he simply muttered something about the stench of humanity and commandeered the showers. Dean flinched at the idea of the former King of Hell within these walls of safety, but the bunker itself acknowledged his humanity and allowed him to walk through the door, right over the demon trap at the base of the stairs. It was Sam’s idea to paint it there in UV paint, not wanting to solely rely on the band of sigils protecting the library. Those thoughts of Sam were pushed away and stuffed into the darkest corners of his heart. Even human, Crowley was probably still a threat in some way, but Dean didn’t have the energy to parse it all out that night.

Kevin demanded an explanation and they gave him the abbreviated version: both Sam and Cas completed the trials. Naomi had not been lying about Sam and the price he would have to pay. Metatron had been true to his word and slammed the gates of Heaven shut, not before tossing the angel whose grace he used within spitting distance of Dean. Castiel didn’t mention the painful little monologue he’d been subjected to about “loving humanity”.

Kevin gasped at the description of the angel’s fall.

“The alarms went off in the War Room,” he said, gesturing toward the map table. “It looked like a missile impact outside Sioux Falls. It must have been you… Do you think the Men of Letters set it to track only fallen angels? Or catastrophic disturbances in the Force in general?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Castiel said tightly, “Heaven’s gates are locked. Those alarms won’t be going off again any time soon.”

Despite the fact that both hunter and former angel had survived the unthinkable, they still needed to deal with the sudden proximity of Crowley to the tablets he once so coveted. Kevin laughed with a slightly maniacal glee and ran off into the archives, coming back with a curse box.
“That won’t do squat against Crowley!” Dean growled, seething at the fact that his little brother was gone and he was still here, dealing with the shit stain that was the world.

*It should have been me*, he kept thinking.

“No, no, no!” Kevin protested, “This is different. Sam built this.”

Dean’s heart seized and his face crumpled. Cas looked at him with such guilt-love-pity, that he almost lost it right there and then. Almost. Dean cleared his throat, schooling his face into a neutral expression. Kevin didn’t need any more prodding to continue.

“It functions on the Mirror of Erised principle!” the Prophet exclaimed.

“Seriously? Harry Potter? Jesus, what a dork,” Dean snorted with only a slight hitch in his voice, allowing his mind to briefly skim over the memory of Sam happily devouring those books, while Castiel only looked confused.

“Only someone who knows what’s in here, but has no intention of using it can open the box. So, basically, only someone whose intention it is to destroy or protect the tablets can get to them,” Kevin explained, looking at the former angel.

Castiel seemed doubtful, his eyes narrowing at the box in Kevin's hands.

“It’s protected from both demons and angels,” the boy assured, “Plus, we found a heavily warded safe down in the archives we could put the box into. And I guess, we could drop it into the Mariana Trench if we come across a friend with that kind of mojo…”

Castiel's hands clenched into fists at the comment; only a few hours ago, *he* would have had the “mojo” to do just that. Kevin’s eyes dropped guiltily to the floor. Dean stepped forward and without ceremony or even a pause, tossed the tablets into the box and slammed it shut. There was a flash of light and the thing was sealed.

“We’re done,” he choked out. “No more of this bullshit. You’re free, Kevin. I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry. For everything.”

Kevin nodded, relief making his shoulders drop and his eyes go glassy.

“I wish my mom…” the boy said quietly, unable to finish the sentence.

Both Cas and Dean bowed their heads sadly, until Crowley interrupted, fresh from his shower and dressed in a slightly too-tight gray suit that Dean was sure he pilfered from one of the untouched Men of Letters bedrooms.

“Oh yes,” he hissed. “About Mrs. Tran…”

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Six hours later found them back in the bunker, after a panicked drive down to Wichita reunited the Prophet and his mother. Dean wouldn’t leave Crowley alone in the bunker and so they had all piled into the Impala to rescue Linda from the fetid locker at Castle Storage. Grudgingly, the hunter let Crowley sit shotgun so neither of the Trans had to be too near him. Once back within the safety of
the warded walls, they allowed the exhaustion to finally kick in.

Despite the dirt and the blood and the sweat, Dean and Cas simply walked to Dean's room, toed off their shoes and outer layers and slowly, painfully made space for each other on the bed. They slept, clothed, back to back, for almost twelve hours. When the tears finally came and the hunter's body shook with the effort of keeping them to himself, a warm dry hand found his and squeezed gently. That’s when Dean had let it all out: the pain and the sorrow and just the damn unfairness of it all. Hunter and former angel of the Lord remained back to back, hand in hand for an interminable amount of time, until Cas mentioned in a grief-scratched voice that Crowley was somewhere in the bunker with them -- unsupervised.

On the second night, Dean offered Castiel the room across the hall from his; he figured since Crowley had claimed one, Cas should have one too. The former angels eyes dropped to the ground at this suggestion and the corners of his mouth quirked in the same direction, but he simply nodded and retrieved his coat and shoes from Dean's room.

Kevin and his mother beat a hasty retreat back to a semblance of their old lives. Charlie was called upon to help and she rose to the challenge admirably, erasing their old identities, selling off their assets and funneling some of the liberated Richard Roman Enterprises funds to the newly minted Kevin and Linda Phan. They left for their new lives in Denver within days, too rattled by Crowley’s presence to stay much longer.

Those first days were hard and almost silent between Dean and Castiel. It began with a need to simply cling to each other, but then, afraid to cross lines neither had drawn, they drifted apart and settled into a weary binary orbit, both circling an invisible, unarticulated need. The guilt over what the other had sacrificed kept them at arm's length from each other, but the need for comfort kept them from rocketing off to opposite sides of the galaxy; a perfect gravitational balance of misery. Dean’s only solace was feeding the newly human Cas, introducing him to the joys of coffee, bacon and the perfectly grilled burger. Although, Crowley and his nasty attitude toward being human put a damper on even those moments.

Crowley raged and then raged even harder when he was met with two pairs of tired eyes and a pair of apathetic shrugs.

“You did this to me!” he screamed. “I was perfectly happy as the King of Hell. I'd found my calling, my niche. And then you wankers came along and bollocksed it all up!”

He had gone on, but the hunter and former angel tuned him out. Eventually, Crowley simply disappeared. One of the classic cars was missing from the garage, a dark red 1958 Bentley, and a scrawled note was left on one of the library tables. “See you in hell!” it read. Dean had blinked at it a few times and then burst into a fit of hysterical laughter.

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It took a few weeks, but the two of them finally got into a rhythm. Dean taught Cas how to be human; covering the basics from brushing his teeth to hand-to-hand combat without the aid of Grace. Cas, meanwhile, pored over the tomes in the bunker library, trying to ascertain the consequences of what they had done. They realized early on that closing the gates to Heaven and Hell wouldn’t stop baddys like vamps, vengeful spirits, and werewolves from continuing their work, so the two of them went back to hunting. Dean activated something like a hunter call tree and word got out to the
community pretty quickly about what the Winchesters and “The Angel” (as they all called him now, despite it being a misnomer) had done. Several condolences about Sam’s loss made their way to Dean and he just grunted in response, pushing all thoughts of his brother away. He still had work to do.

Most disturbingly, he and Cas realized that any demons who had been topside during the Great Slamming of the Doors of 2013 were trapped here and exorcism would only serve to make the cretin flee its meatsuit, leaving it free to possess another human. When they discovered the problem, Dean had simply started killing the demons outright, but Castiel vehemently objected. He had grown tired of death, he said, and the possessed were innocent. The hunter capitulated. They finally figured out a way to trap the disembodied demons in glass witches orbs. The technique wasn’t perfect and the orbs were delicate, but without a better solution at hand, they made do. There were seven of them in the demon's trap in the dungeon, sitting in a box meant to protect Christmas ornaments. The box was red, with a googly-eyed dancing Christmas tree embroidered on the sides that Castiel found in a bargain bin at some big-box store outside of Topeka after their first successful use of a witches orb. Sometimes, when Dean's emotions were dangerously close to the surface and he caught sight of the box, Castiel would find him on his knees, wheezing between hysterical fits of laughter about having the tiniest, most ludicrously festive maximum security prison in America. The former angel didn’t so much welcome these outbursts, as find them preferable to the ones that ended with objects being flung at walls.

At least when it was the hysterical fits of laughter, all Cas would have to do is kneel across from Dean, wrap his arms around the hunter and wait for the man to do the same. Dean would lay his forehead on one of the former angel’s shoulders and they would stay that way until Dean broke contact. Sometimes it was after only minutes, sometimes it would take much longer and invariably, the fabric at Castiel’s shoulder would be soaked through. They never talked about it; it just happened. It was a slightly different story when objects were being flung at walls. In fact, Castiel had come upon the solution to these outbursts completely by accident and out of desperation. The blowout came after a hunt involving a demon; Dean had to use an angel blade outright after their witch-ball gambit failed. The possessed young man had looked remarkably like Sam. At the time, the hunter seemed calm, unfazed, until they reached the safety of the bunker. The former angel had gone to drop his bag off in his room, when the crashing started. Something made of glass shattered right before Castiel made it back into the library.

“It should have been me!” Dean screamed at no one and nothing, pacing anxiously around the library, his fingers running through his hair jerkily. “And it didn’t even fucking change anything!”

Castiel noted with a detached numbness that he must have toed off his shoes and pulled off his jacket at some point, probably in an effort to get comfortable after coming home. There were dangerous-looking shards of glass covering the floor, but the hunter didn’t stop his frantic pacing.

“But the glass!” Castiel had called out. But it did nothing. The man looked up at him with a haunted look in his eyes, not really seeing him.

“And you,” he practically wailed. “Your wings. It’s all my fault. Sam’s gone and you’re human. It should have been me.”

And then he stepped on a piece of glass. To Castiel’s horror, he’d just kept going, not even flinching, and in only a few moments, left progressively bloodier footprints across the library floor. The sight of the blood drove the former angel to action. Realizing that Dean was probably too far gone to respond to a civilized, verbal suggestion to settle down and possibly have his foot looked at, he simply rushed forward when Dean’s back was turned and lifted him bodily out of the field of broken and now
bloody glass. What he didn’t expect, was for the man to fight him. Hard. As they grappled, Castiel was thankful for the hours of sparring the hunter had put him through and despite his lack of Grace, managed to wrestle Dean onto a glass-free part of the library floor, face down, with his arms pinned behind his back. But he just kept fighting, kicking and bucking against the former angel with all his strength. The blood was flowing from his injured foot at an alarming rate and out of sheer frustration, Cas had lifted him off the floor just enough to slam him back down, knocking the wind out of him and threw his own body over the hunter’s. Afraid of what was happening and angry that there seemed to be no way to help Dean without hurting him further, Castiel had summoned his best Angel-of-the-Lord voice and growled right into his ear.

“Stay down.”

Dean had frozen instantly, his breaths coming in ragged and uneven.

“I’ll let you up when I know you’re calm, understood?”

The side of Dean's face was pressed against the floor and one wide eye was staring at him in shock. Several silent moments passed between them, but to his utter surprise, the hunter eventually nodded. Castiel didn’t move, only tightened his grip on the wrists trapped between them. Again, Dean surprised him; instead of protesting this physical lock down, the tightened grip seemed to trigger something and the man practically melted beneath him, closing his eyes. Cas could tell that he was making a concerted effort to even out his breathing. Several more moments passed this way and the surprise he had been feeling was transforming into a realization.

“I’m going to let you up now,” the former angel finally said.

Instead of just allowing Dean to scramble to his feet on his own, Castiel hauled him up bodily and placed him in the first available chair he saw. Without a word, he propped up the injured foot on the library table and peeled off the now thoroughly bloody sock, peering at the gash. After a moment of assessment, he straightened up, glaring at Dean, still angry about what had occurred, but no longer afraid. The man before him didn’t meet his gaze, instead staring resolutely into his own lap, with his shoulders hunched forward and hands gripping the sides of the chair seat.

“I’m going to get the first aid kit. Don’t move.”

The hunter didn’t respond. Castiel folded his arms across his chest and allowed an edge of danger to enter his voice.

“When I come back into the library, will you have moved?”

Dean took in a shaky breath and then shook his head slowly.

“No,” he finally responded, still not looking at the former angel.

“Good,” Castiel said and left on his errand.

True to his word, the man hadn’t moved when Cas returned and allowed him to tend to his injury with only a minimal amount of hissing when the shard of glass was finally removed from his foot. There was a lot of blood, but little permanent damage.

“Look at me,” Cas demanded, still using his I’m-considering-smiting-you voice.

Dean looked up, slowly, meekly, the look on his face a mix of shame and wonder. There was a power in this moment and Castiel, strategist of heaven, commander of a garrison, was determined to absorb the lesson well and use it to every advantage. Dean’s reaction to being manhandled had
confirmed a suspicion the former angel had toyed with for several years. When you carry the kind of burden the hunter did, it is often a relief to be given no choice, to be forced into compliance, especially by someone you trust implicitly. Without choice, you really can’t fuck up; that onus lies with the one demanding submission.

“You’re more than welcome to deal with your emotional turmoil as you see fit, but this,” he said, pointing at the now bandaged foot, “Is completely unacceptable. I’m willing to give you what you need. Whatever you need. But what I need is for you to stop blaming yourself for everything that’s gone wrong in this world.”

“I… I don’t…,” Dean had choked out, his eyes pleading, “Sam didn’t deserve… and your wings…”

Castiel shook his head to silence him.

“We’ve all made our own choices. Not everything is your fault Dean, not every mistake lies at your feet. Yes, we were locked into someone else’s script for a time, and we made some bad decisions, but none of us deserved what happened to us. You chose to trade Sam's life for your soul, but you didn’t deserve hell. Sam chose to stop the Apocalypse by saying yes to Lucifer, but he didn’t deserve the cage. I chose to put an end to the civil war in heaven in the worst way possible, but I didn’t deserve what Naomi did to me. But it’s done now. We’ve made our choices. I gave up my Grace to close heaven and Sam gave up his life to close hell. You are NOT at fault here. It shouldn’t have been you, because it WASN’T. You don’t deserve to suffer any more than I do. You’re a good man Dean, and you WILL stop punishing yourself for it.”

That night, they fell asleep on Dean’s bed, The Magnificent Seven playing out on Sam’s old laptop and Castiel’s arm wrapped protectively around the subdued hunter’s shoulders.

“I’ll watch over you,” the former angel promised before they slipped into sleep, the hunter only grunting drowsily in response.

After that, Dean only had one more outburst because Cas hadn’t quite caught on in time. Usually, the former angel could feel the potential for a blowout building in his partner and would unceremoniously drag him down to the room they had re-purposed for sparring and go at each other until the hunter was pinned beneath him, all the fight drained out.

Before Castiel would allow Dean to get up, he would hover above him and ask, “Do you trust me?”

Invariably, the man would answer in the affirmative, sometimes with only a sharp nod and sometimes with a whispered “Yes”.

“Then believe when I say this: You’re a good man, Dean,” the former angel would tell him, “You’re doing the right thing. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be than here, by your side.”

Sometimes, Dean would give Cas a wan smile, a nod and the unconventional therapy session would be over. But sometimes, he would turn away, his face crumpling or pressed into the floor mat and Cas wouldn’t let him go until the shaking stopped. This had gone on for months now and the former angel didn’t think either of them would ever outgrow the need for this routine. It built something up inside them and between them, slowly but surely healing some of the gaping wounds their choices had left.
In this way, almost six months had gone by. The two men were sitting in the library in their robes, steaming mugs in hand, with news and weather report printouts scattered across the large table. Castiel was squinting at his computer screen, grumbling about pop-up ads while Dean leafed absentmindedly through an old demonology tome.

“You really think there were so few of them up here when the doors were slammed?” he asked for the umpteenth time, referring to the demons they’d either caught or killed over the past six months, “You’d think Crowley had more than just a dozen agents working the States.”

Cas sighed in exasperation, rubbing at his eyes. “We could ask him, if we could find him. Although I doubt he would be in a cooperative mood after what we did to him.”

“I should’ve beaten all the intel we needed out of him when I had the chance,” Dean said, slamming the book in his hands shut with disgust, “Now the son of a bitch is in the wind. With one of our cars too.”

They were in the process of trying to reason out why the left over top-side demons had suddenly gone so suspiciously quiet when the alarms went off in the War Room. Both Dean and Castiel sat up in their chairs, staring at each other with wide, frightened eyes.

“The fuck…?” the hunter muttered, as both of them rose from their seats and rushed into the next room.

The map table suddenly lit up, with a meteor-like streak coming down in northern Wisconsin with an impact point radiating from the Western-most edge of Lake Superior.

“No… no no no,” Castiel suddenly intoned, looking down at his own hands.

Dean looked up from the map just in time to see the bright blue light of Grace fill Castiel's eyes before he disappeared completely.

“Cas!” he screamed fruitlessly into the echoing space of the War Room.

The hunter spent several moments screaming his angel’s name in the bunker before he rushed out into the cold night and spent several minutes screaming his name at the starry sky of Kansas. After his voice almost gave out, Dean slammed his way back into the bunker, pacing in front of the map table. He kept looking at his phone, keeping track of the minutes Castiel had been gone. It was exactly 7 minutes and 32 seconds before the angel suddenly appeared inside the bunker on the opposite side of the map table. The towering shape of Dean's brother accompanied him. The hunter took a shocked step back.

“S-sammy?” he stuttered, his eyes growing huge in disbelief.

Sam grinned sheepishly, nervously shuffling behind Castiel. “Hey,” he said breathlessly and rather anticlimactically.

“It’s him, I checked,” Cas said in a strangely distracted manner, tilting his head in the large man's direction.

“Wha… but…,” Dean's eyes raked over the two figures and he suddenly realized why Sam, ever the hugger, hadn’t surged forward to embrace him yet.

“Why the hell are you naked?” he asked, peeling off his own robe and tossing it at his brother, who caught it gratefully.
“I doubt Seraphina had the wherewithal to consider clothing while she was reconstructing Sam mid-fall,” Castiel said, his tone fractious.

The hunter finally managed to unglue his eyes from Sam, and abruptly realized that the former angel was almost as naked as his brother. Thankfulsl, Cas had been wearing boxers, but his own robe was now in his arms, arranged in a soggy, suspiciously human-shaped bundle.

“Seraphina?” he asked.

Castiel gently placed the unconscious figure on the map table and the three men stared at her. Sam looked at the pale face and wild dark hair with something like affection, while Cas glared down at her with a mix of emotions that Dean couldn’t quite keep track of; they flitted over his face so quickly. Confusion, fear, guilt, anger, then back to confusion.

“Either of you want to tell me who the hell that is and what the fuck is going on?” Dean finally growled.

“She smuggled me out of heaven,” Sam supplied, rather unhelpfully in Dean's opinion.

The younger hunter didn’t elaborate, distracted by his attempt to fit into his brother’s robe. After several moments, he gave up and just wrapped the thing around his middle.

“But who IS she?!” he exclaimed.

Sam opened his mouth to speak, but Castiel beat him to it.

“Seraphina is a fallen angel.”

“Ok…” Dean said hesitantly. He could tell there was some other piece of information the man was holding back. Cas’ hands came up to rub violently at his face, as if he were trying to chase away a bone deep weariness and then raked them through his hair.

“Seraphina… is my daughter.”
Resurrection Road

Chapter Summary

“So when you said ‘daughter’...” Sam trailed off.

After several moments of sputtering from both hunters and choice exclamations from Dean, Castiel sent them to retrieve some clothing. He refused to leave the unconscious girl unattended, so the brothers made their way into the deeper parts of the bunker, with Dean leading and Sam only semi-successfully trying to cover up with the borrowed robe.

“Dude, I’ve been wiping your ass since I was four,” the older Winchester quipped, “Ain’t nothing I haven’t seen already.”

Sam chuckled, but they held off on the bone crushing hug until they were better dressed. Dean found some pajama pants for himself and retrieved the same and a hoodie from Castiel's room.

“You kept my things,” Sam said quietly as they met up in a dimly lit corridor.

He was wearing a pair of old sweats and a t-shirt that Dean remembered laundering in that first week after the gates were closed. It put a lump in his throat to see his brother in the clothing he had sobbed into, believing they’d parted ways for good this time.

“Yeah, well…” Dean huffed in an effort to push that memory away, “Winchesters are shit at staying dead, so...”

Sam nodded, blinking away the sudden wetness in his eyes. They hugged finally and the older hunter managed not to make any jokes about chick-flick moments. They made their way back through the library and into the War Room, quietly overjoyed at being reunited but also apprehensive about what this turn of events might mean. The brothers sat down opposite Castiel, who was still on the far side of the table, staring pensively at the motionless figure bundled in his robe. Dean handed over the extra clothing.

“So, uh, Cas, you got your mojo back or what?” Dean asked, both hope and dread warring in his voice as the former angel pulled on the garments.

“No,” he replied flatly. “It was just the residual.”

When the brothers only stared at him, Castiel continued, “It was the bit of my Grace I gave Seraphina when I built her. It was dislodged when she lost her own Grace in the fall.”

“So when you said ‘daughter’...” Sam trailed off.

“She’s as close to a child a creature such as myself could’ve produced at the time.”

Dean cringed at the way the former angel described himself, but asked, “...at the time?”

Castiel huffed a frustrated sigh and took a seat at the table. It cast an eerie yellow glow over the whole scene, making them all look like participants in the strangest strategic meeting the War Room had ever hosted. Seraphina still hadn’t stirred and Dean noticed a small puddle of water forming
around her head, a glowing translucent halo.

“The only time I had the power to build an angel of my own was after I tapped Purgatory. When I thought I was God,” Cas said, with a bitter edge to his voice, “I was foolish and arrogant and trusted no one. So I constructed a being with no ties to the old Heaven, no loyalties to the original angels or God: Seraphina. And then I abandoned her. I thought she was dead…”

Cas rubbed wearily at his face again. Sam and Dean sat silent, transfixed by the confession. The younger Winchester looked down at the fallen angel’s face, considering Castiel’s words. In real time, she would only be a few years old, but looked like she could be in her twenties. What had she done in Castiel's name in her short life?

“But that is not important right now,” Cas finally said. “What I want to know is why Sam is here.”

Dean jumped up from his chair, anger flaring up in his voice. “What the hell do you mean? He’s alive, that’s all I damn well care about! What, you want to knock on Heaven’s gates and hand him back?!”

Sam reached up to put a restraining hand on his brother’s arm and Castiel’s face softened, as did his voice.

“No Dean, of course not. I’m simply concerned with his method of egress,” he said, spreading his hands to indicate the still form on the table between them. “It is highly disturbing to find out that Seraphina has been alive this whole time. It’s even more ominous that someone has emerged in Heaven powerful enough to cast her out in such a dramatic fashion.”

“What do you mean?” Dean asked, calming slightly and allowing Sam to pull him back into his seat.

“The force with which she was cast out was meant to kill her. It would have killed any regular angel. But I built her differently than the way the heavenly host is constructed. None of them would have been able to not only survive that kind of fall, but also rebuild an entire human being mid-descent and set them down without a scratch.” Castiel shook his head. “The point is that something has changed in Heaven and we have no way of knowing what. Unless Sam, you have some insight?”

Castiel peered in Sam's direction expectantly and Dean joined him.

“I… uh…,” Sam stuttered, searching for a way to start his story, “I wasn’t up top long before they started looking for me. Remember Zachariah?”

Dean grimaced, recalling their jaunt through Heaven as fugitives.

“It started like that,” Sam confirmed. “And guess who came to rescue my ass again?”

“No way.” Dean sat up straighter, staring at his brother in disbelieving wonder.

“Yes way,” he laughed in response. “Apparently no one caught on that it was Ash hiding us back then. He’s still up there, picking their locks and interrogating all the dead theoretical physicists he can find. He came and got me almost as soon as I landed. Good thing too. We were just cracking open some beers at the Roadhouse when the orders from Metatron came over angel radio. ‘Find Sam Winchester’.”

Sam’s face darkened and he glanced at Seraphina. In this light, he could see she had the same chin cleft as Cas.

“Ash programmed an escape hatch that would send me from heaven to heaven at random. He’d
come and get me once in a while to give me a break and an update. After a few months, it seemed like they were all giving up, swapping theories about what had happened to me on angel radio. We could tell something else was going on too, but they kept it off the waves. Mostly. Ash and I puzzled out that someone was making a grab for the reins. Someone powerful. It had everyone rattled.”

Castiel sat forward at this, his eyes narrowed. “Who?”

Sam shrugged. “They never mentioned a name, but they were scared. Then, a few hours ago, angel radio went dead. Not a peep. Freaked Ash out. We were at the Roadhouse when Seraphina popped in. She didn’t make any sense at first, talking a mile a minute. She kept saying ‘He’s coming for me’ but wouldn’t say who it was. We assumed it was Metatron or one of the angels assigned to look for me. I still don’t know how she found me, but she convinced Ash that it was my last chance to make it back here…”

“She convinced Ash?” Dean said sharply as Sam’s voice trailed off guiltily. “But not you?”

“I just…” Sam started, his eyes pleading. “I just wanted it to be over. I wanted it to be done. But even dead, they won’t lay off. At first, I refused to go.”

Dean huffed angrily at this, turning away from his brother and crossing his arms over his chest. Castiel gave him a look that was meant to pacify, but only received a sullen glare in response.

“But I realized pretty quickly that I couldn’t stay, not with the way they were looking for me. Metatron sure as hell wanted me for something…” The younger Winchester turned pensive, again staring at Seraphina with a furrowed brow. “I figured I’d be of more use here, instead of hiding out in other people’s heavens. Plus, I didn’t trust her until she said an angel named Castiel sent her.”

Cas leaned back in his chair, sighing.

“Well, obviously that was a fabrication,” he said gravely. “Naomi told me she had personally terminated Seraphina. I had no reason to doubt her efficiency or resolve when it came to restoring Heaven and in her mind, Seraphina was an abomination.”

Both Sam and Dean shifted in their seats uncomfortably and exchanged glances, the previous animosity forgotten in lieu of this new information. The former angel never fully revealed what Naomi had done to him and the brothers happily employed their own version of a “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy after their multiple encounters with the hellish side of the afterlife. Each one of them could vividly imagine what the other had gone through and didn’t need their own experience embellished with the pain and suffering of those they loved. When Cas didn’t elaborate, Dean uncrossed his arms and turned back to his brother.

“So how exactly did she get you out? Someone had to toss you two our way. You didn’t see anything?” the hunter asked.

Sam shook his head. “She used the same technique Benny taught you in Purgatory, except I was in her chest instead of her arm. After that, I don’t remember anything, just suddenly coming to on a beach, naked. I watched her fall into the lake and just as I was about to go into the water, Cas showed up.”

“Lake?” Dean asked.

Castiel answered before Sam could. “Lake Superior. Seraphina managed to drop your brother on one of the Apostle Islands before she lost consciousness. I would never wish that kind of fall on anyone, but had she not lost her Grace and returned the residual to me, she would have drowned and Sam
would still be stranded on that island. Naked.”

Dean was not satisfied; they still had no idea who had inspired such fear in Heaven or why Seraphina had felt compelled to evacuate Sam, but at least it explained why she was seeping lake water all over their table. Castiel opened his mouth to speak, but before any sound came out, the subject of their conversation took in a strangled breath and burst up into a sitting position, looking wildly around her. She sat up with such violence that the three men startled out of their chairs, Sam sending his clattering across the room. The girls eyes found Castiel and terror crossed her face.

“No,” she moaned, throwing up a hand as if to stave off a blow. “No, no, no!”

The cries turned into sobs and she scrambled away from the men. Before any of them could stop her, Seraphina tumbled right off the edge of the table, landing hard on the marble floor. They all made a move to help her up, which only earned them a terrified shriek before she threw herself under the map table, her eyes wide and wild, looking for an escape route. It didn’t help matters when all three of the men crouched down to peer at the hysterical girl. Seeing no path for retreat, she made herself as small as possible and looked between them, tears streaming down her face.

“Please,” she whispered in a pained and broken voice. “I’m so tired. Just end this, Naomi.”

Sam and Dean only glanced at each other in confusion, but a look of disgusted horror settled on Castiel’s face.

“Naomi is dead,” he said. “Metatron killed her. She can’t hurt you anymore.”

A small ‘oh’ escaped Dean as he caught on to what was happening. Naomi had tortured and reprogrammed Castiel to the point that he had been almost completely under her control, until the moment she asked him to do the impossible: kill Dean. If she had been capable of doing that to one of her own brothers, the hunter didn’t care to imagine what she was willing to do to a being she considered an abomination, as Cas had suggested. Seraphina buried her face in her knees, and began to rock back and forth.

“Not true, not true,” she whispered.

“Why don’t we, uh, back off, huh?” Sam suggested quietly, also catching on to the implications of her words.

The brothers straightened and joined Castiel at his side of the table, giving Seraphina a means of escape, but also herding her further into the bunker if she decided to bolt. The girl took the opportunity as soon as it was offered, popping up on the other side, keeping the table between them. Her short dark hair was still damp, but sticking up at wild angles in places and in this light, they could see that her eyes were the same shade of blue as Castiel’s. Seraphina was significantly smaller than the three of them, but by the way she moved, Dean could tell that she would be a fierce opponent if they attempted to engage her. She started backing away, toward the library, when her eyes settled on Sam and she froze.

“What are you doing here?” she asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously, “She's never used you before.”

“You got me out, remember?” he asked gently, choosing to ignore her strange declaration. “You said it wasn’t safe for me in Heaven any more. You said you could get me back to my brother.”

Sam gestured to the other hunter standing beside him. The girl seemed to register all three of them for the first time and her shoulders dropped a little.
“But there’s no way out of Heaven,” Seraphina said quietly. “The gates are closed, the only way out is to…”

Whatever temporary calm seeing Sam had achieved was shattered and the pale little face crumpled as Seraphina sank to her knees, her arms wrapped tightly around herself.

“My wings,” she moaned, her voice cracking.

Castiel made a move toward her, but Sam held him back, shaking his head. The girl was clearly afraid, confused and probably in pain. It was a miracle that she was still in the room with them, instead of making a break for the bunker door. Sam was convinced that the more time and space they gave her, the more likely she was to trust them. He just wanted to keep her talking long enough for her to calm down.

“I’m really sorry about your wings,” Sam said, turning back to her, the sincerity obvious in his voice. “I didn’t know. I wouldn’t have agreed to come if I’d known carrying me would rip out your Grace.”

Seraphina sniffed, her arms relaxing into her lap.

“He would have cast me out anyway,” she said, her voice small and watery. “It was part of the plan.”


Her hands came up to her face, rubbing the dampness away and Dean was strongly reminded of Cas, who had done the same thing only a few minutes ago.

“I don’t remember,” she groaned through her fingers. “The fall…”

And that was when the bunker door slammed open and a familiar figure sauntered in, practically skipping down the metal stairs. The three men stared open mouthed as the intruder grinned at them.

“Hey hey, miss me?” he exclaimed, opening up his arms as if they were all about to rush in for a hug.

“Gabriel?” Castiel whispered, disbelieving.

Dean glared daggers. He was all for being reunited with his brother, but too many people were rising from the dead today and he didn’t trust it.

“You’re dead,” Sam finally choked out.

“So were you, Winchester,” he laughed, “but it looks like miracles do happen! I’m assuming Sera’s filled you guys in. Pretty damn slick, if I do say so myself. You’re welcome.”

The archangel looked around expectantly, his eyes sparkling with mirth, sporting a lopsided grin. When his gaze finally landed on Seraphina, the joy in his face fled. She was still on the floor, wrapped in Castiel’s slightly soggy robe, her eyes wide with fear.

“You’re the one who cast me out,” she whispered, a shudder running through her body.

Gabriel’s eyes snapped angrily to the hunters and the former angel.

“What the hell did you do to her?” he growled, taking a step toward the men. He was smaller than all of them, but his Grace flashed dangerously in his eyes; he could incinerate them with a thought.
“We didn’t do shit,” Dean spat. “Are you the one who tossed her from Heaven? You nearly killed her; if Cas hadn’t been there, she’d have drowned and Sam would be stranded. Hell, according to Cas, if she’d been any other angel, both of them would be dead right now. So what did YOU do to her? And what the fuck is going on in Heaven? How are you even here?! Have the gates been opened?”

“It was part of the plan! She was willing to take that risk!” the archangel yelled. “And let ME worry about heaven, bub, ‘cuz I’m the one in charge now.”

“YOU?!” Castiel barked, “You’re the one who took control? You never even cared! You let Zachariah and his ilk destroy our home and betray humanity!”

“I can’t see that you’ve done much better little brother,” Gabriel snapped. “In fact, project Resurrect Gabe got started the moment you popped the cork on Purgatory. I guess Dad finally got worried enough to step in.”

“Hey,” Dean pointed a finger at the archangel, “he was trying to stop a friggin’ civil war in Heaven that your pops didn’t give a damn enough to prevent!”

Gabriel was about to retort when they noticed a low, off-key humming. The melody sounded vaguely like ‘You Are My Sunshine’ and the archangel’s face changed from wrathful to confused. All four men glanced in the direction the humming was coming from. Seraphina had scooted into a corner, her knees at her chest, eyes squeezed shut and hands clutching the sides of her head. She was rocking back and forth gently, humming the strange little tune. Gabriel abandoned the argument with Cas and the Winchesters and walked slowly toward the girl.

“Sera. Hey, Sera,” he said gently, crouching in front of her, but to no effect. The archangel turned back to the men. “Has she been like this the whole time?”

“She’s been unconscious mostly; only just came to when you showed up,” Sam said quietly, peering at Seraphina with worry, but eminently glad that the shouting match was over. “She said she couldn’t remember anything.”

“Dammit,” Gabriel hissed and then turned back to the rocking figure to try again. “Seraphina. Little bird. You’re safe, little bird.”

The humming stopped and she opened her eyes; they were wide with recognition, but she still flinched back when she realized how close he had gotten. The archangel held up his hands, as if to show her that he was unarmed.

“I need you to remember, Sera,” he said gently. “I need to leave here knowing that you remember.”

The girl lowered her hands from her head, staring intently at the archangel.

“We had a plan,” she said, slowly leaning toward Gabriel. “I was in the Garret.”

Castiel took in a sharp breath. The Garret was a prison in Heaven. Very few of the heavenly host even knew of its existence. It wasn’t just a place to lock away misbehaving angels, it was a black site; a place the rules and morals of Heaven went to die. Cas always thought of it as Heaven's very own Hell.

When the Winchesters looked at him questioningly, he explained, “Naomi had me there.”

That was all the description the brothers needed to understand the meaning of it.
Seraphina leaned toward Gabriel to search his face, as if her lost memories might be found there. He gave her a tremulous smile, trying to encourage her. The girl raised her hand and gently traced one of the archangel’s eyebrows with her finger.

“Raven?” she asked, cocking her head to the side, her voice suddenly bright.

Gabriel nodded, relief washing over his face.

“It IS you!” she exclaimed, surging forward and wrapping her arms around the archangel’s neck.

Castiel and the brothers looked at each other in surprise. Gabriel brought his arms down from their pacifying position and hugged her tightly, once, before standing them both up. He didn’t let her go though, holding her elbows as if afraid she might dart away from him. Seraphina didn’t pull away, gripping his forearms in response and leaning forward as if about to share a secret.

“I remember,” she whispered, looking wonderfully up at him. “Did it work?”

Gabriel smiled at her confidently this time. “Yeah, Little Bird, it worked. You were fabulous. They bought it, hook, line and sinker.”

Seraphina laughed, it was a breathy quavering sound, the kind of laugh you hear from people surprised to find themselves alive. “I’m free?” she asked, a note of disbelief still tinging her voice.

Again, the archangel nodded. “No more cages,” he said softly.

Castiel and the hunters watched this exchange in confusion. The former angels eye’s were mere slits, he was squinting so hard. Sam, ever the diplomat, kept looking between the three angels, trying to figure out the most unobtrusive moment to point out that they really needed to know what the hell was going on. Dean, his arms crossed and still staring daggers, barreled ahead.

“So wait, wait, wait,” he cut in. “Are the gates open or not? Are we about to have a shitstorm of angry halos coming down on us?”

Gabriel sighed, casting a long suffering glance up at the ceiling.

“You have a terrible sense of dramatic timing, Winchester,” he groaned. “Can’t you see we’re having a moment here?”

But Seraphina’s face darkened. “He’s right. You shouldn’t be here. They’ll suspect.”

Gabriel sighed again, not relinquishing his hold on the girl. “I needed to see for myself that you and the Sasquatch made it.”

Sam threw his best bitch face at the archangel, but he wasn’t paying attention.

“Are you sure this is what you want?” Gabe asked, briefly glancing at the three men staring at them expectantly across the War Room.

Sera took a breath, chewing her lower lip, her eyes also wandering briefly in their direction. They all glanced at each other nervously and stood up a little straighter, unsure of the implications of this exchange. She nodded once, sharply, and squared her shoulders, as if expecting a protest from the archangel before her. Gabriel only smiled wanly in response.

“Alright then,” he said, snapping his fingers once. “As promised.”

Two large, military style duffle bags appeared at Seraphina’s feet. He squeezed her elbows and
leaned forward to plant a chaste kiss on her forehead.

“Goodbye, Little Bird,” Gabriel said quietly and was gone.

“Goodbye, Raven,” Sera said into the empty space he left behind.
“I suppose I should start from the beginning,” she sighed.

It took all night, but Seraphina told them everything she could. They moved into the library to be more comfortable. Sam bounded up the metal staircase to make sure the bunker door was secured after Gabriel's dramatic entrance. Cas set about making coffee for the hunters and tea for himself and the newly fallen angel. Dean slipped into the depths of the bunker quietly and returned just as quietly, holding a bundle of clothing in his hands. He shoved them in Seraphina's direction wordlessly. She only stared at him questioningly.

“You’re human now,” he said gruffly, “And that robe is soaked. You’ll get cold eventually.”

“Oh, yes,” she said, looking down at herself, “The lake.”

Sam saw Castiel smiling into his tea and wondered if this was a familiar scene. In fact, he wondered what the last six months had wrought in his absence between the former angel and his brother. Cas seemed comfortable in his body in a way he never had as an angel and Dean had lost some of that haunted look in his eye. Seraphina settled into one of the wooden chairs at the table, resting her chin on her knees. A pair of Dean’s old sweatpants were rolled up at her ankles and a dark Henley hung loosely off her shoulders, sleeves scrunched up at the elbows. The fallen angel answered their most pressing questions first; the gates of Heaven were still locked and intact and Gabriel had indeed wrested power from Metatron. How it all happened was a far more complex story.

“I suppose I should start from the beginning,” she sighed.

After Castiel had taken his fateful walk into the lake and disappeared, Seraphina managed to keep order for only a few days before the angels became restive. The old factions again appeared, new alliances coalesced and the civil war began anew. Naomi was one of the first to regain power and with it, she captured Sera, imprisoned her in the Garret and cut off her access to angel radio. At first, her only concern was in keeping Castiel’s second-in-command away from any potential allies that might still rally under his banner. But then her interests turned more devious; what could possibly lend her more legitimacy than Castiel's own lieutenant swearing allegiance on bended knee?

Naomi had been part of a secretive division of Heaven, ostensibly in charge of setting rebellious angels back on the righteous path. What she actually did was beat them into submission. If that failed, they could be forcibly reprogrammed into compliance. She set about testing her skills on this brand new type of angel and found them lacking. Nothing done would bend Seraphina's will or put her under Naomi's control. For several weeks, the prisoner was left in peace while the struggle for dominance continued. Then, Naomi’s mind landed on a new, even more brilliant idea; if she couldn’t turn this new angel, she would simply learn how to replicate her. It would be easier to build a loyal army from scratch, she reasoned, than attempting to convert suspicious and fractious groups to her side. And, without a discernible operating system that could be located and manipulated, this new army would never switch allegiances. Naomi’s visits to Seraphina’s cell became more frequent.

At this point in the story, the girl stopped talking and stared into her half empty tea cup, scraping her nail against a chip in the handle. The silence stretched on for so long that Sam and Dean glanced at
Castiel, unease creasing their foreheads. They didn’t know what she was remembering, but they imagined he had a pretty solid idea of what Naomi was capable of.

“She’s dead,” he said, startling Sera out of her reverie.

“Yes, I know,” she nodded, “Gabriel confirmed it.”

Seraphina stared hard at Cas, as if debating how much to reveal.

“I never told her,” she said softly, “How to make more of me. No matter what she did, or said, or showed me. Not even when she sent copies of you to hurt me.”

Castiel swallowed hard and looked down at his hands. Dean could see a small twitch start up at the corner of his mouth, like he was trying not to scream or cry. None of them knew that although Naomi had practiced this technique on Seraphina, she perfected it against Castiel. Sera’s words were beginning to sink in and Sam took in a sharp breath.

“‘She’s never used you before’”, Sam repeated the strange remark she had directed at him when she first awoke in the War Room, realization dawning, “You meant Naomi. You meant she’d never used a copy of me to hurt you.”

The fallen angel nodded and Dean shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

“Don’t worry,” Sera said, directing a faint smile in his direction, “She only sent you once and I think it was out of sheer spite. Metatron told me what happened, with the angel tablet. She was so mad. Furious.”

The girl giggled. Castiel was reminded of Dean, when one of his moods was coming on him. He sat up straighter in his chair and exchanged glances with the hunter. The man seemed to recognize the moment as well. The cup started to vibrate slightly in Sera’s hand and she set it down with a clatter, shoving her hands under her butt.

“That’s when I knew,” the fallen angel said, her voice becoming steadier the longer she spoke, “If you kept fighting, I would keep fighting. Even if you didn’t know it. Even if you never knew it. Even if it meant dying up there, in that wretched place.”

Before any of them could stop her, she plunged ahead into the story.

Naomi became preoccupied with retrieving the angel tablet and once again left the prisoner in peace. Weeks passed. Then, one day, all of Heaven shook. More weeks passed. Even though Seraphina knew that she was completely cut off, she got into the habit of praying to Castiel aloud, just to hear a voice in the vast, echoing silence of the Garret. That’s when Metatron found her, not before overhearing her prayers to her own absent father. He had been trying to find a quiet place to think, because apparently the heavenly host were a tad more clamorous and needy than he had anticipated, and stumbled upon the Garret. He was delighted to discover her; but not enough to set her free. Metatron demanded her stories, her company, her conversation; and in return, he wouldn’t smite Castiel, whom he revealed to now be a defenseless human.

“I didn’t believe him, at first, about the gates and about you. I laughed at him. I told him that he couldn’t possibly be the one who took control. So he turned my angel radio back on.”

Seraphina screamed herself hoarse trying to make contact with her creator. But no answer came and when she questioned the other angels, they confirmed Metatron’s version of events. The only reason they even condescended to answer her was because he commanded it. He was in control he said, and if she wanted someone to talk to, if she wanted the monotony of her imprisonment to change, it
would have to be through him. Or, he threatened, he would kill Cas, cut off her angel radio again and make sure she was so well hidden, that it would be millennia before someone found her. Sera relented.

“He called me his very own Scheherazade. I didn’t much care what he asked of me,” Seraphina said earnestly, looking at Cas, “I just wanted to know that you were still alive. And I didn’t want to be left alone again. Not like after Naomi. I had started to lose my mind…”

She never stopped praying to Castiel, despite knowing that he couldn’t hear her. None of the other angels made contact with her again, but she got to listen in on the shared waves and didn’t feel so cut off. Then something changed; someone was attempting to gain control of Heaven. It set the heavenly host to whispering among themselves. This made Metatron nervous. Knowing that she had no allies in Heaven, he would sometimes discuss this new development with her, reasoning that she was far enough removed that she would have unique ideas but couldn’t also sabotage him.

“He was mostly right. Mostly,” she said, smiling thinly at the memory, “I still don’t know why he left my angel radio on…”

A new voice was on the radio, but it was speaking only to her, questioning her about her prayers to Castiel. It didn’t know who she was. The more it pressed, the more she was convinced that a rebellion was brewing among the angels; that perhaps they were probing her loyalty and willingness to fight. She made her position clear; all she cared about was keeping Cas alive and allowing the current order to stand would forever leave him in danger and her imprisoned. When she finally caved in and told the voice who and where she was and how she came to be there, it balked. It demanded to set her free immediately, carefully planned rebellion be damned.

“I decided that if this angel was really that powerful, that he could break me out and afford to lose the element of surprise, I wanted to help him. He said it wasn’t always true, but that you had become his favorite little brother,” Seraphina said, smiling at Castiel, “That’s when I knew… an archangel had been resurrected.”

She refused to be rescued, instead revealing that Metatron confided in her and that the valuable information she could provide could result in a potentially bloodless coup. Seraphina didn’t want any more of the angels to die needlessly, whether they cared for her or not. She knew that it was what Castiel would have wanted. The voice agreed and called itself Raven. The angel collected all the intel she could from Metatron’s visits, siphoning it to the quietly growing resistance. In return, she got information of her own and from this exchange, a plan was formed.

“The angels had the same opinion of me that Naomi did; I was an abomination. Raven would suffer a rebellion of his own if he not only allowed me to live, but allowed me to serve at his side. Besides, I wanted to join you, among humanity,” Seraphina said, nodding at Cas, “So he agreed to cast me out in front of the entire heavenly host, to make it look like he had killed me; the other angels didn’t know how I was constructed, they would assume the fall was fatal. And since the gates were locked, it was the only way to get me out.”

“But how did Gabriel get his feathery ass down here then?” asked Dean.

“My father knew that the doors of Heaven could be shut, he wrote it into the code himself,” Castiel mused, “He must have had some sort of contingency plan, a doorway that would remain open for a trusted few, in case humanity needed them.”

Seraphina nodded, “There’s a single door. In the Garret. No one can sense it or use it, except the angels it’s meant for.”
“Archangels?” Sam guessed.

“Yes,” the girl nodded again, “And since there were no archangels in Heaven, it might as well have not existed at all. Until Raven… Gabriel came along.”

“And what about me?” Sam asked quietly, “What use was I to this plan?”

Seraphina turned to him, smiling. Dean’s breath caught in his throat. He knew that smile, it took up residence on Cas’ face sometimes, when the former angel was looking at him.

“Use? You were of no use at all,” she said this softly, kindly.

Sam’s eyes dropped to the table and he bit the inside of his cheek. He didn’t seem to pick up on her tone and his face worked through several emotions, including disappointment, anger and sadness.

“Gabriel told me it was a bad idea. That it might not work. That the fall could kill us both. Permanently. He said without Metatron’s goading, the other angels wouldn’t demand anything of you. But I had to have you.”

The younger hunter looked up at that, confusion dancing across his face.

“When Castiel made me, he told me three things. My loyalty must lie with him and him alone. The protection and guidance of humanity is our one objective. And…,” her voice caught and Seraphina’s eyes flickered to the former god sitting across the table from her, “And… among humanity, there are those we love above all others. There are those worth decimating Heaven and losing our wings for.”

Sam’s eyes grew wide and darted between the three people in front of him. Dean mirrored the look, but had gone red in the ears and was fidgeting in his seat. Cas was sinking slowly into the chair, as if trying desperately to avoid the looks that the two hunters were directing at him. Even after he had betrayed them, after dismissing them as nothing but brave little ants and threatening to destroy them, the angel had retained his love of them. It made both of the hunter’s heads spin.

“So…” Sam prompted.

“So, Metatron told me who you were and that he was looking for you,” Seraphina explained, “I knew through angel radio that you had not been located, that many of the angels believed your soul had been intercepted before you even got to your heaven. If you weren’t found after Gabriel's ascension, no one would question it. This was the one chance I had of getting you back to your brother. I understood the risks.”

When Gabriel revealed himself before the heavenly host, they all turned on Metatron without hesitation. She explained how the archangel and his supporters stormed Metatron’s stronghold in Heaven, how they broke through his defenses, how he came to the Garret to hide.

“You should have seen the look on his face,” Sera said, shaking her head in pity, “When Gabriel appeared and set me free. He said it was his favorite plot twist to date. And then he was dead.”

“At least he died with a good story on his mind,” Castiel huffed, “He didn’t seem to appreciate much else.”

The moment Metatron was dead, Seraphina flew to Sam. According to plan, Gabriel gave her a solid head start so that she could locate the Winchester, convince him to trust her and smuggle his soul in her own body. Then, claiming that Metatron was the one who released her, the archangel recaptured Sera and cast her out in front of the entire heavenly host.
“They cheered,” she said without any bitterness, “And then we fell.”

Castiel made a sound of annoyance and shook his head. Dean could see the self recrimination washing over him, the guilt tightening his eyes, the shame forcing his lips into a rigid frown. He could practically hear the litany of transgressions that the former angel was bludgeoning himself with. They were sitting side by side at the table and purely on instinct, the hunter reached out for him, placing a calming hand on the back of Castiel’s neck. Sam watched this moment intently, a private smile ghosting over his face before he schooled his features into neutrality.

“So how did you find me?” Sam asked, “When all of Heaven couldn’t, how did you?”

He trained his gaze on Sera, but was gratified to see in his peripheral vision that Dean’s hand stayed where it had been placed, drawing small circles with his thumb until Castiel’s shoulders began to drop slightly. Seraphina took the verbal hint and allowed her own eyes to slide away from the two men across the table.

“I actually don’t know,” she said, a hint of wonder in her voice, “The moment Gabriel freed me, I could hear your soul in the distance. Like a song that I recognized but couldn’t name.”

The two looked back at Castiel and Dean’s hand fell away. The former angels eyes were narrowed and he was looking between them as if they were unexpected variables in an equation he’d been on the verge of solving and now couldn’t.

“Have you ever heard of that happening before?” Sam asked.

Cas glanced back down at his hands and his face went suddenly smooth.

“No,” he said, shaking his head and swallowing thickly.

Dean cocked his head in the former angel’s direction, his face suspicious, as if he heard a false note in the answer. He was about to ask something, when Seraphina cut him off.

“May I….” she said, hesitating, as if the answer might be anything but ‘yes’, “I’d like to see the sky. If you’ll allow me…”

Castiel looked up sharply at her, “You heard Gabriel. No more cages.”

The two hunters nodded at Seraphina, Sam emphatically.

“Why don’t we all go?” the younger hunter suggested and got up to lead the way.

As the bunker door was swinging open, Sam realized that none of them had shoes on, but Seraphina slipped past him into the faint glow of predawn and the others followed, unperturbed. They climbed the little rise above the door until they could see over the trees, their feet going numb in the snow and frozen leaves. None of them seemed to care. The sky was charcoal above them and still sprinkled with stars. On the silver horizon, an apricot sunrise was only hinting at its imminent arrival. They waited in silence as the orange disc peeked over the Kansas plains in the distance.

“Thank you,” Sam said into the hushed stillness, looking down at Seraphina and shivering slightly in his t-shirt.

She met his gaze and smiled, and as they all watched, she faced him and gently placed her right forearm against his, exposing the soft pale underside of each. For a moment, two hand prints glowed Grace-blue in the dawn light. A small one on Sam’s and a large one on hers, the fingers almost meeting at her elbow. Dean gaped, touching his own bicep unconsciously, remembering a similar
handprint.

“You’re welcome, Sam Winchester,” she answered.
A Question of Trust

Chapter Summary

Would this girl demand something of Sam? What did they owe her now?

They slept late into the day and by the time Sam stumbled into the kitchen, drawn by the smell of coffee wafting down the bunker corridors, it was well past noon. Dean was already on his third cup, fully dressed and working on a pan of scrambled eggs. There was a plate piled high with cold bacon on the table.

“This. This is better than Heaven,” Sam declared, chewing on a piece of bacon while attempting to steal a forkful of eggs out of the pan.

Dean smacked his hand away. He turned to watch his brother walk across the kitchen, pour himself a mug of coffee and then rummage through the fridge to find milk. It was all so familiar, so easy, as if he’d never been gone. Dean turned away, shoving the happy, glowing feeling in his chest into a dark corner of his heart, where it couldn’t betray him. He spent months trying to close the gaping wound Sam’s death had left. His sudden reappearance was both a balm for that wound and a sharp reminder of it. Every time the older hunter looked at his brother, he was aware of what he had lost and could now lose all over again. Sam brought the goat’s milk creamer to the table and then eyed the mason jar full of brown sugar already there.

“Dude,” he said incredulously, “What is all this? I mean, don’t get me wrong, I’m thrilled to see you expanding your palate and all, but I’ve only been dead for six months...”

Dean laughed. “Blame Cas. I took him to a farmers market once. Once!” he smacked the spatula against the pan for emphasis, “And now he brings all this crazy stuff home. Clover honey, sustainably sourced mushrooms, cruelty free goat’s milk. It’s like he’s got a homing beacon for it all. The heirloom tomatoes he gets from this one local guy are great though, even I ate that salad.”

Sam sat in stunned silence for so long that his brother turned to him.

“What?” he groused, “I got something on my face?”

The younger hunter shook his head, with a look of wonder and what Dean thought was joyful disbelief.

“You seem… ok. Happy even,” Sam observed.

Dean frowned in response, shrugging, “I guess. I mean, I’m not actively miserable or anything.”

His brother nodded, an impish smile on his face. “I bet having Cas around has been helpful.”

Dean slammed the pan of eggs he’d been holding back down on the eye of the stove, the spatula clattering to the floor. Sam jumped, surprise and confusion replacing his smile. His older brother’s shoulders had gone tense and rigid. This never lasts, thought Dean, this peace, this joy, it always gets washed away by guilt. This was a two-fold guilt; he ignored the comment about Cas because he couldn’t face that yet and instead focused on his brother.
“I tried to find you Sam,” he growled, turning to him slowly, “There wasn’t even a body left! Cas was human and Crowley was useless and being a little bitch. I tried Sam. I fucking tried. But the gates were locked and there wasn’t a way! I nearly tore myself apart trying to get to you!”

And yes, Cas was the only thing holding me together, he added silently.

“Whoa, whoa whoa,” Sam jumped from his seat, holding up his hands, “I’m not blaming you for anything! I’m glad you didn’t come for me. Metatron would have just used us both for his own ends. And if you had let yourself get killed, it would have destroyed Cas!”

Dean blinked at him, uncomprehending.

“I’m glad it all went down the way it did,” he continued, “I’m glad it was Sera who brought me back. You have no idea how happy I am that this didn’t end in some demon deal, or you or Cas sacrificing something. Again.”

Sam walked slowly across the kitchen as he spoke, finally ending up in front of his brother, his hands resting on the other’s shoulders. The older hunter took several steadying breaths. He’d been expecting a fight, blame, lies, not this. He’d failed, after all, hadn’t he? Failed to save Sam from the Trials. Failed to get him out of Heaven. Failed to protect Cas from Metatron. And yet here was his little brother, telling him that he was blameless.

“We never get this,” Dean choked out, “There’s always a price. It never lasts.”

“I know,” Sam nodded, squeezing his shoulders, “I know. But the price for this one has already been paid. By Sera. Her Grace is at the bottom of Lake Superior somewhere… She almost ended up at the bottom of Lake Superior. But it’s neither of our faults. She knew the risk. She chose this.”

Dean nodded, rubbing at his eyes, while Sam bent over and picked up the egg-flaked spatula, putting it down gently by the pan and turning the heat off. The older hunter didn’t agree with him of course, but if it made his brother feel better to believe that Dean wasn’t a complete failure, he’d let him. It was Sera and Gabriel who rescued Sam; he was indebted to angels, of all things.

“Speaking of those damn angels,” the older hunter grumbled, “They’re gonna sleep the whole day away.”

He pushed past Sam gently. “Don’t eat all the eggs,” he called over his shoulder, making his way out of the kitchen and toward the bedrooms.

Sam ate his fill and the rest of the eggs went cold in the pan before it dawned on him that his brother had been gone for far too long. He abandoned the kitchen and made his way down the dimly lit corridors. He found Dean standing outside of Castiel’s room, arms crossed over his chest and a furrow in his brow, glaring through the open door.

“Dude, what…?” Sam began, before his brother hissed him into silence.

He joined Dean at the door and peered in. Cas was on his side, curled around Seraphina, who was folded into an even smaller shape than she had been the night before, under the map table. Her forehead rested against the other angels throat, her shins pressed into his abdomen. They hadn’t even bothered getting under the covers. Castiel’s face was the most relaxed Sam had seen it in the last 24 hours. They offered the girl a room, but she only looked at it in horror, her eyes sliding toward Cas, wide as saucers. Without a word, he reached for her, touching Seraphina for the first time that night since she’d regained consciousness and she clung to him as if he were the only piece of flotsam in the sea and she was drowning.
“Aw. They’re adorable,” Sam started with a grin before his brother hissed him into silence again.

Dean carefully pulled the bedroom door shut. “I don’t trust her,” he growled.

“Are you kidding me?!” Sam asked, glaring at his older brother as they made their way back toward the kitchen, “She smuggled me out of Heaven.”

“Yeah, it seems a little too convenient for me,” the other hunter muttered, watching his brother rub absently at his forearm, where the hand print glowed blue that very morning.

“Convenient?! Her wings were burned away, Dean!” Sam practically shouted, his face going pale, “I don’t remember much, but last night some of it came back to me. The heat of the fall, the sound she made when we hit the atmosphere…”

Dean looked away, remembering another angel and another pair of burning wings, the sound of terrible wailing filling his ears. As he did with many others, the hunter pushed the memory away. Trust didn’t come naturally to him and his first instinct had been to thank Seraphina for delivering his little brother to him alive and then toss her in the dungeon and beat every piece of useful intel out of her until he was satisfied. The pow wow last night certainly made that first option unthinkable, which only set him on edge even more. Castiel seemed to trust the girl implicitly, which elicited tooth grinding frustration from Dean. It didn’t help that those blue eyes, which he only recently had sole claim to, now looked at a stranger with such awe-filled adoration. Sam watched his face closely.

“Oh my god,” he exclaimed, disbelieving, practically reading the others mind, “Are you… are you jealous?! Seriously?”

Dean ignored the question.

“I asked Cas last night, if she…” he struggled to find the words, “If she needed help, ya know? An angel brand new to being human? It’s like dealing with a toddler that’s capable of knocking your teeth loose. It took me almost a week to get Cas to fall asleep without a damned panic attack. Not to mention all the friggin personal hygiene issues…”

Dean shuddered a little at the memory of having to explain to the former angel that wiping his ass was an indignity he now had to live with; the look on Cas’ face had been pitiful. He didn’t tell Sam about the time the angel passed out because he didn’t know what hunger and thirst felt like and Dean had been too wrapped up in his grief to realize what was happening. Didn’t tell him about the night he had to change the sheets and console a terrified and mortified grown man because he had his first nightmare and had gone to bed with a full bladder. Didn’t tell him that although Cas had a room of his own, for weeks Dean could only coax him into sleep if the hunter was in the room or on the couch or in the bed with him. He didn’t tell Sam that he had hovered around the former angel like the mother hen his brother had always suspected was wrapped tightly under the poker face and paramilitary training. Dean didn’t tell Sam any of these things, because he knew instinctively. He saw it in the single moment when his brother’s hand had gone to the back of Castiel’s neck, like it belonged there, like he had the right to seek out that contact.

“Aaand…?” Sam prompted, pulling Dean out of his reverie.

“And,” he huffed, “Cas said she’d be fine. That she’s spent most of her life human.”

“Wait, what?” Sam asked, his brow furrowing, “How is that even possible? She spent a few months with him when he thought he was god and then she was in the Garret.”

“I know!” growled Dean.
“It’s how he trained me,” a calm voice rang out behind them.

Both hunters jumped. They had made their way back into the kitchen and were sitting at the table, hands wrapped around lukewarm mugs of coffee. Seraphina stood in the doorway, still wearing the sagging and sleep rumpled clothing Dean handed her the night before. The two brothers looked guiltily at each other, wondering how much of their conversation she overheard. The hair at the back of her head was standing up at wild angles and Dean had to viciously tamp down the rush of affection he felt; she looked so much like a smaller version of Cas. The girl rubbed at her face and shuffled into the room, silently pouring herself a cup of coffee, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. She took a few gulps, not even bothering with milk or sugar, before casually claiming a place at the table and pulling her feet up onto the seat of her chair. Sam decided that making herself as small as possible was the former angel’s unconscious default and he smiled as she rested her chin on her knees, mimicking her pose from last night.

“Castiel had very little time to bring me up to speed,” she said, “He bent the laws of time and space a little… I’ve been a human soldier in nearly every major conflict on Earth since the Peloponnesian wars. I fought with Boudicca against the Romans. I defended Jerusalem from the Crusaders. I rode across the steppes with the Khans. I drowned with the Bismarck. I was there when you dropped the bomb. And I did it all in less than a minute of your time.”

Seraphina took another gulp of her coffee, while the brothers gaped at her, stunned.

“So yes, I am far more familiar with being human than Castiel ever will be. However,” she looked down at herself pointedly, “I haven’t spent much time as a female or a civilian. Nor do I remember ever being this small…”

Seraphina eyed Sam and Dean, a look of shrewd appraisal on her face.

“Although, I bet I could still take you Winchesters on,” she said, with a smile in her voice, “If only one at a time.”

The brothers snorted in unison and the tension fled from the room, Dean's shoulders visibly relaxing and Sam sitting back in his chair.

“Did you really fight in the Crusades?” the younger Winchester asked, his eyes sparkling with their usual curiosity when the topic turned to history or folklore.

Seraphina nodded. “Fought and died. On both sides.”

Sam sat forward, pushing away his empty plate and leaning in on his elbows.

“Did the Arabic warlocks really use qutrubs against the Europeans?” he asked.

Dean rolled his eyes. He had no idea what a qutrub was, but he was certain it was obscure, supernatural and probably boring. He picked up Sam’s plate and took it to the sink.

“Ugh, yes,” Sera answered, wrinkling her nose, “The worst of them did. Horrid creatures.”

The conversation continued, but Dean wasn’t paying attention. His previous feelings were still at the surface; he just didn’t trust this newcomer. She wasn’t one of them and certainly hadn’t proven herself to be trustworthy, the smuggling of Sam out of Heaven notwithstanding. It was Cas he was most worried about; if Seraphina hurt him, if she betrayed them, if this was just some ploy by Heaven to get him to turn on the Winchesters, it would… The hunter refused to complete that thought. They had a good thing going here, amazingly enough. No major disasters had plagued them, no world-altering mistakes had been made, Kevin and his mother were still safe in Denver and
Charlie was no longer in the belly of the beast. They were all happy. At least, as happy as their myriad anxieties, nightmares and general PTSD would allow. It was enough. Hell, Dean thought, it was more than enough; it was more than he had ever dared to hope for. With Sam alive and back in the fold, it was damn near perfect.

Except for Seraphina; she was the anomaly, the one unknown factor. The hunter looked up from the sink, watching the fallen angel. She looked comfortable, like she belonged there in that chair, at that kitchen table, regaling Sam with her war stories. The younger Winchester was laughing at something, his eyes crinkling at the corners, his forehead smooth and free of worries, his dimples showing. Dean ached for this version of his brother, the one who only an hour ago told him that he was blameless, echoing the notion that Cas had been trying to convince him of for months. She was the reason he had Sammy back; was it enough? The memory of the hand print glowing on his brothers forearm suddenly flared up in his mind and he started to reach for his own bicep unconsciously before catching himself. Heaven had laid a claim on him almost as soon as he’d been resurrected. Would this girl demand something of Sam? What did they owe her now? A low level anxiety started to buzz in his gut; how soon would her presence put pain and worry back on Sammy’s face? How soon before Cas was gazing at him with helpless guilt? How soon would his own blood be running freely because of this fallen angel?

At that moment, Castiel shuffled into the kitchen in much the same way Sera had and his eyes landed on her. She and Sam hadn’t yet noticed his presence and he gazed at them, a smile spreading across his face and his eyes lighting up as the hunter laughed. Dean hated himself for it, but his whole body rebelled at the sight and a petulant part of him screamed that he didn’t want to share.

Oh fuck it, he thought, his querulous mood blooming like a radioactive mushroom cloud in his chest.

“So, when did you plan on leaving?” He asked, his voice too loud for the space they were in.

The conversation at the table died and Castiel’s eyes snapped in his direction, the room suddenly frigid. Seraphina’s mouth dropped open, her lips going pale; he might as well have slapped her. The silence stretched out between them, brittle as spring ice. Dean didn’t dare look at Cas, he could practically feel the hurt and confusion radiating off of him, those eyes boring into the side of his face. But he had to sever this tie now; if her intentions were anything like what he was imagining, it was best to get rid of her as quickly as possible, rip her out of their lives like ripping off a band aid. It was time to play his trump card. The hunter pushed off from the counter he was leaning against and walked slowly over to the table, pulling something from his back pocket and tossing it in front of the girl.

It was a packet of IDs, all bearing her face and the name Seraphina Lee. She flinched away, looking at the things like they might jump up and bite her. Sam, on the other hand, leaned forward and gently rearranged them so that they were all visible. There were three passports, American, Canadian and one from the EU, with three corresponding drivers licenses and, strangely, an American VA card.

“Lee, huh?” Sam said thoughtfully, “That was good thinking, most common surname in the world.”

He picked up one of the ID cards and held it up, as if comparing the photo to Seraphina’s face. She only stared at him in disbelief, holding her breath. Dean snatched it out of his brother’s hand with an annoyed grunt and threw it down in front of the fallen angel. It was the EU drivers license.

“Planning a trip?” he asked coldly.

Sera finally pulled her eyes away from Sam’s calm face and leaned forward, her finger tentatively brushing the edge of the ID.
“Were these in the duffel bags?” she asked, picking up the card in front of her and gently rubbing her thumb over the photo.

_Shit_, Dean thought, her question suddenly bringing everything into focus.

“Gabriel promised me a life,” she said, still staring intently at her own face, gazing back at her placidly from the ID card, “Just in case…”

Seraphina faltered for a moment and her eyes flickered up to Castiel’s.

“In case you didn’t… want me,” she finished quietly.

_Shit, shit shit_, Dean thought again. The other contents of the duffel bags now made so much more sense. Besides the Seraphina-sized clothing, there was a birth certificate, social security card, the title and registration to a car, bank statements, credit cards, a rumpled high school diploma, even a AAA card; it was what one needed for a believable identity. A human life for a fallen angel. He had been so concerned about Castiel's unwavering focus on Seraphina and what it might do to him if she left or asked him to come with her, that he never considered her own mistrust of them. She was more like her father than he had anticipated.

In the first few weeks at the bunker, after the slamming of the gates, Dean dragged the former angel to a mall to buy a new pillow and better bedding, in an effort to get him to sleep more comfortably. Cas was having enough trouble that the hunter had a fairly good idea what the parents of a newborn must experience. They picked out new sheets and a soft comforter; later Dean helped Cas make his bed and proudly announced that he should now feel more at home. The man had turned hopeful eyes on him and asked if that meant that he could stay for good. That had been quite a kick to the gut for Dean. He’d spent a few guilt-ridden moments stuttering about how the angel was always welcome, about how home to the hunter had evolved into any place Castiel happened to land. The smile that this earned him was worth all the embarrassment of the faltering confession. And now he had done it again; completely misread a situation and come out looking like the asshole.

“Want you?” Sam echoed, glaring at Dean for a brief moment, “You’re not some stray dog. You can stay as long as you like.”

Dean finally mustered the courage to look at Cas and all the air was punched out of his lungs; there was so much hurt and disappointment there. He could take Sam’s bitch faces, he could take the apparent fear with which Seraphina regarded him, but he couldn’t handle that look from his angel, not after everything they’d been through. The hunter rubbed at the back of his head.

“I’m sorry, ok?” he said to the floor, “I didn’t… Shit. I’m going for a drive.”

The signature Dean Winchester move; running from strong emotions and the people that elicited them. As he fled the kitchen, he heard Seraphina say, “I can be useful. I didn’t really like being a soldier, so I was basically a field medic for whatever army I was in…”

“You don’t have to be useful to stay,” Sam replied, before Dean got out of earshot.

He didn’t bother making a pit stop in his room for a jacket because passing the kitchen again would be torturous, so he exploded out of the bunker in his morning outfit; boots, jeans, t-shirt and flannel. The air was icy and he fumbled with the Impala’s keys before sliding into the equally cold but welcoming interior. Dean gripped the steering wheel hard, trying to breathe and chase away the crushing self hatred Castiel’s hurt face had evoked. He hadn’t noticed the former angel following close behind and jumped when Baby’s passenger side door was wrenched open and the trench coated figure slid in quietly. The hunter had no idea when Cas had the time to grab his coat and was
about to tell him to go back to the bunker when he spoke.

“Drive Dean,” he said in a voice that would brook no opposition.

So Dean drove.
Dean drove north. He didn’t turn on the radio or pop a cassette into the player, too aware of Castiel sitting at the opposite end of the bench seat, calmly observing the frozen Kansas prairie that stretched East of route 281. The former angel didn’t say anything; didn’t even look in Dean’s direction and the three feet of space between them kept growing in the hunter’s mind until it felt like the former angel was as unreachable as if he were on Pluto. Dean didn’t know where he was going until he pulled onto the dirt road thirty minutes later. It was a little slice of public land just north of the Nebraska border that sported no signage, but had a small, oddly shaped pond half a mile off the road and enough tree cover to make it feel protected. The trees were all bare though and the creek that fed into the pond had gone dry over a month ago. Dean didn’t bother pulling off the little road, it dead ended at the trees. The Impala rolled to a stop, the frost and dead grass crunching under the tires.

He turned off the engine and silence descended, filling in all the empty spaces between them and making Dean’s ears ring. As the seconds passed and Castiel said nothing, the low level anxiety that had been building in his gut suddenly expanded; his scalp tingled with it, his finger tips going numb. The silence built and as it reached it’s crescendo inside the hunter’s skull, he thought he might vomit. Instead, he wrenched open his door and stumbled to the front of the car, sinking heavily onto Baby’s hood and taking shallow breaths in the frigid air. The sky was overcast, but it was too cold to snow; Dean could tell by the way the inside of his nostrils froze with every in-breath and his lungs ached. Finally, Cas got out of the car, closing the door far more gently than the hunter had and walking pensively to stand before Dean.

“I didn’t mean to...” he started, but the former angel cut him off.

“Yes you did.”

The hunter’s anxiety ratcheted up a few more notches and the blood was screaming in his ears. Was Castiel angry with him? He didn’t sound angry.

“You thought you understood what was happening, but you were wrong,” the angel said calmly. “Because you were seeing the situation through the miasma of your own fears. You weren’t thinking clearly. Now, if you were nothing but a hunter, the blunt cudgel you see yourself as, I would find this odd. Emotions don’t often get the best of you. Not when you’re a hunter and not on the job.”

Dean looked up, meeting Castiel’s gaze for the first time during this conversation. They both knew what happened after the job. Thinking about his “episodes” made him break out in a fine sweat, even in this cold, and he shivered.

“But you were not a hunter in that kitchen. You were my…” the angels eyes roved over Dean’s face, as if looking for something, like consent or avowal. He didn’t seem to find what he was looking for, so he continued. “You were my friend. You were afraid… that what? Seraphina would leave and take me with her?” he asked, his eyes narrowing, “Like a piece of luggage with no say?”

“She’s your kid,” Dean said, folding his arms at his chest, a response to both the cold and the defensiveness he was feeling. He didn’t know how else to explain the runaway train of his mind.

“Angels aren’t much for familial ties, if you recall,” Castiel said, his face tightening, and they both knew he meant Naomi, “I feel responsible for Seraphina’s well being and I wish for her to stay. But that decision is up to her.”
And you, the angel thought, but didn’t say.

“You chose her,” Dean said gruffly, changing tactics, “When you had a choice, you built her, instead of…”

“Oh Dean,” Cas looked at him with something like fondness and pity, “That’s not true.”

The hunter shook his head, allowing his ire to rise, if only to mask the hurt in his voice. He leaned further back against the hood of the Impala and away from the former angel. Maybe if there were more space between them physically, he would be able to untangle this knot of fear and sadness and rejection that was threatening to bring the wetness to his eyes that he was trying desperately to avoid.

“I would have helped you, Cas.”

“You tried,” he said sadly, “But that didn’t end well, did it?”

Dean remembered Ellsworth’s house; the circle of burning holy oil, the angel pleading with him to understand, and then to run. Cas remembered it too, but the thing that stood out the most to him in retrospect was not the sinking feeling that maybe he had made a mistake, but the way Dean kept saying “we”, the way he used the words “brother” and “family” later that night and how it hadn’t been enough to push the angel off his doomed path.

“After… If you’d asked… I would’ve…” the hunter said haltingly.

“After I betrayed you? After I threatened to kill you?” Castiel asked incredulously, his face reflecting all the guilt those words brought with them, “After I said that you were useless to me? After I drove Sam into a mental ward? You think I could have brought myself to ask something of you? After all that? No. Seraphina was born of my arrogance, not of my rejection of you, Dean.”

“And now?” The hunter asked, hating himself for the raw need in his voice, “Now that she’s here and alive and still loyal? If she asked you to go, would you choose her?”

Castiel stepped forward into Dean’s space. He wore a look of determined, if slightly exasperated affection. It was the kind of look one might wear while explaining to a beloved but stubborn toddler that no matter how certain he may be, there are, in fact, no monsters under his bed.

“You were the first choice I ever made,” the former angel said softly, willing Dean to believe him, “In Hell, when we couldn’t find you, we split up. Angel radio died and I was completely cut off from my brothers. That’s when I heard it; music in Hell. The sound didn’t belong there, it was too beautiful for that place. So I followed it and it led me right to you.”

Dean’s jaw had gone slack and his eyes widened at this confession.

“You were meant for Michael. He was supposed to raise you from perdition, rebuild your soul, claim you as his. That was the script,” Castiel shook his head ruefully, “But when I saw you, when I saw what they had done to you…”

Dean flinched slightly at these words, chasing the memories away, starting to fold in on himself, ready for the wave of self-hatred to wash over him again.

“I saw how your soul shone, how it sang, even after all that,” the angel continued, “You told me to leave you. I had orders, you understand. Strict orders. I should have left to find the others. Michael was to raise you. But in that moment, I made my first choice. I disobeyed Heaven and I chose you.”

That wave of self-hatred never came. The hunter started to shiver in earnest, from the cold and from
the anxiety that was only now starting to ebb away in response to those words, replaced by a warmth in his chest he rarely felt. He clenched his jaw tightly to keep his teeth from chattering and Cas stepped forward one more time, completely crowding into Dean’s space and putting his arms around the hunter. Dean didn’t even bother resisting like he usually did; he needed this too much and leaned forward, snaking his arms under the trench coat, around the angel's waist, burying his face in the rumpled and threadbare hoodie below.

“I’m not leaving you,” Castiel said, and after a pause added, “I’ll watch over you,” stroking the back of Dean’s head like he did only when they were too exhausted to keep up the pretense of boundaries.

The hunter didn’t object. The angel’s words and body warmed him, the buzzing panic finally dying away. Cas had never told him this part of the story; had never really told him any of it, not after what happened with Alastair and Sam and Uriel so many years ago. After that, they refrained from broaching the topic of his time in Hell. Despite the fact that Dean avoided thinking about it, he liked knowing that even there, in the darkest abyss, when he was completely broken apart with the worst of him on display, Cas had still seen something worth saving.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled into the angels hoodie, his words making the fabric warm against his face.

“It’s alright,” Cas said, “You were trying to protect me, in your own way. I’d already forgiven you before I even got in the car.”

Of course he had. Dean laughed weakly, his face still pressed into Castiel’s chest. Deep in his gut, there was still that pit of anxiety that only fled when they were in the sparring room; when the fight bled out of him and the former angel’s weight bore down on him with the heaviness of fate, of mountain ranges, and he felt safe. But that pit was familiar and it no longer threatened to bloom into something bigger and uglier. In fact, it was quite happy to stay small and hidden, now that Cas had spoken those magic words, had assured Dean that he wasn’t going anywhere, not even for Sera.

“C’mon,” the angel said after a while, tugging the hunters arms away from his waist, “We’ll freeze out here. Time to go home.”

Before he stepped away from the man completely, Cas grasped Dean’s chin firmly, making him look up. He searched the other’s face earnestly, his eyes narrowed. Again, Dean didn’t fight it and let his shoulders relax, allowing the angel to tip up his face. If this type of scrutiny came from anyone else, it would have made him squirm or scowl. The hunter would never admit this to anyone, but these moments when the former angel looked him over like a worried parent, grounded him, made him feel like he wasn’t alone in this battle that was his life. In these moments, he had no doubt that if he asked, if he needed it, Cas would give him anything. And that’s why, sometimes, these moments made his gut clench too; there were things he wanted that he was too afraid to ask for.

“Are you alright to drive?” Castiel finally asked.

Dean laughed again, wiping the ice from his eyelashes. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

He cranked up the heat once they were back inside the Impala and as he pulled back onto the paved road heading south, a thought struck him.

“You lied,” Dean said.

His tone wasn’t accusatory, but one of revelation, so instead of looking hurt, Cas just looked quizzical.

“About the music,” the hunter said, “About how Sera found Sammy.”
“Oh yes,” the former angel replied, looking appropriately guilty, “I didn’t think my foray into Hell was an appropriate topic for that moment.”

Dean only gave him a skeptical side-eye.

“I don’t know what it means, so it didn’t seem worth mentioning,” Cas said, cagey.

They drove in silence for a few minutes, but it didn’t feel oppressive.

“I asked Michael once, if he could hear your soul,” the former angel said so quietly that Dean almost didn’t hear him, “He had no idea what I was talking about. Told me all human souls sound the same; silent.”

“Huh,” Dean grunted, he had no idea what any of it meant either, “Well, maybe Sammy’s found his own ‘profound bond’...”

Castiel hummed in response.

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Dean hadn’t thought about what he was walking into until he and Cas were halfway across the War Room. Sam had commandeered one of the tables in the library, spreading all of Seraphina’s paperwork across it. They were sitting together, leaning on their elbows over the documents, shoulders touching. The younger Winchester was explaining car insurance, or something equally mundane to the angel, but the intensity with which she was listening to him made Dean chuckle; he was strongly reminded of Castiel. As they mounted the steps into the library, the two of them looked up and the hunter faltered in his advance. Sam’s jaw tightened, his lips pressed together disapprovingly, while Sera’s eyes sought out the other angel. Dean felt a hand on the small of his back, gently urging him on; he kept walking until he was in front of the pair. There was an awkward silence while his little brother leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms and Seraphina watched him as if he were her executioner. Dean wasn’t sure what was expected of him, but he plunged forward anyway.

“You can stay,” he said, but it came out far more surly than he meant it to.

Sam seemed to relax at this, despite his tone, unfolding his arms and nodding at his brother. Seraphina kept watching him, her sapphire eyes wide and expectant. Dean wasn’t planning on saying anything more, hoping that it would be enough for not only his brother, but Cas as well, when the girl spoke.

“You don’t trust me.”

It wasn’t a question. Dean shook his head.

“No, I don’t.”

Sera looked at him intently, her head tilted to the side in a very Castiel-like manner, as if puzzling something out, and then her face cleared and she nodded slowly.

“I understand,” she said, as if they had come to some sort of agreement.
“Do you?” Dean growled, crossing his arms.

He was used to having whole conversations through glances and body language with Sammy and Cas, but it annoyed him that Sera seemed to have the same habit. He didn’t know her, despite the fact that many of her mannerisms reminded him of the other fallen angel, and he couldn’t read her tells clearly yet. It put him on edge that she might have picked up on something from him. She nodded again.

“If the time ever comes, don’t hesitate,” she said gravely.

“What are you talking about?” Sam asked, sounding exasperated.

Seraphina’s eyes slid to the other Winchester and she gave him a ghost of a sad smile.

“If I hurt you or Castiel, your brother will kill me. I am simply agreeing to his terms.”

Sam sputtered, his eyes bouncing between his brother and the girl. Cas stood quietly on the steps, his jaw tight. Dean looked hard at Seraphina. Until she said it aloud, even he hadn’t been sure what they were silently negotiating, but as soon as those words left her mouth, he knew she was right. The inherent threat and promise behind ‘you can stay’ hinged upon the unspoken ‘if’. With his silence, even Castiel was acquiescing to this covenant. Sera put a reassuring hand on Sam’s arm.

“It’s an honorable deal,” she assured him earnestly, as if they were talking about buying a used car and not about his brother murdering her.

“You have got to be... Fucking... Kidding me,” Sam ground out, glaring between the two of them.

He stood up abruptly, shaking off Seraphina’s hand and grabbed a hoodie hanging from the back of his chair, pulling it on while grumbling under his breath.

“I’m going for a walk,” he growled, stomping toward the staircase and the bunker door.

“One day back and we’re already fighting,” Dean sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, “Glad to see some things never change!”

He yelled the last part at Sam’s retreating back, but there was no venom behind it. The girl waited until the bunker door slammed shut before she jumped from her seat to follow the younger Winchester. Cas quickly stripped his trench coat off, holding it out to her as she passed. Sera took it without a word, but with a single look and nod exchanged between them. She pulled it on as she clambered up the stairs. Dean noted that the fallen angel was no longer wearing his clothes, but whatever must have been left for her by Gabriel. The hunter groaned internally when he noticed that she was wearing what amounted to the Winchester uniform; work boots, jeans, and a black t-shirt topped by a flannel. But all of it disappeared under the trench coat, which dropped to her ankles, as she wrapped it around herself and bounded out the door. Dean glanced at Cas, his eyebrows raised in question at the silent exchange between the angels. He only shrugged. The hunter sighed and turned toward the kitchen, with the intention of cleaning up whatever mess Sam and the girl had invariably left.

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Seraphina found him sitting on a fallen tree in the sparse woodland above the bunker. She didn’t try
to mask her footfalls in the frozen leaves and he didn’t acknowledge her, even when she sat down next to him, wrapping her father's trench coat tightly around her shoulders. Their breaths coming out in little white puffs, they watched the trees sway above them, creaking in the breeze.

“He won’t do it, you know,” Sam suddenly said, referring to the deal the girl and his brother had struck.

Sera turned to watch his profile, his nose and ears going red in the cold.

“How can you know that?”

Sam smiled, finally turning to her, “Because of his hands.”

The girl tilted her head in question.

“People can say whatever they want, true or not. But hands never lie,” the hunter answered her unspoken inquiry, “Dean brought you his clothes, so you wouldn’t get cold in that robe.”

He nodded, as if that was the answer to everything. Sera kept watching him, her eyes roving over his face, as if she were trying to unearth some mystery.

“You trust me.” Again, it wasn’t a question.

“Yup.”

“Why?”

“Because of your hands,” he said.

The girl untucked them from her armpits, where she was trying to keep them warm and gazed down at them. These were the hands that had once done Castiel’s bloody bidding, keeping the rancorous Heavenly Host in check. But she understood what Sam meant; these were the hands that sheltered him from the murderous angels. These were the hands that rebuilt his body mid-fall. These were the hands that set him down safely on a rocky shore in the middle of the night, while their owner fainted into a watery abyss. Sam pulled the sleeve up on his hoodie, exposing his right forearm.

“Do it again,” he asked.

Seraphina smiled, pulling up the sleeves on her own arm and placed it next to his. The hand prints glowed blue, but fainter this time.

“Hands don’t lie,” Sam said again, rolling down his sleeve, but keeping a hold on his forearm, “Your hands brought me home. Your hands brought me back to my brother.”

The girl nodded, chewing on her lower lip.

“And Castiel’s hands?” she asked.

“He rescued my brother from Hell. Healed him more times than I can count. Even when we thought he had betrayed us, even when he was making the wrong decision, he was trying to protect us. Protect Dean,” Sam answered, “I have no doubts about Cas’ hands. He made you, after all.”

Seraphina looked down at her feet.

“I’m an abomination,” she said softly.
Sam laughed.

“Welcome to the club,” he huffed.
It took them all a few days to get used to each other. Dean and Castiel were so adapted to having the bunker to themselves, that they had to actually discuss an informal shower room schedule after the population of their secret lair doubled overnight. The precipitating incident involved Sam walking in on Seraphina, standing completely naked in the middle of the large communal bathroom, angrily glaring at a loofah.

She looked up at the younger Winchester, unperturbed, and asked, “Do you actually use these?”

He fled, red faced, stammering about maybe running the water to signal that the bathroom was occupied. They decided on the hotel model, and Castiel enthusiastically made “Do Not Disturb” door hangers for all of them. The bathroom door hanger had a picture of a floating otter on it, with a shower cap photoshopped on its head. This brought the hunters an undue amount of amusement and every time Dean saw it, he couldn’t help but snort.

It turned out that the kitchen was a far easier territory to negotiate. Sam, as was his habit, avoided the kitchen at all costs, unless he was consuming food or grabbing snacks from the cupboards or beer from the fridge. The younger Winchester wasn’t much of a cook, unless one counted epic salad creations, and had a serious aversion to dish washing. Castiel’s greatest gift in the kitchen involved stocking it with strange and interesting ingredients; Dean would spend countless hours on his laptop trying to figure out how to use watercress, jackfruit or jicama in familiar recipes. The angel had also developed a slight tea obsession during his time as a human and an entire cupboard that used to house mismatched Tupperware was re-purposed for the storage of countless jars full of dried herbs and fancy little tin boxes with words like “oolong”, “tomurcuk” and “gunpowder green” on them. Dean, of course, was the cook. Sam and Cas could be trusted to safely and accurately follow the instructions on a box, but not create meals fit for three men and a girl whose metabolism mirrored the older Winchester’s.

A few days after her arrival, Seraphina discovered a huge crock pot that Dean purchased months before on a whim. It turned out that she was a decent cook when it came to making stews and soups. When the older hunter complimented her on her first creation, she admitted that mulligan stew was her specialty.

“I was always better at patching people up and feeding them than I was at killing them,” she said, referring to her extensive and varied military career.

Despite Dean’s reservations, he had to admit that the girl was an asset in the kitchen. While Sam avoided responsibility and Castiel, though enthusiastic, was more a hindrance than a help, it turned out that Seraphina and the older hunter possessed almost a sixth sense around each other when it came to feeding their little crew. Cas contented himself with cleaning up, while the other two silently and efficiently prepped, seasoned and cooked meals that would be the envy of any family.

True to her previous claim of experience as a field medic, Seraphina commandeered the infirmary. She could be seen on multiple occasions sitting on the tiled floor, surrounded by boxes of gauze and bandages, a notepad balanced on one knee, muttering to herself about expired medications. After a few days of cleaning and reorganization, she handed Dean a neat, handwritten list.

The hunter balked. “Seriously?” he practically yelled, looking over the list, “You really think no one’s gonna notice this much morphine and military grade equipment going to some PO Box in Kansas?”
The girl simply shrugged. “I’m very good at what I do,” she replied calmly, “But there are limits. Castiel and I are human now, we can’t just zap you back to health.”

With that, she threw a meaningful glance in the other angels direction and stalked back to the infirmary with a gallon of bleach in hand, grumbling about dust and contamination. Dean only glared at the list, tossing it down on the library table with an annoyed harrumph.

Despite his lack of Grace, Castiel discovered early on that he still had a grasp on most ancient languages. He could no longer use them with his former ease, but translation of texts was something he could still do. Even before Sam’s return, the former angel worked on getting through some of the untranslated books in the bunker library that might prove useful in dealing with all the leftover demons; it was how they eventually came up with the idea for the witches orbs. Their main concern was Abaddon, whom they had no way of killing and would not be contained in one of the glass orbs. At first, Dean had kicked himself for locking away the Demon Tablet, but Castiel pointed out that even if they still had access to it, the hunter had sworn to never force Kevin into translation again. Their best bet was the Winchesters original plan, which Dean dubbed Operation Humpty Dumpty 2.0; use a devil's trap bullet to lock her inside her own body, then dismember her, with oaths of never putting the demon back together again.

Seraphina continued to sleep in Cas’ room, which secretly annoyed Dean; he tried not to examine too closely the little pangs of jealousy he felt when the two angels would blearily shuffle into the kitchen for their morning fix of caffeine. After Sam’s death, the excuse he used for ending up next to Cas every night was the former angels fear of unconsciousness. Then, he justified it with the emptiness of the bunker; it felt so vast and hollow, even Crowley's resentful presence would have been welcome. Instead, he filled the silence with Sinatra and Crosby, with his own voice and Castiel's warm companionship. After six long months, Dean stopped trying to justify the angels presence in his bed; it was never awkward, it never moved beyond just sleeping next to each other with frequent (but rarely acknowledged) spooning. It simply was.

*And then you had to go and ruin it,* Dean thought angrily at himself, as he watched the easy way with which the two angels passed the sugar and poured the milk; the familiar way with which Sam greeted them, pushing the cereal box in their direction.

It was one of those perfect mornings, the kind when you quietly wake up without quite knowing where or who you are. Dean surfaced to consciousness slowly, thankfully becoming aware of the fact that he was safe, nothing was hurting, the pillow at his cheek smelled wonderfully clean and he was wrapped around someone warm. He was vaguely aware that this moment was completely ethereal, it would slip away in a heartbeat and he tried to hold onto it, hold on to the person in his arms whom he was sure would melt away into nothingness. With his eyes still closed, he sniffed at the nape of the neck that was pressed against his nose; it smelled like safety, like thunderstorms and damp earth. He smiled against the skin of that neck, nuzzling closer, slowly becoming aware of his morning wood, pressed against his partner's backside.

That was the moment when Castiel, former Angel-of-the-Lord, grunted in his sleep and started to turn toward Dean. Everything came into sharp, terrifying focus and the hunter sprang from the bed as if he’d been struck by lightning. He managed to lunge across the room, pull on his robe and make it mostly out the door when Cas called after him sleepily.

“Just havta’ pee,” he’d called cheerily, already half way down the corridor.

Dean spent an interminable amount of time locked in the bathroom, trying to force air into his lungs. He’d been there long enough that the former angel knocked hesitantly on the door and asked if everything was alright.
“I’m...just… not feeling so hot, OK?” he stalled, “My stomach…”

The first night, he could explain away his request to sleep alone with a feigned illness and Cas understood, nodding sadly and regarding his own hands with an air of betrayal; if he were still an angel, he could’ve cured Dean with a touch. That moment twisted the hunters gut into guilty knots. But he couldn’t sleep next to his friend, not when his own body had betrayed him so thoroughly. He brushed it off; morning wood was bound to happen at some point, angel or not. The problem wasn’t the erection. The problem was that for a fraction of a second, a sliver of time that could barely be said to have existed at all, Dean knew that it was Cas in his arms and he had wanted to stay pressed up against him, hard on and all.

The two had not slept in the same bed for almost a week before the resurrected party-crashers arrived. It was all Dean’s fault, really, because he just couldn’t keep his mind from wandering into dangerous territory. It was as if that one moment of pressing himself against Castiel’s backside had shattered an already flimsy dam and allowed every denied, ignored and bottled up sexual frustration to come pouring out. For a week, all he thought about was the angel's mouth, his hands, his thighs; these images would appear without warning, fully formed in his mind's eye and at completely innocuous moments. Cas poured his coffee and Dean imagined that hand wrapped around him instead of the mug. Cas took a pull from a beer bottle and Dean imagined that mouth on the skin of his neck. Cas field-stripped his Beretta and Dean imagined being taken apart and put back together with equally deft skill.

It was maddening and the amount of time he spent in the shower that week was bordering on problematic. The former angel was starting to get the distressed look he used to wear right after the slamming of the gates; his eyes getting narrower by the day, the little triangle of worry lines between his eyebrows getting deeper. Dean had thrown himself into trying to find them a case, anything to get his mind out of the gutter and their bodies out of the bunker. And then, a quite literal gift from Heaven landed right in their laps and took up all of their attention. He was grateful for Sam’s resurrection and guardedly happy that Castiel had something to distract him as well; he’d been looking more and more like he was about to have “The Talk” with Dean about the unnamed thing happening between them. If the hunter were honest with himself, which he rarely was, he’d have to admit that he was terrified of what Cas might say, might do; he liked things the way they were, excepting the last two weeks of studious avoidance and then jealousy.

They all tried to find a place in these new living arrangements, find a rhythm and harmony between the four of them that would work smoothly. It was like trying to find your mark and remember your lines to a production you didn’t know you were in; everyone was stumbling over each other and occasionally stepping on toes. But they persisted. A few days after the arrival of Sam and Seraphina, the tension between Dean and Castiel abated somewhat; they started leaning on each other again, reaching for each other in moments when their guard was down. They were all doing their best.

Undeterred by his ordeal and dramatic resurrection, Sam went right back to fulfilling his duty as a Man of Letters, diving wholeheartedly into the archives with Cas, trying to give them a leg up on all the demons still roaming free. It was around this time, about a week after his return, that the younger Winchester noticed all the alerts their fake FBI email was getting, concerning BOLOs about a certain 5’9” redhead with a penchant for murder.

Sam looked at his brother in disbelief and gulped out, “Didn’t Crowley tell you?!”

Dean slammed his fist into the nearest bookcase, causing several volumes to topple off their shelves and rain onto a wide-eyed Seraphina, who was sitting on the floor, poring over an Egyptian demonology text.
“That son of a bitch!” the hunter growled, while Castiel tried to soothe him with a hand on his shoulder, “So, we’ve been looking for a meat suit that Abaddon smoked out of months ago?! She could be anywhere, riding anyone!”

The three men looked at each other in horror. “Kevin,” was the one name they said in unison.

There was a flurry of panic and tense discussions about secure phone lines, email encryption and whether demons were likely to be tech savvy when Sera reminded them that an archangel had been recently resurrected. Kevin, in essence, had his very own, deadly version of LoJack. The hunters began questioning Castiel about the mechanics of archangel protection while the gates of Heaven were locked when the girl interrupted again.

“We could just ask,” she suggested.

Dean rolled his eyes. “As if that feathery asshole is gonna answer.”

Seraphina bristled, leveling him with a gaze he wasn’t expecting and despite himself, the hunter gulped. The girl slammed the Egyptian text in her hands shut and rose, never taking her eyes off of Dean. She took a step toward him and although he knew she had no Grace left, the way she moved made the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. The girl hadn’t been human long enough this time around to shed some of her affected, otherworldly mannerisms. He would not have been surprised if the lights started to flicker.

“He might answer me,” she replied.

Castiel waited for a single heartbeat and then cleared his throat meaningfully. It was like a switch was thrown and the girl suddenly demurred, lowering her gaze and stepping away from the hunter. Another heart beat and she was making her way deeper into the bunker, toward the bedrooms. Cas sighed heavily.

Sam, thankfully, pretended like nothing had happened and they quietly resumed scouring the archives for ways of killing a Knight of Hell. They didn’t see Seraphina for the rest of the evening and when Dean passed Castiels bedroom later that night, the former angel was, for the first time in a week, alone. He was sitting cross legged on the bed in pajamas, staring pensively into the distance. The hunter knocked on his door frame.

Cas looked up, smiling. “Come in Dean.”

He sauntered in. “Mini-Cas giving you trouble?” he asked, half joking.

The angel narrowed his eyes and cocked his head to the side, appraising the hunter in a way he hadn’t done in some time. It made something warm coil in Dean’s gut. He had the sneaking suspicion that despite his lack of Grace, Cas could still see to his core, passed all the posturing and terrified macho bullshit, right into the naked unprotected parts of him. The hunter wanted the hard earned camaraderie back, the kind they had before the sudden resurrection of their loved ones. Dean loved having Sam back, but the sympathetic smiles and knowing looks when Castiel crowded into Dean’s space, or when the hunter pressed his shoulder tightly against the former angels at the dinner table were starting to grate on him. Sera wasn’t helping matters either; she stuck to the other angels side as if she hadn’t yet achieved object permanence. The more comfortable she got in the bunker, the less fear she exhibited when alone with either of the hunters. At first, the silent, wide-eyed regard with which she treated Dean suited him, but she was getting less reserved and far more fierce in their interactions. He didn’t like it; it felt like they were competing, but the hunter didn’t know over what prize.
“No,” Cas said slowly, “I do not believe I am the one troubled by her presence.”

Dean huffed a laugh. “I’m that obvious, huh?”

“Subtlety is not your forte,” the angel answered, smiling slightly.

“Yeah,” Dean breathed, rubbing at the back of his head, “About that… I’m trying, OK? I just… I’m just…”

“No longer used to sharing?”

The hunter balked; that was his thought almost word-for-word a week ago in the kitchen, when he confronted Seraphina with all her IDs. Was he really that transparent? If Castiel knew this about him, what else was he aware of? The morning when he fled their shared bed came rushing back to him and Dean flushed bright pink, staring resolutely at anything but the other man. Really, if anyone had a claim here, the hunter thought wildly, it belonged to Cas; he rebuilt Dean in Hell and created Seraphina from scratch in Heaven. They were his, he was not theirs; sharing was Dean's only option. The former angel hummed, as if confirming something.

“Perhaps we need a hunt,” he said, “Life threatening paranormal interactions always seem to help you sort out your thoughts.”

Dean snorted, thinking that Cas was joking, but when he looked up, the angel was deadly serious.

“I found a case this morning, but the revelation about Abaddon derailed my suggesting it,” he said tentatively, “It’s a nine hour drive. A town near Wilmar, Minnesota may be having a ghoul problem.”

“Hell yes!” Dean exclaimed, punching the air, delighted to have an excuse to finally leave the bunker, even if it was just an easy ghoul.

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The next day, an even better gift fell into the hunter’s lap. Sam came down with a massive sinus infection that would keep him from the hunt. Despite her vocal protests, Castiel convinced Seraphina that her duty as their chief medical officer, was to stay with the younger Winchester and take care of him. The girl glared at them, her mouth set in a disapproving line.

“I suppose if I’m the chief medical officer, that makes you Spock and Dean Kirk?” she’d asked, her arms folded and her shoulders radiating annoyance.

Dean had laughed in surprise and then nearly choked on his own spit when Cas tilted his head, his eyes narrowed, and muttered something about his directive being “logical”. Sera only rolled her eyes as Sam’s laughter dissolved into a sneezing fit and he wiped his nose on a shirt sleeve. He also protested being left out of the hunt, but not nearly as vigorously as the former angel. In fact, he seemed almost relieved at the announcement that he and Sera would not be going, weakly wishing them luck and reminding them to call if they needed help with research.

Seraphina walked them out of the bunker to Baby, her arms still folded angrily, but chewing on her lower lip. They stood outside the Impala awkwardly for a moment, while she gathered her thoughts.
“Gabriel confirmed that Kevin is under his protection,” she said casually, as if commenting on the weather.

Dean’s eyebrows shot into his hairline, while Castiel released a surprised little “Oh”. The silence stretched out between them.

“No redshirt moments,” Seraphina growled, a warning finger wagging at both of them.

She turned away and stomped back into the bunker without another word, slamming the heavy metal door shut behind her.

Cas turned to the hunter with a triumphant grin. “I understood that reference.”

Dean snorted. “We need to get out more.”

It would be five days before they received the panicked phone call from Castiel, his voice thin and barely controlled over speakerphone. Sam would always remember the way Sera went still at the library table, nothing but her voice moving in the darkened bunker, giving firm and calm instructions to the agitated angel on the other end of the line.

“Dean will be fine,” she said kindly, putting her hand on Sam’s arm after Cas hung up.

The younger Winchester just nodded mutely.
No one had ever really been tender with Dean, at least not in his adult life. He had vague memories of his mother holding him, of his father's touch being kind instead of instructive. There were a handful of one night stands, both men and women, who might qualify for the words gentle, kind, even. But they were few and far between. The only two people who consistently touched Dean without violence were his brother Sam and the man he considered his adoptive father, Bobby. The moment those Hell Hounds tore into him all those years ago, the only thing he could think of was Bobby's hand on his cheek, tears in his eyes, telling him he mattered, that his soul was more than just a bargaining chip. It was one of the memories that shone brightly in the foul darkness of hell; it kept him holding on to his humanity.

Right now, something was happening that hadn’t occurred since he was fifteen. Someone else was washing him. Dean had a pretty good idea of who it was, but the hit to the head he’d taken wasn’t letting him focus. All he knew was the warm water and the gentle hands, wiping away the blood and ghoul nest gore from his face. He remembered the nasty thing grinning at him as it looked up from the rotting corpse it was devouring, the icy cold crypt and jumping in front of Cas when the second creature showed up. The pain in his ribs was pulling him toward another memory though, the kind you bury deep so that nothing hateful or vulgar can get to it; the kind you take out and hold tenderly in your mind when the pain and fear are too much and you need to be reminded that light still exists in the world.

Dean was fifteen and had taken a beating while tussling with a werewolf. He hadn’t been bitten, which was his only stroke of luck that night. John was bitterly disappointed in his performance and stayed at the motel room just long enough to bark, “Clean yourself up.” And then to an eleven year old Sam, who grudgingly stayed behind, “Be ready to leave by next sunrise.” The pink glow of dawn was just edging its way over the horizon, so they had at least 24 hours. Through the haze of both sharp and throbbing pain, Dean had been thankful for at least that reprieve. He stumbled into the bathroom before his little brother could start questioning him about what went wrong. He forgot to lock the door and at the time, he would have blamed that slip on his physical condition, but looking back now, through the clarity of self knowledge, Dean admitted that he probably needed that door unlocked, precisely to allow Sam entry.

Angry bruises were blooming along his ribs and he barely got his hunt-smeared clothes off before stumbling into the shower. Half way through, Dean discovered that he couldn’t lift his arms above chest height. In fact, he realized he probably wouldn’t be able to lift himself out of the tub at all, since he’d sunk down into a sitting position after grabbing the soap and his washcloth. He sat under the warm water, trying to get the filth out of his hair, but gave up after a few minutes. The warmth, combined with all the pains that were making themselves viciously obvious every time he tried to get up, made it impossible for him to think. Dean turned the water off and sat dripping in the tub, trying to come up with a plan.

“Dean?”
The thin, worried voice startled him out of his stupor. Dean couldn’t remember how long it was since he’d turned off the water, but he came to shivering. It must have been long enough to worry Sam and send him into the bathroom.

“Dean?” he asked again, the single word laced with a quiet dread, “Are you OK?”

Before the older Winchester could stop him, Sam pulled back the cheap beige motel shower curtain and peered down at him, worry lines creasing his forehead. Dean hunched in on himself, still shivering.

“Dude!” he spat, “What the hell are you doing?!!”

He tried to struggle up into a standing position, but his legs failed him and he didn’t even attempt to brace himself with his arms. Sam jumped forward just in time to keep him from slamming his head into the wall.

“Shit. Shitshitshit…” Dean breathed, his face contorted in pain. He tried to ignore his little brothers scrutinizing gaze and after a moment, the eleven year old stepped away.

Good, Dean thought, I will damn well fix this myself.

But Sam reappeared at his elbow abruptly, shoving a handful of ibuprofen and a glass of water at him. The young hunter blinked, uncomprehending.


Dean blinked a few more times but complied. His little brother had never been bossy with him and he didn’t know how else to react. Sam’s eyes roved over the other’s body, the corners of his eyes tightening and his lips pressing into a pale line as he reviewed the bruises. The visual examination ended with him eyeing the blood and dirt still clinging to Dean’s hair. Without a word, he took back the now empty glass, placed it on the floor and then leaned forward to turn the water back on. Before his older brother could protest, he grabbed the washcloth from his hands and the shampoo from the lip of the tub.

“Can you get yourself under the water?” he asked, as if they did this every day.

Dean started to protest, but Sam just glared at him with the determined air he would sometimes get before butting heads with John. The older boy just sighed and scooted forward under the water, if only to get rid of the shivering that sitting in the cold tub had caused. Slowly, tenderly, Sam washed the grime out of Dean’s hair and rubbed at the mud caked behind his ears. He tried to keep it together, he really did.

But as the small gentle hands worked, all he could think was, Fuckups don’t deserve this.

The only reason he’d even survived the werewolf was because John swooped in and saved him. He somehow found himself upwind of the creature, alerting it to his presence. It was a stupid mistake, he kept telling himself. Just a stupid mistake. John had been so angry and Dean had been so scared. When the thing was dead and his father rolled the carcass off him, all the old man said was, “You should have known better.” But all the boy could think of was the putrid smell of its breath as it pinned him to the muddy ground, it’s claws at his ribs, it’s leaking snout sniffing at his neck and thinking, I don’t want to die.

Suddenly he was sobbing and Sam was shushing him, his little hands rubbing soothing circles on his back, reassuring him that he was a great hunter, almost as good as dad, stop beating yourself up, I wouldn’t be better off if you were dead, don’t say that. Too late, he realized he’d been thinking
aloud. Sams litany of praise and reassurance didn’t stop and because he was the one pure, untainted thing in Dean’s life, he tried to believe him. For years afterward, the hunter would recall his brothers fervent defense of Deans goodness and whatever pain or fear or doubt that plagued him, it would fall away.

The memory shifted and the hands on his body were bigger, stronger, the voice definitely not that of an eleven year old Sam. This body was in the tub with him, the arms wrapped protectively from behind, the voice shushing in his ear. With a start, Dean realized that Cas was still dressed and sitting under the spray of water with him. The hunter panicked, tried to struggle up, but the hands held him fast. Buzzing anxiety crashed over him, a wave that would surely drown him this time. But the voice wouldn’t stop, it was rhythmic and soothing, if only he could focus on the words, maybe this lurching panic that suddenly seized him would abate.

“Just breath Dean,” the rumbling voice was saying, “Breath with me. You’re safe, we’re safe. I’m right here, I’m not going anywhere. I’ll watch over you, just breath.”

The hunter managed to pull in a ragged breath and then another. Amazingly, his body responded, feeling the chest pressed against his back expanding and contracting in time with his own. The angry buzzing in his mind and his limbs slowly started to fade, the warm water working on his numb body.

The next time he came to, Dean was warm and dry, with something heavy and even warmer wrapped around him. Slowly, he realized he was in the motel bed, with every available blanket piled on top of him. It was still dark out, but the room was illuminated by the street lamps. Cas’ breath was warming his neck and the hunter realized that the “even warmer” thing wrapped around him was the former angel. Dean tried to enjoy this moment, but his head was throbbing. The pain had a drug infused distance about it; Cas must have convinced him to take something before he passed out again. He groaned and the other man was suddenly awake, throwing off the blankets, turning on the side lamp, his eyes focused on Dean’s face.

“Are you alright? Nauseous? Are you numb anywhere?” Castiel was asking, peering into his eyes with a laser precision he usually reserved for one of Dean's episodes.

“Since when are you Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman?” The hunter groused, shielding his eyes from the lamp and batting away the angels hands, which were exploring an injury on the side of his head.

“Since you got a concussion,” Castiel growled.

“I do not have a concussion,” Dean growled back, rolling his eyes, which made the room spin.

“That’s what Sam said you’d say,” the angel answered, sounding more relieved than the moment warranted, in the hunter's opinion.

The hunter groaned again, “Why the hell were you calling Sam?”

“I wasn’t calling Sam, I was calling Seraphina.”

“Right, our very own battlefield medic.”

Castiel was still glaring at Dean with an intensity that made him squirm and for some unfathomable reason, guilt washed over him. The hunter looked away, kicking at the pile of blankets covering his legs. It dawned on him that he was wearing nothing but boxers and not the ones he’d started the day in.

“Um, Cas,” he started uncertainly, “What the hell happened?”
Dean wasn’t exactly shy around the former angel but nudity still made him queasy. They’d been in enough scrapes together, patching each other up and stripping out of blood-soaked or mud-caked clothing so many times that neither made a fuss. But this was a new phenomenon.

The angels face softened. “You saved me and in the process, nearly got yourself killed.”

The ghouls were working together, a pair, which the hunters had only seen once before. Night had fallen. One distracted them by leading them directly to the body of the missing man they’d been trying to track down, the other attacked. The crypt was cramped, there had been almost no room to fight. Castiel had his back turned to the entrance, was in the process of dispatching the first ghoul when Dean jumped between him and the second attacker. There was a struggle and the thing almost got the best of the hunter, bashing his head into one of the tombs. By the time the angel killed both creatures, Dean had vanished.

“At first, I thought there must have been some spell to magic you away, but then I saw the blood in the snow,” Castiel's face twisted with pain for a moment, “It was dark. You were disoriented. I think you were trying to get back to the Impala, but you wandered into the creek instead. By the time I found you…”

The angels voice faltered and he took a steadying breath.

“You were hypothermic, soaked through, your head wouldn’t stop bleeding. I don’t even think you recognized me.”

“Shit, Cas, I’m sorry.”

“Stop,” the angel pleaded wearily, taking the hunters bruised hand in his, “You promised.”

Dean looked up sharply at that. “What?”

The angel waved vaguely in the direction of the bathroom. “You said…,” his eyes roved over the hunter's face, searching for something but obviously not finding it. His shoulders dropped, his face unaccountably sad and he withdrew his hand reluctantly; Dean wished he hadn’t.

“You promised to stop apologizing for things that aren’t your fault, that’s all,” Castiel answered quietly.

The hunter could tell that this was not the truth, but he was too addled to pursue the thread further. The former angel moved to the edge of the bed and began pulling on his boots. Dean could fill in the blanks without Cas’ help; he was hypothermic, uncooperative, bleeding profusely and caked in god-knows-what from the crypt. In the middle of the night, his partner somehow fished him out of an icy Minnesota creek, drove him back to the motel and manhandled him into the shower. He could not, for the life of him, remember if he’d said anything while they warmed up under the spray of water; he could only remember the panic and Castiel's voice, calling him back from the edge, soothing him. Dean’s ears tinged pink as he thought about what must have happened next; it’s not like Cas could put him to bed in wet clothes, warm or not.

“Thanks,” the hunter said softly, “Thank you.”

The former angel actually smiled at that and nodded; it made the knot of guilt in Dean’s gut untwist.

“I packed us up, apart from your bag” Castiel said, “It’s only a nine hour drive and sunrise isn’t for a bit. I want to get you back to the bunker; I’ll feel more at ease once we’re there. Get dressed. I’ll warm up the car.”
With that, Cas grabbed his trench coat from the untouched second bed in the room and disappeared out the door. A few moments later, Dean heard the distinct Impala engine rumble to life. His eyes lingered on the other bed; they had used it solely as a dumping ground for their bags and dirty clothes during their stay in Wilmar and Dean wondered how things would stand when they got back to Kansas. The hunter wasn’t the most astute student when it came to picking up on subtle emotional cues, but even through the haze of his throbbering head, he could tell Cas was unhappy with their exchange. Had he really promised to simply stop apologizing to the former angel, or was there more? Nothing of their encounter with the ghouls or the aftermath was coming to Dean, aside from what he already knew and remembered. He gave up on his mental excavation and got dressed instead, checking the room for anything they may have left behind.

The bruises across his ribs made him grunt as he pulled on a shirt, but the biggest shock came when he ducked into the tiny motel bathroom to kill the light. Dean caught his own reflection in the mirror and paused; there was a nasty bruise radiating from the lump on the side of his head. In fact, the entire left side of his face was a nausea inducing rainbow of purple and green with sickly tinges of yellow at the edges. His left eye was puffy and bloodshot. He looked terrible; no wonder Cas was eager to get him back to the bunker.

They stopped in the next town over for a quick breakfast and because Dean developed a violent case of car sickness, probably due to the concussion he wouldn’t admit to. Cas practically forced the motion sickness pills on him, doing everything but physically shoving the little white pellets in his mouth and pinching his nose.

“I’m fine!” Dean kept growling, batting the angels hands away.

Castiel just glared angrily and replied, “We’ll see what Seraphina says.”

For some reason, Dean imagined her on a Civil War battlefield, covered in blood and a rusty saw in hand, glaring down at him with the same frustration Cas was aiming his way. He took the pills and swallowed them dry.

“Gee thanks, Sammy,” Dean groused, dropping his duffel on the chair next to his brother.

Castiel stumbled into the library after Dean, looking tired and grumpy, the strain of the drive showing in the bags under his eyes. His trench coat was rumpled and shoulders tense, but the hunter looked significantly worse, even though he slept most of the way back to Kansas. It took them the full nine hours to make the drive back to Lebanon from Wilmar, mostly because Cas refused to let the other man drive and was unwilling to go more than ten miles an hour over the speed limit.

“What is the point of avoiding the highway if you’re not gonna take advantage of empty country roads?” the hunter had grumbled, watching the speedometer bitterly.

“Where is Seraphina?” Castiel asked distractedly, peering around the library.

“Here,” came a muffled voice, followed by a book thumping closed.

The girl slid out from under the library table, nonchalantly clicking off her flashlight and brushing dust from her clothes.

“What the hell were you doing under there?” Dean asked, his eyes bouncing between Sam and the girl curiously.

Sera exchanged a look with Sam, then shrugged. “I like it. Now let me have a look at you.”

The hunter started to protest, but Cas cut him off, rattling off all the symptoms that Dean had experienced the night before and that morning. The girl gently herded the injured man into a library chair, glaring at the bruise adorning his face as if it had personally insulted her. Sam’s mouth was set in a hard line, his eyes roving over his brother. The hunter expected Seraphina’s hands to poke and prod at him, to be as severe as the look on her face. Instead, her fingers barely ghosted over his skin and she asked his permission before lifting his shirt and examining his ribs. She didn’t press at the bruises there, just laid her cool hand, flat and wide, along the curve of the bones and closed her eyes, asking him to take a few deep breaths.

“Well, nothing’s broken,” she concluded, “But it sounds like you have a concussion.”

Dean grunted. “I’m fine.”

“You’re not.”

Sam and Seraphina exchanged a significant look. It seemed like the younger hunter was trying to goad her into something, judging by the determined raising of his eyebrows and pursing of his lips. Dean and Cas watched this silent conversation with both wonder and apprehension. After several moments, the battle of wills was concluded. Sam smiled. The girl sighed.

“I can heal you,” she said, with some misgiving, “If you’ll let me.”

The tone of her voice suggested that Dean might rather scoop out his own eyeballs with a rusty spork than allow her to perform her doctorly duties.

“You can still heal?” Cas asked, his eyes going wide.
Seraphina shook her head. “Not like that,” she said quietly.

The girl explained that after a day of plying Sam with herbal teas and Sudafed to no effect, she got tired of listening to him snuffle and dug up an old spell she knew. It was one she used on almost a daily basis in one of her many past lives. It also happened to be written word for word in several of their old tomes, not to mention in a book about Wicca readily available at a popular online bookseller.

“And, seeing as none of the 1,072 reviewers mentioned results including death or dismemberment, Sam condescended to trust me enough to actually cast the spell on him,” Seraphina said, arms akimbo, sarcasm dripping from her words.

“In my defense, I didn’t know about all that time you spent as a shaman in Siberia,” Sam said, with sudden laughter in his voice, “Or that time you were a witch on the Hebrides.”

“I was also a necromancer in Persia,” the girl said, defiance in every angle of her body.

Sam feigned a gravely concerned face, “I thought we don’t discuss that.”

“We don’t,” Sera said, turning back to Dean, “So, will you let me?”

Dean and Castiel watched this exchange with great interest. Despite the worry and concern that overshadowed both their faces when they looked at the injured hunter, it seemed that Sam and Seraphina had found a comfortable rhythm between them. In less than a week, something fundamental shifted between the two and there was a fearless ease, an almost cocky camaraderie, with which they spoke to each other. Cas gave them what Dean called the “confused dog” look, tilting his head to the side and squinting.

“Something is different,” the former angel muttered.

Dean’s eyes nearly popped out of his head. “Oh my god. Did you two get it on!?”

Sam looked affronted and Seraphina only rolled her eyes, pinching the bridge of her nose in exasperation. They both shook their heads and the presence of annoyance instead of shame on his brothers face convinced Dean that he was wrong. But even if it wasn’t sex, something happened between the two of them. Before the hunter could really dig in his heels and start grilling the two, Cas interrupted.

“Are there drawbacks? Side effects to the spell?” he asked anxiously.

“It’ll knock him out for a while, a few hours probably; it’s not an instant fix,” Seraphina replied, “And it’s perfect for simple injuries, wipes them right out, but a concussion…”

The girl chewed on her lower lip pensively, looking hard at Dean. He didn’t like the way they were talking about him; like he was a kid or a pet that didn’t get to participate in the conversation.

“I’m fine,” he growled again.

“You could be dead tomorrow!”

The sudden explosion of fury in the girl’s voice seemed to take all of them by surprise. She took a breath, steadied herself, and launched into a litany of things that might be currently wrong with Dean, including a subdural hematoma. She explained that even though the spell wasn’t strong enough to actually cure or eliminate many of these dire and deadly conditions, it would downgrade them, jump starting the healing process and keep the body from going over the edge. By the time she
was done, Sam and Castiel were looking at the other hunter beseechingly and even Dean felt slightly uneasy about the hit he’d taken to the head. He rolled his eyes, which sent a sharp pain shooting through his skull.

“Fine, fine,” he said, raising his hands in defeat.

The spell turned out to be fairly simple and within a few minutes of its casting, he was being helped into bed by Cas. Dean felt the magic pressing in on him from all sides and for a few moments after laying down, clutched at the former angels arm, blinking fiercely, trying to stay calm. From somewhere above him, a tired voice said “Stop fighting it” and as soon as he relaxed, the magic seeped into his pores and he was swallowed by a comforting darkness.

He had no idea how long he’d been out, but it must have been at least a day. An empty water glass, a mug with only the suggestion of tea in the bottom and a crumby plate were on his night stand. Castiel was asleep in a chair next to him, his socked feet propped up on the bed, head thrown back and the trench coat draped over his still form. A ratty copy of Gaiman’s Stardust was lying discarded on the floor, right below the man's limp hand, as if he fell asleep reading it and it slipped from his grip. It was thirst, hunger and the pressing need to get to the bathroom that drove Dean from his bed. He was careful not to wake the sleeping angel, but took a moment to drink in the scene despite his pressing physical needs; fondness for the man bloomed in his chest and he wondered again what he promised in Minnesota. Judging by the detritus on his night stand, Cas must have been there all day and night, watching over him. This knowledge would have unsettled him a few years ago, making him feel vulnerable and exposed, but now it only made him feel protected. The hunter finally tore himself away and gave in to the demands of his bladder. He was surprised by his own reflection above the sink; there was no more cut, swollen lump or bruise adorning his face. Upon closer inspection, Dean found that all the bruises were gone, his ribs felt fine and even when he performed a theatrical eye-roll, nothing smarted.

The hunter didn’t want to wake Cas and went in search of Sam and the other angel instead. He found them in the library, asleep in one of the large leather chairs tucked into an alcove. There were several non-occult medical texts open on the main table, but it was mostly covered in books concerning healing magic, with loose sheets of paper scattered throughout and covered in Seraphina’s precise print. Dean glared at the two sleeping figures.

“Didn’t have sex, my foot,” he muttered.

Sam was sprawled across the chair in much the same way Cas was back in Dean’s room; ass almost off the edge, head thrown back, mouth slightly open, snoring. The huge difference was that Seraphina was curled in his lap, head resting in the crook of his neck, one hand fist ed in his flannel. Usually, the older hunter would take the opportunity to place a spoon in his brother's mouth, or tie his shoelaces together, or any one of the hundred pranks that instantly popped into his head. But he knew that people revealed the most about themselves when they were take by surprise and he wanted the couple to be thrown completely off guard. Also, he was feeling quite chipper, now that the shooting pain in his head was gone, and although it was no way to thank the two, he couldn’t miss this golden opportunity to force them to come clean. Picking up a single heavy volume and never taking his eyes off the two, he dropped it from chest height. The sound of the book hitting the marble floor boomed through the vaulted library.

Whatever Dean was expecting to occur, it was not what happened next. Seraphina shot up from Sam’s lap like a cork and seeing the other man, slammed backward into the bookcase in the alcove, sinking to the ground. Her right arm shot up straight in front of her, palm up, fingers splayed, the way it had on the night she regained consciousness atop the map table and thought Castiel was one of Naomi’s copies, sent to hurt her. The girl's eyes were wide, but unfocused, and Dean had the
distinct impression that she wasn’t actually seeing him.

“Don’t don’t don’t don’t,” she breathed, the word a plea.

In the next moment, Sam was there, crouching in front of her. His large hands came to rest on the spines of the old books, on either side of her head, while her own arm reached out over his left shoulder, still trying to stop an attack that wasn’t coming.

“Sera!” the younger hunter barked, “You’re in the bunker. You’re safe.”

But the desperate litany didn’t stop.

“Look at me!” Sam commanded and slammed his open hand against the spines of the books, only inches from the girl's face.

She didn’t flinch or jump, just fell silent. For the span of a breath, nothing else changed and then her arm relaxed to his shoulder, her eyes pulling away from Dean and focusing on the man before her instead. Sam huffed a relieved but mirthless laugh, mirroring Sera by resting a hand on her shoulder.

“Look at that,” he said with false cheer, “Less than ten seconds and you’re back already. You’re getting better at this.”

The hand on Sam’s shoulder migrated to his cheek.

“Why don’t you, uh, go check on the food?” The younger hunter stammered, the back of his neck turning pink.

Seraphina nodded silently and Sam pulled her up off the floor. She slipped passed both of them, her eyes flickering across Dean's face for a moment, and then disappeared into the gloom of a hallway.

Dean stood frozen, eyes wide, remorse flooding every nook and cranny of his being. Sam took a breath and rubbed at his face with both hands before turning to Dean.

“Well, looks like the spell worked,” he said, eyeing his brothers face.

“No, no, no,” Dean said wagging a finger at Sam, “I am NOT letting that slide. What the hell just happened?”

He ended the sentence by pointing down the hallway after Seraphina with the finger he’d shaken in Sam’s direction. The younger man just sighed, rolling his eyes half-heartedly.

“C’mom man,” he said, sounding slightly exasperated, “You know what a panic attack looks like; you’ve had enough of them yourself.”

Dean balked. Since childhood, most of his relationship with Sam involved stubbornly ignoring or denying anything that might even hint at Dean’s inability to protect his little brother. He studiously avoided letting any weakness show; no fear, no panic, no doubt. Even while he was silently agreeing with Sam while he railed against their father, he’d defended the man and the method. Every time he had been certain they wouldn’t make it out of a hunt (or an apocalypse) alive, he put his best murder face on, put himself between whatever was trying to kill them and Sammy and tried to make sure that he died first. If he were honest with himself, that was really the reason this whole cycle of near-world-ending tragedies had started; his unwillingness to live while Sam died. Once, Sam sat Dean down and used all the best vocabulary he learned in Psych 101 to explain what Dad had done to them, throwing out words like enmeshment, neglect, trauma and the ubiquitous PTSD. Once the conversation moved on to include words like coping, anxiety and self-worth, Dean waved Sam off and, as was his habit, tried to not think about it all. It’s not as if understanding what they’d lived
through would change it, the hunter reasoned. Sam sighed, pulling Dean out of his thoughts.

“She was fine the first day Cas was gone, figuring out a way to heal me gave her something to do, I think,” the younger man said, his gaze unfocused and directed at the hallway leading down to the kitchen, “But that second night, I found her in the War Room, under the map table. She…”

Sam faltered in his story, his face settling into a look of dismay. The girl’s presence under the table at the library the day before suddenly made sense to Dean; she felt safe there. The hunter wondered what triggered the episode and was surprised by the sudden wave of sympathy he felt toward the fallen angel. The lifetimes she’d spent as a human soldier fighting other people’s wars, under the guise of training, in the name of an unreachable father, started to feel uncomfortably familiar to the hunter. In his mind, Seraphina was looking less like a grenade with a pulled pin and more like a real person with recognizable ghosts haunting her.

“So,” Dean stalled, trying to decide which way to steer the conversation. After a heartbeat, he decided that ‘lighthearted’ was the best goal, “You’re still a virgin then?”

Sam snorted, his face visibly relaxing. After Dean’s own resurrection so many years ago, they concluded that coming back from the dead meant you got a brand spanking new body, since none of the old breaks or sprains seemed to bother him or even showed up on a later x-ray. A brand new body also meant one that hadn’t yet been used in the most carnal and pleasurable of human activities.

“Sera and I did not have sex, no,” Sam said, rolling his eyes good-naturedly.

“Buuuut…?” The older Winchester goaded him, hoping for a telltale blush.

Sam chose a different tactic, crossing his arms and glaring at his brother, “How about you and Cas?”

This brought Dean up short, his face reddening.

“What about me and Cas?” He asked defensively.

Sam shook his head, throwing his hands up in the air, physically trying to retract the conversation.

“No, really, I want to know,” Dean demanded, his voice suddenly heated, “What about me and Cas?”

“Dude,” the younger Winchester said, managing to pack all of his annoyance, resignation and long-suffering into that one word, “Sera’s only been here, what, two weeks? Even she’s noticed you two silently pining for each other. We’ve spent enough time living practically on top of each other for me to know that you’ve got more diverse tastes than most guys, Dean.”

That last bit was said with such gentleness, that the older hunter didn’t have the heart to be annoyed. It’s not like they hadn’t had this conversation before. Actually, Dean was quite proud to report, it was one of the few times he’d gotten dragged into one of Sam’s “educational” heart-to-hearts knowing more than his brother. He had patiently listened to the younger Winchester’s lecture on the sexuality spectrum and then calmly informed him that he did, in fact, know that he was bi and had no qualms about this conclusion. He had, however, warned his brother in the strongest of terms, against letting their father know; it was not a complication he’d been willing to deal with.

“I’m not…,” Dean faltered, then shrugged, “I can’t.”

“Why not?” Sam asked, all sincerity and eagerness, “I bet…”

But whatever the younger hunter was betting on was interrupted by a loud and demanding grumble
from Dean’s stomach.

“Did you say something to Sera about checking on the food?” Dean asked hopefully.
Dean was under the effects of the spell for almost ten hours, so it was well past midnight by the time they decided to eat dinner. Since Cas had been so worried about him, Dean wanted to be the one to wake the angel. The other man was still asleep and Dean hesitated before putting a hand on his shoulder, mulling over what Sam said only a few moments before. Were the two of them pining for each other? Were his desires so obvious, that a traumatized girl who’d only known him for the span of two weeks could see them written on his face? Did he have even a snowball’s chance in hell of giving Cas what he needed or wanted? Dean didn’t have the slightest idea of what the former angel might ever need from him. As far as the hunter was concerned, the only reason Castiel, ancient, capable, former angel-of-the-lord, stuck around this long was out of obligation. He knew how to be human now, he didn’t need Dean, but Dean very obviously needed him; every panic attack proved that. He’d already asked for so much from Cas, he couldn’t bring himself to ask for anything more. In fact, Dean realized, the worst possible thing was to obtain what one wanted and incur the resentment of the giver.

But then his mind caught on all those panic attacks again and he thought of the way each one of them ended; with Cas keeping him safe from himself, telling him that there was no other place in the world he’d rather be. The former angel always asked Dean if he trusted him and even after everything that happened between them, the hunter always thought it was a ridiculous question that only had one answer. Now a new question bloomed in his mind; did Castiel trust him? Those early months and mishaps rose up with sudden clarity; the former angel listening intently when Dean explained how to grind and brew coffee, his tongue caught between his teeth, forehead scrunched in concentration as he tried to mimic the hunters actions. That first time, when he tried to do it on his own and poured the water into the wrong side of the coffeemaker, his face horror struck, his hands frantically trying to clean up the mess as Dean rolled his eyes, pushed him out of the way and took care of the puddle of brown water pooling on the counter top. After every exasperated groan or disapproving grunt, Castiel still looked to him, hopefully, for instruction and approval. It struck Dean how rarely he acknowledged the former angels efforts, how seldom he said “Thank you” or “Good job”, how difficult it was for him to show gratitude or give praise, and with dread clogging his throat, he realized he’d turned into his father.

The hunters gut clenched at the thought, rebelling. He could be different, dammit, he would be and he didn’t have to ask for anything; he could give instead. Before Dean could scare himself out of his resolve, his hand found Castiel's shoulder and he shook it gently. The angel didn’t spring from his seat to greet his newly healed friend, but growled his disapproval, his eyes still closed, trying to bury himself deeper into the uncomfortable chair, pulling the trench coat up to his chin. Dean laughed. At the sound, the dozing man’s eyes flew open and for a moment, they just stared at each other. Taking in the hunter’s unbruised face, Castiel’s own cleared of the worry that had made a semi-permanent home there and he surged forward, the trench coat falling to the floor, trapping the other man in a hug. Dean chuckled again and the former angel quickly let go, stepping away, the back of his legs bumping into the chair.

“It worked? You’re alright?” Cas asked, his hands obviously itching to touch the side of Dean’s face where the awful bruise used to be, but holding himself back.

The sudden awkwardness between them made all of Dean’s resolve scamper behind his internal barricades. Whatever happened in Minnesota must have been quite a fuckup, if Cas was acting this squirrely even while they were alone. The hunter kicked himself mentally, desperately trying to remember what could have happened between taking a hit to the head in the cemetery and waking up at the motel.
“Looks like Seraphina knows her spells,” he said, shrugging and digging his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, feeling every bit of the unease radiating from the other man.

They stood there, awkwardly staring at each other for several long moments until Castiel’s stomach rumbled in much the same way Dean’s had minutes before in the library.

“Sammy said there’s food.”

The former angel only nodded in response, picked up his coat and slipped past Dean, making an effort not to brush up against him. Something seized up in the hunter’s chest and for a wild moment, everything in him screamed that if he didn’t fix this, if he didn’t do something, anything, this might be the moment he lost Cas forever.

“Thank you,” Dean blurted out, practically shouting it at the angels retreating back.

The other man froze and then slowly turned to face him, head cocked to the side. Before what little courage he’d mustered fled, Dean did what he knew best; barreled ahead without a plan.

“Thank you, for… everything,” he said lamely, vaguely waving his hand in the direction of his night stand, which was still covered in the detritus of Castiel’s vigil, “I owe you.”

He knew it was the wrong thing to say as soon as the words left his mouth. The former angel’s head snapped up and his shoulders stiffened, as if he’d been slapped. He took a step forward and even in the shadows thrown by the bedside lamp, Dean could see the muscles in his jaw clenching and unclenching.

“I’m not keeping score,” Cas finally said, his eyes disbelieving, his voice a harsh whisper, “I don’t do any of this out of a sense of obligation. I’m here because I want to be here, because I want to watch over you, but you won’t believe me. Why is it that you always think I’m on the verge of leaving, when it’s you who does all the running away?”

The words took Dean’s breath away and he stood there stupidly, his mouth opening and closing without any sound coming out. Where had this outburst come from? What could he have possibly said or done in Minnesota that would provoke the ever patient Castiel into such a declaration? Before any of those thoughts coalesced into coherent questions, the former angel was out of the bedroom, down the hall and behind a locked door, leaving Dean alone and his head buzzing more painfully than it had the day before.

Dinner was a tense affair, with Sam and Sera glancing at each other self consciously while Cas remained locked in his room and Dean shoveled food into his mouth morosely. The next few days were strained, with Sam throwing concerned and questioning looks in Dean’s direction with infuriating regularity. Cas avoided being alone with him and got into the habit of taking increasingly prolonged walks with Seraphina in the woods above the bunker. This new state of affairs was so different from what Dean had become used to, that he lost all focus; even the search for Abaddon wasn’t able to pull him away from all consuming thoughts about Cas. More than anything, he wished he could talk to the former angel about what happened in Minnesota and what was now happening between Sam and Seraphina. Instead, he got into the habit of regular email correspondence with Charlie, who was more than happy to read his rambling letters and provide sage advice. A distraction finally presented itself a few nights after their return from Wilmar.

The four of them were eyeballs deep in research, still trying to figure out a way to subdue or kill a Knight of Hell, when Seraphina sat up sharply in her seat, eyes trained on Sam. Her sudden movement drew Cas and Dean’s attention, making them glance between the two curiously. The younger Winchester was asleep in one of the large leather chairs in an alcove of the library, some old
tome balanced precariously on one knee, with a laptop on the other. Seraphina watched him intently and after a few seconds, at the moment when Dean was about to ask a question, she flinched as if in pain. Across the room, Sam’s forehead wrinkled and he let out a low groan. Despite the current enmity between them, Dean and Castiel exchanged a confused look. Before either of them could say or do anything, the girl rose from her seat and stalked toward Sam, her eyes trained on his face; her own contorting in pain every few seconds. The younger hunter’s eyebrows drew together in the same moments, as if the two of them were reacting to the same stimulus. Just as Sera reached him and raised two fingers to his forehead, another wave of pain seemed to hit her and she took in a sharp breath. Her fingers hovered over Sam and she hesitated, as if afraid that touching him might burn her, but then the moment was over and she brushed his forehead gently, her face relaxing and her shoulders dropping in relief. The sleeping young man didn’t stir.

When she turned back to the table, the look on Castiel’s face froze her in place; he was glaring daggers. Dean had never seen the former angel look at the girl with anything other than affection or concern, but now his face was radiating nothing but anger. Seraphina put up both hands in a placating gesture and walked toward Cas slowly, looking over her shoulder once, to make sure Sam was still sleeping.

“He gave me his consent,” she whispered, worried eyes trained on the other angel, “I swear. I would never… not without his permission.”

Cas sat back in his chair, surprise and then resignation replacing the anger and let out a breath. Dean looked between the two former angels, not even sure what question to ask, since he had no idea what just happened.

“When?” The question was nothing but an exhaled breath.

“While you were in Minnesota,” Sera answered, her hands falling to her sides and gaze dropping to the floor, “I’m sorry.”

Castiel let out a mirthless half-laugh, rubbing at his face with both hands, “Why? If he gave you his consent?”

Seraphina met his eyes, looking guilty despite the other angels response, and glanced furtively between him and Dean. Cas sighed and got up from the library table, looking worn and tired and sad.

“I’m going to bed,” he announced and was gone, leaving the girl standing in the middle of the library with drooping shoulders and Dean gaping at her.

“What the hell just happened?” the hunter asked, as Sera dropped into the chair Cas vacated.

She didn’t answer at first, drawing her feet up onto the seat and burying her face in her knees. When she finally looked at Dean, it was the first time she actually reminded him of a human girl; her lip between her teeth, eyes filled with tears. She took a shuddering breath.

“He’s upset.”

“Yeah, I got that. Why?”

Dean searched Seraphina’s face intently and found hesitation and deep misgiving there.

“Just tell me,” he growled.

The girl stared hard at him for several heartbeats, trying to decide what to say. She seemed to come
to a conclusion and squared her shoulders. The hunter wasn’t sure this boded well for him.

“He’s upset because Sam gave me something he’s been hoping to get from you for a long time.”

This was not the response Dean was expecting. He blinked at Sera, going hot and then cold, his mind racing from scenario to scenario.

“What?” he finally choked out, his fists clenched in front of him on the table, “What did Sam give you?”

“He gave me permission,” she said slowly, her eyes sliding back toward the sleeping hunter, her fingers worrying a thread loose on one of her socks, “To Watch Over him.”

Dean could tell that when Sera said “watch over”, the phrase was in capital letters. Again, this was not what he expected and his confused silence prompted an explanation. According to the girl, angels were not only tasked with the preservation of Heavenly order, they were also meant to watch over and guide humanity. Although they would do this as a group by default, angels also had the ability to choose an individual and extend special protection to them. Considering their opinion of humanity, it was almost unheard of for an angel to do such a thing on their own; they were usually commanded to protect certain humans in order to aid heavens machinations. The prophets and their violent connection to the archangels sprang into Dean’s mind. Seraphina nodded in response.

“Kind of like that,” she said.

But in order for an angel to watch over a regular person, they have to get that person’s consent. Once an angel gets consent, they become intimately linked. They can enter their dreams, transfer knowledge and lend them strength. Although the loss of Grace prevents many of these connections, some are only dialed down to a whisper.

“An angel doesn’t stop being an angel just because their Grace is gone,” Sera said, “Some things are innate and the Grace just gives them power.”

For an angel to volunteer for this connection would be extraordinary and the human involved must either be very important to Heaven or be greatly loved. For a human to turn away from such an offer, especially since it doesn’t require possession, would be almost inconceivable.

“Oh, it’s conceivable,” Dean ground out bitterly.

He buried his face in his hands, as memory after memory washed over him. He couldn’t remember when it started, Cas saying that he’d watch over the hunter, but the first time he could remember was seared into his mind with painful clarity and he suddenly hated himself. They were in Oklahoma City, chasing a string of deaths right out of a Looney Tunes episode and the angel was fresh from Purgatory. Dean was calling it a night, badgering Cas to get a room of his own when the angel’s face cleared for a moment and those words tumbled out, simple and innocent and sincere.

*I’ll watch over you.*

Dean’s reaction had been glib and derisive. How many times had the other man said those words to him after that? How often did he continue offering himself up, even as the hunter shot him down over and over again? Hadn’t the former angel said it only a few days ago, after Sera’s spell healed him? And now this girl sat in front of him, having gained what Cas so desired; with Sam’s heart and mind in her hands after barely three weeks. Alarm bells went off in Dean’s head.

“Wait,” he said, looking up sharply, momentarily suspending his internal tirade of self-reproachment, “You said an angel can influence someone’s mind.”
Seraphina returned his sharp look.

“Not like that,” she protested, rising from her seat and crossing her arms angrily, “Never!”

“But it’s possible.”

“No,” Sera barked, “It’s not like being possessed. Even when a human gives their consent to be Watched Over, an angel can’t force them to do something they don’t want to do!”

“But you said--”

“Influence!” the girl yelled, fisting her hands at her sides and interrupting Dean before he could finish his thought, “If an angel is sadistic enough to want the kind of control you’re implying, they would just coerce a human into being a vessel and then they could do whatever they wanted! I’m not even an angel anymore, I have no Grace left!”

“So what the hell did you do to Sammy just now? Huh?” Dean spat back.

His mind was reeling back to the morning after Seraphina’s arrival, to all of the suspicions he’d had, to all of the mistrust that was now roiling back up to the surface. The hunter had half a mind to kill the girl right there in the library, until Castiel’s reaction brought him back from that edge. The former angel was not angry because of what she had done, but because he thought she didn’t have permission. And at that moment, his mind skipped back to the other things Sera said…

He’s upset because Sam gave me something he’s been hoping to get from you for a long time.

All of that anger and suspicion and fear for his brother ebbed away. If this was something Cas wanted for himself, something he wanted from Dean, it couldn’t be cruel. It might be dangerous or foolhardy or odd, but it would never be cruel. As that realization hit him, the unusually long silence from Seraphina made him look up. She, however, was very still and studying her feet with an intense focus. Sam cleared his throat, making Dean jump. The younger hunter made his way over to them, pulled out a chair at the library table and placed a gentle hand on Sera’s shoulder, encouraging her to sit back down. He settled opposite his brother, sighing.

“You should answer Dean’s question,” he said quietly, pinching the bridge of his nose.

The girl shot him a surprised look.

“It’s OK,” he said, sighing again, “He’s enough of a worrier that he would have figured it out eventually.”

Seraphina opened her mouth as if to protest, but then thought better of it, turning a serious face on the older hunter, her mouth set in a grim line.

“Sam has nightmares about Hell. I make them… bearable.”

Dean’s eyebrows shot up and he looked at his brother for confirmation.

“Why don’t you start from the beginning,” Sam said.

This entire night was not shaping up into anything Dean was expecting, so he sat back and allowed Sera some moments to gather her thoughts, his eyes oscillating between his silent but relaxed brother and the brooding girl.

“It was after you and Castiel left, after I healed Sam, after I… after I...,” she faltered for a moment
and Dean knew she was thinking about the panic attack, the one his brother briefly mentioned, which drove her under the map table.

“Sam was so kind. He explained what was happening. He…,” she gave an unexpected watery laugh, “He got under the table with me.”

One side of Sam’s mouth quirked up and despite the gravity of the conversation, Dean grinned, easily imagining the scene, especially the part where his hulking giant of a brother attempted to calm a panicking angel by folding himself under that table to be with her. The next day, Seraphina explained, they fell asleep watching some documentary, when she startled awake from a nightmare. This was unlike any other nightmare she’d ever had because in it, she was locked in the Cage with Lucifer himself. For several hair-raising moments, she really thought she was there, until Sam’s panicked breathing brought her back to reality. That’s when it dawned on her; she was sharing the hunter’s nightmare. His distress became hers and purely on instinct, without thinking it through, she reached out to wipe the fear from his mind. To her shock, it worked.

“The connection must have been forged when I smuggled Sam’s soul out of Heaven. An event like that creates a… a link… or a…”, the girl struggled to find the appropriate word.

“A profound bond?” Dean supplied, looking hard at his brother.

“Yes!” The girl responded enthusiastically.

Sam narrowed his eyes at the older hunter questioningly. Dean noticed the look and also noticed that the other man reached for his own forearm unconsciously. Seraphina continued with her story. It took her several minutes to understand what had occurred and several more to pluck up the courage to wake Sam and explain it.

“I did it without his consent and that’s not acceptable,” the girl said, her eyes unfocused for a moment, worry creasing her brow.

Once she explained it all to Sam, however, he didn’t mind and gave his consent. In fact, he was thrilled by the idea. For years, he’d longed for Heaven to claim him or for Heaven to at least show an atom of remorse for what had been done to them, but even then, Sam didn’t feel the full weight of that apology; it always felt like it was directed at Dean. Logically, he knew that being the Lucifer Sword didn’t make him evil, didn’t justify the terrible things which had been done to him, but deep in his gut, it still ate away at him. It didn’t alleviate the younger Winchester’s guilt any, knowing that as the end approached, he chose to trust a demon over his own brother. It didn’t help matters when he’d been resurrected soulless and wreaked havoc in the world. Sam thought that completing the trials to close the gates of Hell would be his last hurrah, his last chance to prove to Heaven and to himself, that he wasn’t just a walking apocalypse waiting to happen. He never expected an angel to claim him the way Castiel claimed Dean. He wasn’t even that surprised when, after the slamming of the gates and his death, the angels still saw him as a useful tool and not a worthy soul allowed to rest. As he hid in other people’s heavens, Sam Winchester understood that there would never be any peace between him and the angels, there could only be an uneasy truce until he ceased being useful.

And then… Sam sighed at the thought. And then, Seraphina burst into Ash’s heaven. She rescued him from the angels. She rebuilt him as they fell. She left a mark on him, small and glowing. Faced with Dean’s formidable glower and burning mistrust, she calmly agreed to forfeit her life. She answered every question Sam asked, never dismissing him or waving him off. She saw the terrible things that haunted him and stepped closer. She healed him. She claimed him. She forced his
nightmares to scamper back into the dark. She made him feel that maybe, just maybe, he deserved to live out his life without any more manipulation or interference from Heaven and Hell.

“So you, what?” Dean asked slowly, as he processed everything he’d been told, “You make the nightmares go away? You erase the memories?”

“No,” Seraphina responded, shaking her head, “I don’t manipulate the memory. I’m not leaving empty chunks in Sam’s head. I dull the emotions associated with them, so they stop being nightmares.”

“Satisfied?” Sam asked as Dean mulled it all over.

The older hunter looked between the two, considering. No one was feeding Sam demon’s blood or trying to convince him to abandon their little family. Sera gained nothing by seeing those terrible memories; in fact, they seemed to cause her physical pain. He couldn’t think of a nefarious reason for allowing Sam to get a real, full night's sleep. A well rested Sam Winchester was a far greater danger to angels and demons than an exhausted and defeated one. And then, there was always the fact that what was happening between his brother and this fierce former angel was something Cas wanted for himself. Sam appeared unfazed from exposing those dark, terrifying parts of himself and Sera had not run shrieking from him. Something in Dean yearned for that kind of intimacy; to have someone besides himself to lean on. His brother accepted Sera’s offer without hesitation. Couldn’t Dean do the same? Hadn’t Castiel proven himself equal to the task, over and over again? Was he really trying to spare Cas the trauma of being privy to the grisly things lurking inside his head or was he just too afraid to shine a light on them?

“Yeah, I’m satisfied,” the older hunter said, his voice tired.
Prayers for the Peripatetic

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The revelations supplied by Sam and Sera kept him awake and his mind couldn’t let go of all that new information he’d been given. Dean couldn’t sleep through the night without waking up in a cold sweat and got back into the habit of wandering through the dim halls of their subterranean home at odd hours of the night. Cas didn't actively avoid him anymore, but there was no easiness between them. So, Dean stalked through the bunker during the late (or early) hours, trying to figure out what to do. Sometimes, Castiel would forget to close his bedroom door and the hunter would watch him sleep from the shadowy safety of the hallway, wondering desperately what he could do to repair what was broken between them. After the Minnesota trip and their little tête-à-tête in the library, Seraphina quit sleeping in the other angels room and Dean assumed she had finally chosen a bedroom, until he wandered past Sammy’s one night and found the door wide open.

The light in the room was coming from a single bedside lamp and there was a low murmur that at first, he couldn’t place. Sam was sprawled across his bed face down, with Sera sitting in a chair by his side, her feet propped on the edge of the mattress. The first thing Dean really registered was Sam's hand, wrapped firmly around one of the girls feet. The next, was that she was reading to him from a tattered copy of Alice in Wonderland. The murmuring he’d heard before resolved itself into words.

“...she had never forgotten that, if you drink much from a bottle marked “poison,” it is almost certain to disagree with you, sooner or later...,” she read softly.

His eyes were drawn back his brothers grip on her foot. After several heartbeats, he realized that the murmuring had stopped and with a start, Dean met Seraphina’s inquiring gaze. There was nothing accusatory in her look, but the hunter felt himself color anyway. Without a word, he walked away, leaving the girl to interpret their interaction as she saw fit. Afterwards, he started noticing how often Sam and Sera touched; how tightly they pressed against each other as the four of them watched a movie, how he rested his hands on her shoulders, how she leaned against him any time they were standing side by side for more than a moment. As these scenes played out before him, Dean wondered if this was what Sam had seen between him and Cas; if they had at one point given off such nonchalant and glaring markers of trust and intimacy.

Sam and Sera did their best to act normally when Dean and Cas were in a room together, with the girl succeeding where the younger Winchester seemed to keep failing. There were several tense moments and near misses, usually beginning with Sam looking between the two other men imploringly, doing his best to seem nonchalant, building up to a frustrated sigh, the beginning of a sentence that sounded something like “Look, guys...” and culminating in a daring intervention from Seraphina. Sometimes all she had to do was kick him under the table and his mouth would clamp shut, but other times, she would haul him bodily out of the room. The two would return later, faces flushed, with snacks or cups of tea and coffee that would be silently placed in front of Cas and Dean. The older hunter never could figure out what the two were doing in those absences but he appreciated it anyway.

A few days later, Dean managed to catch Sam alone in one of the larger store rooms attached to the archives. He was sitting cross legged on the floor, reorganizing old Men of Letters records by some more efficient rubric that only he seemed to understand. The older hunter watched his brother from the doorway, still awed by the fact that he was alive, here in the bunker and muttering grumpily
about shoddy record keeping, as if he hadn’t died to protect the world only a few months ago…

“You gonna creep on me all day or make yourself useful?” Came Sam’s voice, jolting Dean out of
his reverie.

He thought he’d been stealthy, but apparently not.

“Sure, whatchya need?”

Sam glared at what looked like an old spreadsheet in one hand, a highlighter clutched in the other.
Finally, he selected what seemed like a random jumble of letters and numbers, marked it, and handed
the sheet up to Dean.

“Find me a box with that written on it.”

“Okie dokie,” Dean replied and started scanning the nearest boxes diligently.

After a few moments, he realized that the room was very quiet; his brother was no longer digging
through the box in front of him or shuffling papers around. Dean turned to find Sam watching him
intently, a question written all over his face, his lips pressed into a worried line. The older hunter
raised his eyebrows, his own version of a silent question.

“You didn’t even ask what’s in the box,” Sam said, his eyes searching the other’s face, “You usually
hate doing stuff like this.”

Dean only shrugged in response.

“And Sera says you haven’t been sleeping.”

Dean clamped his teeth together, turning away from his brother, bracing himself mentally for the
anger that was about to flare up in his chest. But it never did; worrying over the chasm between him
and Cas had exhausted all his reserves. Charlie had badgered him via email to talk to his brother and
he turned back to the younger Winchester, waiting for the question he knew Sam wanted to ask.

“You ok?” his brother asked tentatively and Dean could practically feel Sam bracing for an angry
retort.

The older hunter frowned down at the paper in his hand, not seeing it.

“No,” came the glum answer.

When he chanced a glance at Sam, the other man looked dumbstruck; Dean almost never admitted
that he wasn’t handling anything well and when he did, it was usually accompanied by anger and
dismissal of the topic. Yet here he was, standing there awkwardly, trying to figure a way to tell Sam
everything without the benefit of a computer screen as a protective filter. But when his brother
cleared his throat, Dean knew he couldn’t spill his guts to Sam, not the way the younger Winchester
was hoping for. Before the other spoke, he interjected.

“So why’s Sera up so late all the time? Trouble in paradise?” He asked, directing the conversation
away from himself. Charlie would be pissed when he inevitably confessed his failing.

It turned out that Dean wasn’t the only one wandering the bunker late at night. He ran into Seraphina
twice in the last week, at odd hours. The first time, he’d nearly taken her head off in surprise; she
was sitting at the kitchen table in complete darkness, staring into nothing, when he came in to get a
snack. Dean didn’t know she was there until he was buried shoulders deep in the fridge, muttering about where the string cheese had gotten to and she answered out of the darkness. The next time, he found her in the sparring room, going at the punching bag with such violence, that he thought the thing might not survive the night. The next morning she could barely hold her cup of coffee and Sam watched, distraught and obviously guilt-ridden about something. At first, Dean was convinced the two must have argued, until Sera carded a bruised hand through Sam’s hair and asked if he still wanted to go to the local county historical museum. Now, with the question hanging between them, his little brother got that same distraught look on his face and Dean wondered what kind of can of worms he opened. Sam chewed on the inside of his lip and looked away, studying his lap.

“My nightmares,” he said a little hoarsely, “They... upset her.”

“No shit,” retorted Dean before he could think it through.

Sam flinched at the words, his eyes trained on his own hands, picking at a piece of thread coming loose on the seam of his jeans. Kicking himself mentally, he walked back over to where his brother was sitting and lowered himself down on the floor with only minimal creaking in his knees, putting the spreadsheet aside. He ducked his head, trying to catch Sam’s eye. Eventually, there was a silent apology and acceptance.

“Regrets?” Dean asked.

“I’ve got lots,” Sam muttered, “Sera doesn’t seem to have any.”

The younger Winchester explained that the more memories the former angel made bearable for him, the more seemed to pour to the front of his awareness. Sometimes, Sera only felt Sam’s emotions in response to the nightmares, but more often than not, she actually saw what he’d lived through.

“I’m putting her through hell Dean. Literally,” Sam said, his voice pained.

“You tried to back out of the whole being Watched Over thing, didn’t you?” Dean asked, understanding finally dawning on him.

All of the guilt he’d read in his little brothers interactions with Sera the last few days began to make sense. It was bad enough that these terrible memories haunted Sam; it was even worse that he was subjecting someone else to them too. The situation he’d gotten himself into with the former angel broke all of their hell-related “don’t ask, don’t tell” policies. It also explained the girl’s nightly wandering; the things she saw being done to Sam made her feel angry or helpless or both and she worked through it, seemingly, the same way Dean would, minus the copious amounts of alcohol.

“Yeah,” Sam answered.

“Didn’t work, did it?” Dean guessed.

“Nope,” Sam breathed, a slightly hysterical note to the word.

They were bound together, even if he rescinded his consent, by the fall from Heaven. It took her just one night to prove the point, when the younger Winchester thought he’d be clever and simply lock her out of his room. He barely slept, the nightmares crowding everything else out, and finally relented in the early hours of the morning. He found her under the map table, face tear streaked and staring blankly into nothingness.

*I still see them, Sam.* She said, her eyes finally meeting his as he peered under the table. *I feel them.*

If he allowed her to watch over him, to alleviate the emotions associated with the memories, they
would both benefit. If he refused, they both suffered. There was no choice to be made. Sam was afraid the nightmares would never stop; he spent the equivalent of almost two hundred years in the cage. Seraphina waved away his worry with a small hand, convinced that most of the memories would never even surface; the human mind was remarkably adept at self preservation.

“She called it the backlog,” Sam said with a wry smile.

Dean was glad he stopped to talk with his brother; it gave him a fuller picture of Seraphina’s involvement in his life and what Sam told him managed to erase a large portion of the mistrust he still carried. This young woman was more like her creator than maybe even she knew. That thought made Dean smile.

“Our angels,” he said, before he could catch himself, “They take good care of us.”

Sam’s face softened and he ducked his head, trying to hide the smile on his face. Dean cleared his throat, heat crawling up the back of his neck, glaring at the ceiling. It was the first time the older hunter came so close to admitting what he felt for Castiel out loud. It was the first time in a long time that he’d confided in his brother in any way. Sam knew he might not get another chance, so he adopted Dean’s strategy and simply barreled ahead when he saw an opening.

“He loves you,” Sam said.

There was no pleading in his voice and no doubt. It was a simple truth. Dean closed his eyes, took a deep breath and got up, pausing in the doorway of the store room.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” he sighed.

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His talk with Sam made him restless and a few days later, he found himself walking the halls of the bunker again, with an increasingly warm bottle of beer. It was late and he didn’t actually want the alcohol, just wanted something solid in his hands and had worried the label of the thing right off, leaving a small trail of tiny curled paper bits in his wake. Sam would be annoyed at the litter and the waste of beer, but there was no way in hell he was going to drink any of those fruity teas which had begun to encroach dangerously on the coffee territory in the cupboards. The sheer intensity of encouraging puppy eyes he endured from his brother when he’d taken Seraphina’s example and brewed a cup for Cas had been slightly nauseating. But the look on the former angels face had been worth it when Dean placed the steaming mug in front of him wordlessly and went back to his online research with his own fresh cup of coffee. Sera’s face had not been any less priceless for the sudden glow of affection she directed at Dean. The memory made him smile in the gloom of the abandoned hallway. Then he remembered how he’d waited for a tentative knock on his bedroom door that night and how it never came. The threads of thought and emotion were starting to get tangled, producing a queasy feeling in his gut and he pushed the knot away.

He came to a standstill while considering the memory and would not have heard it above his footfalls otherwise; whispering. All of his senses came online sharply and he allowed his hearing to expand into the corners of the bunker, like a living thing unraveling from his center. He stood very still, willing his body to relax and his heartbeat to slow, so he could focus completely on hearing. Dean imagined this is what other predators did when they sensed prey in their vicinity. Although he never really thought for a moment that a baddy of some sort had somehow insinuated itself through the
angel-approved and demon-tested warding the bunker boasted. There were only three other people in 
here with him and Dean had a pretty good idea of who he would find. The real question was what 
was Seraphina doing in this particular, mostly abandoned, part of the bunker? The hallway was lined 
with empty storage rooms. He supposed he could be asking himself the same question, but since self-
reflection was not a strong suit of this particular Winchester brother, he pushed that thought away 
too.

Dean determined which part of the hallway the barely audible noise was coming from and started to 
slowly and carefully make his way toward the hushed voice. At the last moment, he readjusted the 
bottle in his hand so he could use it as a weapon, just in case. He began his restlessness-induced 
patrolling of the hallways in nothing but a t-shirt, sweats and thick woolen socks; completely 
umarmed. The bunker threw enough surprises their way that entering an unknown situation could 
prove deadly, even within these protected walls. But when Dean finally peered into what must have 
at one point been an unused closet, his shoulders fell and he instantly felt like a complete asshole. 
Seraphina was on her knees, with her back to the door, praying. There was no light fixture in the 
narrow cubby; the only illumination was coming from a single candle burning on the floor to her left. 
The girls kneeling shadow flickered slightly and the interior walls were bathed in a weak but warm 
orange glow. The hunter hoped desperately that she hadn’t heard him and made up his mind to 
silently back away when he realized that the whispering had stopped and her posture had changed. 
Sera’s head turned to the left and although her eyes were fixed on the flame beside her, he knew she 
was watching him in her peripheral vision.

“Dean?” She asked softly.

“Uh… I’m…,” he stuttered in his usual eloquent fashion, going from confident, stalking hunter to 
fumbling dork in 0.6 seconds flat.

Dean would have bolted right then and there, had Seraphina not arisen smoothly from her knees, 
turned and pinned him with a completely unoffended and unembarrassed look. When he continued 
to sputter wordlessly, battling with his own embarrassment of intruding on her in such a private 
moment, she tilted her head and narrowed her eyes in that distinctly Cas-like way she had, trying to 
parse out his reaction. Despite her small size and (possibly because of) her frankly uncanny 
resemblance to the former angel he had deep but largely unexplored feelings for, he constantly felt 
off-balance around Seraphina. Maybe that’s why a glow of affection on her face had affected him so; 
he was imagining it was Cas looking at him. But he wasn’t gonna go down that rabbit hole right 
now.

“Couldn’t sleep,” he finally managed, with a single shouldered shrug, “Heard whispering.”

Sera’s face cleared and she straightened her head.

“I was praying,” she informed him matter-of-factly.

“Yeah, I figured,” he began, about to ease into an apology for his interruption and get the hell out of 
there, when his eyes focused on something over her shoulder. The cubby was completely bare, 
except for the candle still burning on the floor and what he now saw was a single image tacked on 
the far wall. The edges of the picture were ragged, as if ripped out of a magazine. Dean took a step 
forward, his own eyes narrowing, trying to make it out. To his surprise, he recognized it and took in 
a barely audible but sharp breath when the implication of that image hit him. He saw it once, in one 
of Bobby’s books and was discomfited by it then too, mostly because he knew that it was more 
accurate than other paintings like it. In fact, he found it in an art book, tucked among all the lore and 
dusty Sumerian texts of the extensive Singer collection. Dean had even gone so far as to tease Bobby 
for having a compendium of “Angels in Art Through the Ages”, specifically for the ridiculous
alliteration and the way many of the angels were depicted; kneeling before humans in worshipful love. The hunters knew better at that point; the God Squad could hurl just as much fire and brimstone as their below-deck brethren and loved humanity with about as much enthusiasm.

This particular image was one of The Annunciation, an angel appearing before Mary to tell her of the impending change her life was about to take. But unlike in the other paintings Dean had seen, Mary was not calmly and graciously accepting the angels presence. She was vulnerable, sitting up in bed, clearly having been awoken from sleep by the celestial visitors presence and seemingly flinching away from him, either in confusion or fear. The angel is extending a white lily, which she makes no move to take and holding up his other hand in a calming gesture one would use with a wary animal or scared child. The angel in question isn’t just anyone either; it’s Gabriel. As understanding filtered it’s way into Dean’s awareness, he tore his eyes away from the tattered reproduction and looked down at Seraphina.

“Does Cas know you’re down here?” The question came out far more harshly than intended and he could see Seraphina's shoulders stiffen and her eyes flicker toward the image on the wall.

In fact, he’d intended to ask if Sam knew where she was, but considering the emotional strain she was operating under, he wondered if it would be best to bite the bullet and talk to Cas about this. Dean considered the possibility that his brother had already explained the situation to the other angel and made a mental note to ask. He told himself that his only interest was in protecting the other men; it would not do well to have a former angel crack up in a bunker full of weapons, supernatural or otherwise. He had yet to admit to himself that maybe that protectiveness was aimed directly at Seraphina.

“I… he…” It was her turn to stammer. She took a breath, “I don’t want to hurt him.”

Seraphina started worrying her lower lip with her teeth, her eyes fixed on the painting of Gabriel and the girl. Dean understood what she saw, an image of herself and her savior.

“Why? Because it’s not him you’re praying to? He wouldn’t care and he sure as hell would not want a picture of himself up there,” Dean said, gesturing toward the far wall of the little closet with his beer, “He’d understand. He’s stronger than all of us. Told me once that having faith was good. Granted, I think he meant having faith in his father… But Cas is the only…”

... the only one I’ve had faith in...

The hunter stopped short. Had he really been about to confess that? His eyes raked over Seraphina and he saw that she was watching the flame again, a thoughtful crease between her brows. He’d never had the urge to talk so much as he did these past few days. Charlie was doing some sort of freelance cyber security work in San Francisco and there was nothing but radio silence from her for the past week, so she was no help. Cas tied him in knots. And unless the topic they were covering was the family business, Dean couldn’t imagine spilling his guts to Sam. The closest he’d come was their little talk in the store room. Sera, however, was an anomaly. It felt like she was the three of them remixed, two tortured, hurting hunters and a guilt-ridden, damaged former angel, thrown together into a tiny female form. Much like the men, she had been flung against her will into a blazing world constantly trying to tear itself apart and had lost everything. But her edges were far less sharp than theirs, despite what she had been through. She was still willing to wantonly give away her love and affection. He saw it with the way she bolstered up Cas; how he always came back smiling and ready to take on the world after one of their walks. He saw it with the way she watched over Sam, sharing his pain but never turning away from it. Even, inexplicably, with the way she looked at Dean sometimes, like he was good and brave and worthy, despite his own internal convictions to the contrary.
“What do you pray for?” He asked gently, thinking back ruefully on the many impetuous demands he had hurled toward God, Castiel and heaven in general, in the last several years.

“For?” Her eyes came up sharply to meet his and Dean felt like a kid asking a dumb question and went back to worrying what was left of the label off the completely warm bottle in his hand.

“I don’t pray for anything,” she replied, mirroring his earlier gentle tone, “We both know my grandfather is not a comment card reader.”

Dean snorted lightly at the truth of the assessment, but also at the casual way in which she referred to God Almighty, smiter of cities, as her grandfather. As if he were some cranky old cod with dentures and a cane that he used to nail people in the shins with, instead of the deity that put the apocalypse in motion and allowed civil war to rage in heaven unchecked.

“There’s nothing I want from them,” she continued quietly, “I merely thank them. God, for sending Gabriel and Gabriel for keeping his promise.”

“Does God ever answer?” Dean asked, already knowing what Seraphina would say.

“No,” she said quietly, “But sometimes Gabriel does.”

Dean's eyebrows shot up into his hairline. The archangels attention was unexpected, considering the history between him and the Winchesters. But then again, he communicated exclusively with Seraphina, whom he considered an ally at the very least. Despite his inability to sort out his own emotions, Dean was pretty good at reading other people and the unmasked affection with which Gabriel had parted ways with Seraphina was hard to miss. He glanced back at the image tacked up on the closet wall. Yes, he could see it now; it was perfect actually. Sera in Mary’s place, imprisoned and alone in the endless echoing Garret, flinching away from the sudden blazing presence of an archangel. Sera in the War Room, frightened and in pain, Gabriel holding up his hands just so, to calm her. Perhaps Dean wasn’t the only one who felt protective of the girl.

“I’m glad you have someone to talk to,” Dean said, silently chastising himself for sounding like an after-school special.

“I don’t have the weight of heaven on my shoulders,” she replied, cocking her head to the side and looking so much like Cas, it made him want to reach out and run his thumb across her cheek. Instead, he wrapped both hands firmly around the bottle he was still holding. The beer wasn’t just warm at this point, it was probably flat too, Dean thought sadly. Seraphina narrowed her eyes at him again and he wanted nothing more than to bolt from that piercing gaze.

“When someone carries such a great weight, it often helps to have a companion with whom to share that burden.”

“You sound like a fortune cookie,” Dean snorted, hating himself a little for the derisive edge in his voice.

Sera took one calculated step right into the hunter's personal space and glared up at him with something like fury and pity in her eyes. Dean swallowed loudly and wondered again how such a diminutive creature could cause the hairs on his neck to stand on end, even though he knew she had no Grace left.

“You are surrounded by people who would gladly give you what you need and yet you refuse them at every turn. Why?”

The sentence was whispered, but she might as well have shouted, she said it was such force. His
throat was suddenly dry and his mind was skipping over memories like a rock skipping across water, ghosting across the surface before emotional friction caught it and flung it to the next one. There was only one voice he heard, one face he saw…

_I was getting too close to the humans in my charge... I'll go with you... I did it, all of it, for you... I do everything that you ask... I always come when you call... I won't hurt Dean... I remember you, I remember everything... I need your help... I'm sorry..._

And then, as if this particular train of thought wasn’t painful enough, he saw another face and heard another voice.

_The one in the dirty trench coat who’s in love with you…_

“T don’t… I’m not…” Dean stammered, swallowing over and over is if he could just swallow up all those moments and lock them away, to keep them from glittering so painfully under the light Seraphina cast on them.

Finally, he sighed, “I’ve asked for too much.”

Seraphina huffed out a frustrated breath, but stepped away from him, crossing her arms over her chest and looking down at the dying candle flame.

“That is not for you to decide.”

The flame guttered and finally went out, leaving them in a deeper darkness. Dean was glad for it; there was a prickling at the edge of his vision that he resolutely attributed to his exhaustion. Seraphina brushed past him in the gloom, giving his elbow a gentle, reassuring squeeze.

“He’s stronger than all of us,” she whispered, using Dean's own words against him and then she was gone.

Chapter End Notes

_The painting Sera has tacked to the wall is The Annunciation by Dante Gabriel Rossetti_
There's a First Time for Everything

Chapter Summary

Cas and Dean finally work some shit out.

The winter marched on and November inevitably became December. Three weeks passed since the incident in Wilmar and Dean was no closer to figuring out how to bridge the echoing chasm between Castiel and himself. They were on speaking terms but none of the old comfortable camaraderie showed any signs of reasserting itself. Sam and Sera settled into an easy rhythm, which only served to throw the tension in the other half of their quartet into even starker relief. It didn’t help that Christmas was fast approaching. Months ago, when Castiel’s humanity was still new and raw, Dean gave the other man something to look forward to and promised he would make the holiday special; had promised that the former angel would get to do all of the ridiculous and human things everyone else did. Hell, he’d even promised he would teach Cas how to build a snowman. But now, none of that seemed possible and it was eating away at Dean, to the point of breakdown.

It was snowing outside and he was panicking. The walls of his anxiety were moving in, slowly but inevitably, and he was trying to hide it from Cas. He was far sharper than Dean gave him credit for, but not nearly quick enough. Despite their strained relationship of late, the former angel still kept an eye on the hunter and when he felt a turn in Dean’s demeanor, he swooped into action. The attack broke over him before they made it anywhere near the sparring room. They were in the corridor leading to the bedrooms and with an iron grip on the other man’s shoulders, the angel steered him to Dean’s bedroom, herding him from behind, forcing his stubborn feet to move. The hunter didn’t hear the lock, didn’t know where they were, until his face was buried in his own sheets, his flailing arms secured at the small of his back and the weight of the former angel crushing him into the mattress. Dean was gasping, tears streaming down his face. He didn’t remember when the waterworks had started and even through the haze of his panic, he hated himself for it. After weeks of no real physical contact between them, the weight of another body on his was comforting, the warmth was grounding him and slowly, as if hearing it from deep under water, the hunter became aware of a voice calling him back from the brink. It was Cas. It was always Cas. He focused on the voice.

“You’re safe. I’ve got you. Dean? Dean I need you to breathe. For me, Dean, take a breath for me.”

He could never refuse that voice, especially not when he said it like that, when he used those words; for me. If it were up to Dean, he’d have been an ugly red smudge on the side of a road somewhere years ago, just another nameless blood sacrifice to keep the world from tearing itself apart. But Cas… Brave, selfless Cas, kept pulling him away from that edge, kept breathing life into him.

Oh yeah, thought Dean blearily, I’m supposed to be breathing.

The hunter took a shaky breath and then another. The weight on top of him fully registered, the heat radiating off the former angel went right to his bones and just as suddenly as his whole body had gone rigid, it melted. He could hear Castiel breathe a sigh of relief and the grip on his wrists loosened. The angel started to rise and so did Dean’s panic. A whine escaped his throat; he was currently beyond words. The other man shushed him gently, releasing his wrists and unfolding his trapped arms so they were at his sides and then blanketing himself over Dean again. Of course, Cas wasn’t going anywhere, he was just keeping the hunter’s arms from going numb. These little
moments always shocked Dean; the care the former angel took, the way his comfort and his needs seemed to always be at the forefront of whatever Cas was doing. It made him squirm internally, there was always a voice whispering that this was not something the hunter deserved. But now there was a warm body over his, crushing him deliciously into the mattress, warm breath at the back of his neck and he allowed himself the time to savor it all. Several minutes passed and Dean’s heart rate slowed to normal, his breathing evened out, the burning in his throat was gone. He wished they could stay like this forever; no more demons, no more apocalypses, no more dead innocent bystanders. But these moments never last.

“I can’t keep doing this,” Cas said sadly into Dean’s ear, his voice watery and strained.

The hunter went rigid, his heart rate shooting back up, his mind going into overdrive.

This is it, he thought, cold dread spilling in his gut, This is how Cas leaves.

He was broken, after all. The Righteous Man who couldn’t hold out long enough not to spill blood in Hell. The Sword that would not accept its bearer. The ant that shook its tiny, ineffectual fist at God and Heaven, only to break the world over and over again. Of course Cas would get tired of this.

“You never tell me what’s going on in that head of yours,” Castiel continued, “I can’t keep guessing. I need…”

After weeks of strained silence and avoidance, Dean saw a glimmer of hope and ran head long at it.

“Anything,” he croaked, “I’ll give you anything.”

It was Castiel’s turn to go rigid. He lifted himself off of Dean and took a seat at the edge of the bed. The hunter turned over, staring up at the ceiling. He couldn’t bear to look at the former angel’s profile, too afraid of what he’d find there.

“You promised me that once,” the angel said quietly.

The air was punched from Dean’s lungs and he sat up, staring at his own hands helplessly. That’s what he must have promised when Cas saved him from the ghouls and dragged him, mostly frozen and very concussed, back to the motel room shower. He’d promised “anything” and then he’d forgotten, the memory wiped from his mind as if it never happened. No wonder Cas seemed so defeated, so hopeless after that night. Dean’s addled brain let slip what was hiding there, only to retreat into the safety of a fugue. His heart was hammering in his chest again. He knew what the former angel wanted. Was he brave enough? Could he do this? Was he ready for the consequences?

Fuck it, he thought, in a burst of hysterical hope and dread.

“I don’t have a concussion anymore,” the hunter ventured tentatively, watching the angels profile, “And I’d still promise that.”

Castiel turned to him and his gut twisted. There was hurt and anger on the angel’s face.

“You say that, but you have no idea what it means! You don’t know what I want. You barely know what you want.”

“I want you to watch over me.”

In that moment, Dean could have sworn the entire universe skipped a beat, stuttered and stood still. What had he done? There was no way of taking those words back. Ice raced through his veins and he felt like he was back in that freezing Minnesota creek. The angel’s face went blank for a moment, replaced by a slow disbelief and an even slower hope. Dean swallowed loudly, fidgeting with the
him of his t-shirt. If the hunter was paying attention, he might have braced himself for what happened next. But when he thought about this moment years down the line, he was secretly glad he was looking away, glad that Castiel took him by surprise. Dean had no time to flinch or to resist; he had no time to prove himself wrong. Without warning, the angel was on top of him, crushing him into the mattress again. Cas’ face was very close to Deans and the hunter could only see blown out pupils, the blue irises merely a suggestion.

“I’m not confident that you understand what you’re asking for,” the former angel rumbled aboveDean.

It was a voice the hunter hadn’t heard in months; the Angel-of-the-Lord, smiter-of-demons voice. For a moment, he was catapulted years back, to Bobby’s kitchen. Those same blue eyes were pinning him down, that same voice was demanding his respect, that same shiver was running down his back. Dean was suddenly aware how tight his jeans felt. There was nowhere to turn, nowhere to hide. He desperately tried to find his voice, but his throat went dry.

“I… I…,” he was trying to breathe without choking on the air as Castiel's eyes bored into him, “I do. I want… this. I want you.”

Saying it aloud, finally, untethered him. Those words had always been there, living just behind his tongue, crouching in his larynx, like a creature straining at its chains, choking him, day in, day out. Letting them go gave him nothing to hold on to, even the weight of the other man on top of him wasn’t enough to keep him from drifting to the edge of an inner abyss.

“But you don’t know what I want,” the angel rumbled again, his eyes narrowing.

“You want me to stay. Not to run,” Dean breathed, his mind was spiraling, his body felt like it was floating away, he just needed Cas to act, to do something; kiss him or punch him, it didn’t matter at this point, “Whatever you want. I’ll give it to you. Just take it. Take whatever you want. It’s yours. I’m yours.”

He probably would’ve kept going, continued to ramble until he promised things he’d never be able to take back or deny; not that he would want to. It was the most truth he’d ever spoken to anyone. As usual, Castiel saved him from himself and crushed his mouth with a kiss. Dean’s body stopped floating away and for the first time, in a long time, he felt real. The angel was all teeth and desperation; Dean met him halfway and a few moments later they came up panting, both painfully hard in their pants.

“I believe you,” the angel said.

Dean only had time to swallow nervously once before Cas was on him again. The former angel’s mouth was everywhere, on his neck and cheeks and eyelids and then he laughed softly in the hunter's ear. That little puff of air made him aware that he was bucking up against the other man with enthusiasm. Dean froze, embarrassed; he hadn’t dry humped another guy in over a decade. It made him feel like a fumbling, desperate teenager. Castiel only smiled against his neck and then kissed him hard, thrusting languidly against the hunter’s suddenly still thigh. Dean moaned in relief, fisting one hand in the angels t-shirt, pulling his hips closer with the other and resumed his own bucking. He’d waited so long for this; weeks, months, so much longer.

The hunter always assumed this would be impossible, that he didn’t deserve this. Now that it was actually happening, now that he knew Cas wanted this too, he couldn’t wait, wouldn’t wait. All at once, it was too much and not nearly enough. Dean cursed the multiple layers of fabric still separating them, but he didn’t want to stop. He snaked a hand between them, trying to get a hold of Cas through his jeans and was rewarded by a debauched moan. The former angel copied him,
sending pleasure spiking into his gut. There was another feeling, distinct from that pleasure, that he was slowly becoming aware of; something like fire was unfurling deep inside of him, in his chest, behind his eyelids, in the tips of his toes. Dean had never felt anything like it before and yet, somehow, the feeling was familiar. Was this what it felt like to be Watched Over? It was burning him from the inside out, opening him up, expanding him until he felt like even the Kansas sky wasn’t big enough to contain him. He wondered if this was how Castiel felt before he was constrained by a vessel, but then there was a hot tongue in his mouth and he couldn’t think of anything else.

The friction between them was delicious. It took only a few moments, a few thrusts and well-timed squeezes, a hard nip to his ear lobe, and Dean was coming in his jeans. The orgasm punched a surprised but satisfied mewl from him and all he could think to do was to sigh Castiel's name. Apparently, that was enough to push the angel over the edge and his own hips stuttered against Dean, his body shivering and then going limp on top of the hunter. They lay like that for several minutes, legs tangled, breathing in each other’s scent; reveling in the fact that they could do this now. The twin cooling messes in their boxers were the only inducement to movement.

“Cas,” Dean grunted, still pinned beneath the other man, “We should probably clean up.”

He just hummed against the skin of Dean's neck, his fingers tracing patterns on the other’s arm, working their way up from the forearm, to the inner dip of the elbow, finally wiggling under the hem of a t-shirt sleeve to rest on the bicep where a hand print used to burn. The hunter was tensing to get up, readying the both of them to vacate the bed, but Cas’ hot hand resting there made him relax back into the mattress. He’d promised “anything”, hadn’t he? He would lay here as long as the former angel wanted. And the hand on his bicep reminded him of the thought he’d had only a few days ago; he belonged to Castiel.

“I’m sorry,” Dean finally said, “For however I fucked up in Minnesota. I’m sorry.”

The other man’s face remained buried in Dean’s neck, but he went still. Dean was thankful that Cas didn’t try to sit up or make eye contact; he wasn’t sure he’d be able to get the words out. The realization gave him fodder for the next sentence.

“I’m a coward when it comes to…,” his voice faltered, “I suck at this.”

There were so many other things he wanted to say, but didn’t know how. He wanted to tell the other man how every time he pulled Dean back from the brink, he wanted to kiss him. Every time Cas talked of his siblings, Dean wanted to kick his way into Heaven and make everyone of those feathery bastards who hurt or used or dismissed the man in his arms pay for their transgressions. He wanted to tell Cas how every time he mentioned Naomi, it made him feel murderous and possessive, but mostly murderous. He wanted to say that every moment Cas spent being kind or protective toward Sammy was a moment that made Dean love him even more than he thought possible. How every moment he spent convincing Dean that he didn’t belong with the demons in Hell was a moment closer to Dean actually believing that for himself. But he didn’t know how to put any of that into words.

Instead, he said, “I’m a fucking train wreck and the shit that goes on in my head scares the crap out of me. But I’m gonna try, OK?”

Castiel lay still for a moment longer and then let out a quiet breath that tickled Dean’s neck. The hunter realized the other man was holding his breath throughout the stilted monologue.

“OK,” came the slightly muffled reply.

That one sound gave him courage and Dean decided to come clean completely.
“Sam and Sera, they explained it to me,” he said haltingly, “They explained what it means, when an
angel watches over you.”

Castiel propped himself up on an elbow and finally looked at the man trapped beneath him. Despite
his earlier anxiety, Dean found that he couldn’t look away from those blue eyes, now that they
locked onto him. He felt braver than before, but his throat still closed up with guilt.

“I’m sorry Cas. I didn’t know.”

Such a look of affection crossed the former angel’s face, that Dean thought he might turn into a
blubbering mess again. Castiel shushed him gently, leaning forward and planting chaste kisses on the
cheekbone closest to him.

“And I didn’t explain it to you,” Cas said, “So it looks like we’re both idiots.”

That got a watery laugh from Dean and the other man relaxed.

“Shower?” He asked.

Dean grunted in the affirmative, wincing at the cold stickiness plastering the boxers to his thighs as
they got up. Until Cas was turning on the water for two shower heads side by side in the open
expanse of the communal bathroom, the hunter hadn’t thought through what would happen. The
former angel was stripping out of his clothing, leaving them all in a heap on a bench nearby, as Dean
realized what they were about to do. He kicked himself mentally; was he really going to balk at this
after they’d just dry humped? Cas was already under one of the steaming shower heads, so he
undressed quickly and slipped under the free stream of water, closing his eyes and thankfully
allowing the heat to beat at his shoulders. Without warning, arms snaked around Dean’s middle,
pulling him back until he was flush with a very warm, very soapy and very naked Castiel. The
hunter let out a small strangled sound, but managed to tamp down the urge to pull away; he froze
instead. He tried to relax, making excuses for himself silently; it had been so long since he’d done
this with someone. Dean’s brain backtracked to that thought; in fact, he’d never done this with
someone. None of his few and far between relationships ever lasted long enough to achieve this type
of intimacy or trust.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” came the rumbling voice, right at his ear.

“I know.”

The exchange brought him out of his head and he managed to relax back against the other man.
They stood there silently for a few moments and Dean was reminded of what little he remembered of
the Minnesota shower. There were far more layers of clothing involved in that incident and the
hunter flushed, realizing that Cas had grown half hard, pressed against him.

“What did I do?” he blurted out, his mind worrying like a dog at a bone, trying to remember what
could possibly have sent Cas swinging from concern and physical affection to aloofness and anger.

The former angel dropped his head to Dean’s shoulder at the question. The hunter wasn’t sure he
would answer, until he felt the other man sigh. He almost didn’t hear the response over the hissing of
the showers.

“You kissed me.”

Dean went cold. This explained everything; the hurt and disbelief in Castiel’s eyes when he couldn’t
remember, the searching glances, the eventual awkwardness and avoidance, the anger when he tried
to tell the other man how he felt. Cas already knew how he felt; he’d been privy to it before and the
hunter, by not remembering, had essentially denied it.

“Holy shit Cas,” he said, craning his neck to look at the fallen angel, but only seeing a mess of damp hair, feeling the press of the man's forehead on his shoulder, “I’m sorry.”

The arms around him tightened and Cas lifted his head.

“It was my fault. You were so cold and so confused and I…,” Castiel swallowed thickly, “I told you I loved you. It calmed you down but then you started… telling me things... promising things. I let you say them and I let you kiss me.”

It was only after, when Dean didn’t remember, that the fallen angel realized what he’d done. The man he loved was injured, concussed and completely disoriented; he’d been in no state to understand what was being said to him, let alone make any promises about the future. At first, Cas was angry with Dean for giving him a taste of what he’d wanted for so long, only to have it taken away. Then, he was horrified at himself for putting the hunter in such a position at a time when he was incapable of making any kind of rational decisions. After that, it was a haze of confusion and fear that he would make things worse, so his solution had been guilty and slightly terrified avoidance. But that was finished now. Both men felt the years of tension between them slowly trickling away, their hearts unclenching.

After they were dry and dressed, a thought occurred to Dean.

“What about Sam and Sera?” he asked, a small cold sliver of panic in his gut.

Cas only tilted his head at the hunter.

“I mean, what are we gonna tell them?” he pressed.

The former angel huffed, an incredulous look on his face, “We won’t have to say a word.”

He was right of course. When they walked into the library, Sam and Sera were taking a break from the Egyptian spell books piled on the table and were instead huddled in front of a laptop, watching a nature documentary. The girl was cooing over some ugly many-legged creature on the screen when the younger hunter glanced up at Cas and Dean and froze. Without a word to the girl next to him, Sam closed the laptop with a thunk and fixed his brother with a quizzical look. Seraphina started to protest, but then followed Sam’s gaze. The older hunter could feel his face and ears flushing with heat and in an effort to avoid questions, took a seat at the table, grabbed a spell book at random and tried to bury himself in it.

Dean knew that at best, Sam would enthusiastically approve and at worst… Sam would enthusiastically approve. As Cas settled himself in a chair next to the hunter, Dean couldn’t help but wonder wildly how Seraphina would react and the irrational part of him imagined her grabbing the other angels elbow and spiriting him off to the other side of the galaxy, as if she still had her Grace. But when he stole a glance at the girl, she was throwing a small smile in Castiel's direction.

“So…,” Sam started, which only made Dean pop up from his chair as if electrocuted.

“Gon-make-sm-coffee,” tumbled from his lips and he made a break for the kitchens.

A voice stopped him in his tracks.

“I’d like some tea,” rumbled Cas without looking at him, his voice casual, pulling Dean’s abandoned book toward himself, as if there was nothing new or monumental about this moment.
The hunter didn’t think it was possible, but he felt himself flush an even deeper scarlet. He had no idea that a simple request for beverages could send him into the depths of embarrassment he was currently experiencing. It wasn’t as if he was divulging the details of what had just transpired between them, but the knowing looks Sam and Sera were wearing told him that he might as well be waving a flashing sign that read: Yep. Cas and I totally did it. We made out. Then we got each other off. It was great. He makes me feel all gooey on the inside.

“Sure,” he croaked out, completely unable to mimic the angels relaxed demeanor.

“Oolong.” Cas clarified, a serene smile on his face as he finally glanced up at Dean.

Son of a bitch, the hunter thought, He knows exactly what this is doing to me.

“I’ll help!” Seraphina said, popping up from her own chair and appearing at Dean’s elbow, “I know how Cas likes his Oolong.”

Before the hunter even knew it was happening, he was leading the girl into the kitchen, away from the soft conversation which started up in the library before they even got out of earshot. He tried not to look at the former angel as she rifled through the cupboards for honey and mugs, but there was something building up inside of him that he couldn’t keep in.

“I’m not going to hurt him,” Dean finally blurted out.

Sera stood with her back to him, the cupboard open, gazing thoughtfully at a mason jar of loose leaf tea. She was wearing one of Sam’s old flannels over her own shirt, the absurdly long sleeves rolled up to her elbows, the fabric folded over so many times that it looked like she was wearing pool floaties. The girl turned to him, her face serious.

“I know.”

Dean sensed a moment of hesitation in the girl, a twitch at the edge of her mouth, and he could see something bubbling up inside of her too. She pinned him with a fierce look.

“And I’m not going to hurt Sam,” she finally said.

“I know,” Dean echoed and found that he truly believed her.

Just like that, all the embarrassment and tension drained from Dean’s body. Somewhere inside of him, something clicked into place.

“So,” he said, “How does Cas like his Oolong?”
Ode to Joy

Chapter Summary

It's about time the boys have a happy holiday.

Once the dam broke, Dean couldn’t keep his hands, or his mouth, to himself. The hunter wasn’t a wordsmith and instead, took every opportunity the bunker provided to show Cas just how much he loved him. Sometimes, they would miscalculate and end up giving either Sam or Sera an eyeful. Despite his happiness for the two, Sam never took those encounters well, spending the rest of the day glaring at them from across the library and muttering under his breath about having some common decency. Dean tried to point out once that his brother had been rooting for this from the beginning and these were just the natural consequences, which earned him a pen hurled across the room, bouncing off the side of his head.

“It’s not the sex I care about,” Sam growled, “Books and body fluid do not mix.”

Sera was a much better sport about the whole thing. She walked in on them once in one of the library alcoves, after they thought she’d followed Sam on a run. Cas was breathlessly propped against a bookcase and Dean was so surprised by her appearance that he didn’t even try to scramble up from his knees. She pursed her lips in mild annoyance.

“Don’t get the books sticky. Sam will have an aneurysm,” she muttered, pivoting on a heel and making her exit.

There were no pointed looks or miffed grumblings from the young woman, but the couple tried to be more discreet after that. Not much changed in the bunker, except that Dean’s gut no longer clenched when Castiel’s hands found him; Sam and Sera’s eyes no longer lingered on those touches and it all became blessedly routine. The hunter never realized how desperately he’d wanted to be touched until that need was almost sated. The former angel would burrow close while they watched a movie, he would wrap his arms around Dean’s waist while he cooked, he would knead his shoulders while Dean pored over research. With every new moment of contact, something within the hunter loosened, released and expanded; he slept through the night, consumed more coffee than beer and saw someone worth saving in the mirror.

Despite all his nose wrinkling and muttering, Sam was delighted for his brother. He and Seraphina diligently cataloged all the changes after Cas finally broke through all of Dean’s guilt and fear and self loathing. They would compare notes, Sam giddy with the developments, noticing how much more alive and at peace his older brother became every day that Cas watched over him. Sera saw what it did to her father, to be openly loved and trusted by the one person who’s love and trust he needed most. There was a brief moment in time when the girl thought her companionship might be a good enough substitute, but it became clearer after every prolonged walk through the woods with him, that she could never replace the Righteous Man. Instead, she gave what she could and when the two men finally faced what was between them, she delighted in sharing Castiel's joy.

The winter holiday, which Dean had been dreading, was now becoming a far more cheerful affair than expected. A few days before Christmas, Charlie breezed in; flush from her cyber security gig in California and a successful hunt for a banshee. The redhead was eager to meet the newcomer and pump them all for the sordid details of what was happening between the hunters and former angels.
She bounded down the metal stairs into the bunker, taking two at a time, plastic grocery bags swinging wildly from her hands.

“I come bearing gifts, oh fearless Winchesters!” she exclaimed, dumping the bags on the map table with a thud and a clunk and rushing in for hugs before any of the men could brace themselves.

Seraphina hung back, throwing nervous glances at Sam. After two months with the hunters, she only ventured out into the world of other people a handful of times and not all of them went well. Monster hunting came naturally to her, as the brothers discovered, but basic human interaction that didn’t involve weapons or wounds was new to her. The men watched, bemused, as Charlie zeroed in on Sera, who was unsuccessfully trying to disappear into the shadows of a library alcove.

“All the developments?” Cas echoed, the turn of his mouth teasing.

Dean turned bright red and started stuttering something in response, when Charlie saved him.

“Where’s your Christmas tree?”

They ended up piling into the Impala and driving down Route 36 until they spotted a Christmas tree stand on the side of the road. There was a week-old inch of crunchy snow on the ground and heavy gray clouds blanketed the sky from horizon to horizon. As they pulled into the lot, parking next to a chain link fence sagging slightly under the weight of all the trees, fluffy fat snowflakes started to drift across the landscape. Sera and Castiel made their way eagerly into the faux forest, both sporting looks of laser focus. Dean hurried after them, enthusiastically explaining how to find the freshest tree.

“Start at the back of the lot,” he called, “And make sure the needles don’t fall off in your hands.”

The hunter threw a gleeful grin back at Charlie and Sam and then focused all of his attention on the former angels, telling them about the different types of trees and which needles were the least painful to step on in bare feet.

“I have no idea how he knows any of this,” Sam said quietly to Charlie, following in his brothers wake, “Motel rooms are not exactly tree-friendly.”

The redhead kept pace with him, both of them watching Dean and the former angels. When the older hunter unselfconsciously looped his arm through Castiel’s, they exchanged a grin. Charlie’s eyes followed Seraphina, who was intently listening to Dean and studying each tree with such concentration, that if she still had her Grace, they might have burst into flames. Charlie elbowed Sam.

“It’s good to have you back dude,” she said.

Sam nodded and relayed an abridged version of his escape from Heaven, including Seraphina’s part in it.

“Well that’s… epic,” she breathed, eyeing the other woman, “She’s got a serious Rita Vrataski vibe
going. Except you know, without the red hair or the aliens.”

Sam only stared at her in confusion and she rolled her eyes good naturedly. Charlie wondered out loud how the two angels were coping with being human and the hunter laughed.

“Two completely different ends of the spectrum.”

He explained how much more comfortable Seraphina seemed in her body and how much more familiar she was with the small details of inhabiting one, while Cas was much better at inhibiting the world. Sera always knew what she was hungry for, when she’d had enough during a sparring session and why the sound of steel on a whetstone made her stomach drop. Cas, on the other hand, smiled at children, understood how to interact with a traffic cop and knew where to find the pickled jalapenos at the supermarket. Sera still treated the world as if she were in a war zone, which is why the brothers refused to let her get behind the wheel of anything but the ridiculous lime green Prius Gabriel had left her. The first time Sam and the fallen angel ventured out of the bunker and into the wide world instead of the woods surrounding their home, the hunter found out just how out of touch with peacetime etiquette she was. At the end of the day, he stumbled back into the bunker, sweaty and red-faced after a trip to an historical archive outside of Lincoln, Nebraska and warned Dean to never let the girl drive the Impala. Sera only rolled her eyes and muttered something about Sam being a drama queen.

“You’re just lucky that cop believed your story,” he shot back.

“It wasn’t a story! Plus I had the VA card to prove it,” she exclaimed, exasperated.

“Driving one-twenty and aggressively passing every car in your way to avoid IEDs might be acceptable outside of Kandahar, but it doesn’t fly in Nebraska,” Sam answered in a long suffering tone.

Castiel only stared at Sera in horror, while Dean shot her a surreptitious thumbs up. Sam had growled at his brother to not encourage the girl.

“And that’s why Sera’s not allowed to drive Baby,” Sam concluded to Charlie.

The red head laughed.

“I’m surprised Cas is doing so well,” she said, “I didn’t think humanity would fit him.”

Sam watched the others, the way Sera had her head tipped toward Dean as he expounded on the virtues of certain trees, the way Castiel’s arm rested on the hunters own.

“He’s got Dean,” Sam shrugged.

He was certain Cas could take on anything, even human, as long as the older hunter was at his side.

“And Sera’s got you,” she said.

Charlie noticed the way Sam’s eyes were pulled toward Seraphina, a kind of hunger there.

“How goes it with you and Sera? Dean says you guys are pretty close,” Charlie waggled her eyebrows, elbowing the hunter again.

Sam ducked his head, but couldn’t hide the blush rising in his cheeks. If it had been Dean making the suggestion, he might have been able to just throw a bitch face in his brothers direction and shrug it off. The red head, however, somehow managed to strip him of his reserve.
“It’s not like that,” he muttered, but there was the ghost of a dopey smile on his face.

As the others disappeared among the trees, the red head gazed at him with a look he couldn’t quite decipher.

“You guys are OK.”

It wasn’t a question. The hunter shrugged, his hands jammed into his pockets and his shoulders hunched against the cold. After some moments of deliberation, he answered.

“Yeah, actually. I think we are OK.”

After weeks of misery, and months of warily orbiting around their need for each other, Dean and Castiel finally allowed themselves to crash together. It was all still new and raw, but it was one less burden they had to carry and the improvement was obvious.

Sam’s nightmares were becoming less frequent, but it still gnawed at him when he saw Sera’s tired eyes the next morning. Every time he expressed his remorse for what was happening, she would level him with an exasperated look and mutter “Shut it, Winchester,” while poking him in one of his many ticklish spots. Part of him wished the girl had never started this terrifying cascade of memories but a deeper, more selfish part of him, was relieved to finally have someone to share the burden with. It certainly didn’t hurt that he got to wake up with Seraphina plastered to his back like a soft and warm but often grouchy barnacle.

The two of them were still in the process of working out their boundaries. After a nightmare, the fallen angel knew that Sam needed to be touched, to be assured that he was out of the cage, that he wasn’t locked away with someone whose only desire was to hurt and maim and humiliate. She knew how he loved to have his scalp massaged and that tugging gently on his ears brought him out of an anxiety spiral. Sera came across the latter technique by accident, when she thought he wasn’t paying attention, and had tugged on an ear simply because it was the most convenient appendage within reach. Now she reached for him instinctively, her hands moving over him as if she could feel his buried need that had rarely been quelled.

Sam knew that the opposite was true for the fallen angel; the worst thing he could do was touch her during a panic attack. Instead, it was his voice that would soothe her. Any time she had a nightmare of her own, he would settle in the armchair they filched from the library and tell her stories about growing up; about Bobby and Pastor Jim, about the silly but kind ways Dean protected him, about the few happy memories of John. He always knew when it was safe to climb back into bed, because the girl would peek up from where she was curled, her blue eyes trained on him with an intensity he thought might burn him up from the inside and whisper “I’m cold.” In an instant he’d be there, giving Seraphina his whole back to plaster herself against, making Sam the largest little spoon in cuddling history.

Cuddling, however, was all that they did. Sam was still so astounded by the young woman’s presence in his bed and by his side, that sometimes he wondered if this was just another mirage that would crumble, with Lucifer suddenly cackling over his shoulder. Seraphina always managed to wipe that fear from his mind, every time she wiped away the pain and terror of his hellish memories. Their relationship was by no means conventional, but it was working for them; a fine balance between the horrors they both endured and the care they gladly bestowed on each other.

The fat snowflakes kept falling, covering all of the trees in a soft layer of fluff. The edges of the world around them became softened and muted. Even the grey sky and the vast Kansas flatlands seemed festive and inviting. The snow dusted their shoulders and settled in their hair, giving everyone at the Christmas tree stand their very own halo. Charlie and Sam walked deeper into the
temporary forest in silence, the redhead watching Sam out of the corner of her eye and wondering what was happening in his head. Seraphina bounded out from between two skinny firs, joy written all over her face.

“We found the perfect tree!” she declared, breathless with excitement.

Charlie watched Sam’s transformation with wonder; the hunch of a man perpetually attempting not to tower over others fell away. Sera’s obvious delight lifted something heavy inside him and the man unfolded. He grinned as the fallen angel grabbed his hand, tugging him into the trees.

“Dean says it’s a Scotch Pine,” the girl threw over her shoulder at Charlie, “And Dean says it’s got the softest needles and the most uniform shape.”

The redhead was not expecting the deadly serious tone Seraphina struck, as if Dean’s words of Expert Christmas Tree Selection were carved into stone somewhere. Sam allowed her to pull him through the trees, looking down at her with a kind of sincere and unmasked affection that made Charlie’s heart ache with relief. Yes, they were OK.

The tree itself was not what they were anticipating; it was a hair shorter than Sam, but undeniably fluffy. He was expecting his brother to pick something wholly inappropriate, like one of the twelve foot tall firs at the entrance to the lot. Dean only waved his hand dismissively when Sam asked him about it.

“Not fresh enough,” he claimed, watching Castiel intently, who was fingering a branch of the Scotch Pine with fondness.

“Wow, Dean might as well have cartoon hearts popping out of his eyes,” Charlie muttered, making Sam laugh and Seraphina blink at her in confusion.

While Sam and the angels got their little tree wrapped up and paid for, Charlie followed Dean. They brought the car around to the entrance of the stand and sat in silence, letting the Impala warm up and watching the others through the falling snow. Sera was saying something, her face serious, but whatever it was made Sam and Castiel burst out into laughter. The girl seemed unfazed by their reaction and the men were still grinning as the younger hunter hoisted the tree to his shoulder. When Charlie turned to Dean, a small and tranquil smile was there, his eyes trained on the trio.

“Cas picked the tree, didn’t he?” she guessed.

The hunter ducked his head, but the smile was still there.

“Yeah,” he said.

It was only when they got back to the bunker that they realized they owned exactly zero tree decorations. Castiel suggested stringing up the witches orbs. For a wild moment, Dean imagined he meant the ones they had already used, full of their pulsing black smoke. After his initial horror, he remembered they had over a dozen empty orbs, all colorful and beautiful and already reminding him of over sized Christmas ornaments. While Dean and Sam strung those up, Charlie taught the former angels how to make paper chains and paper snowflakes. The whole enterprise eventually devolved into the redhead looking up more and more complex patterns until the tree was covered in X-wings, Starfleet emblems and little flying snitches.

They spent the few days leading up to Christmas binge watching holiday movies, making more and more extravagant crockpot creations and taking full advantage of the snow. Castiel got to build a snowman; several in fact. The forest above their bunker was guarded by no less than a dozen of the
snowy creatures. Sam hoped that none of the locals wandered anywhere near their hidden home; it looked like a Calvin and Hobbes cartoon strip. Charlie and Dean certainly delighted in building snowmen that looked like they were stealing heads and limbs from each other and by the time the two decided to add red food coloring into the mix, Sam was starting to hope they would run out of snow.

It was the best Christmas either hunter could remember, even Kevin showed up. Sam whipped up some painfully strong eggnog and Dean made an unnecessary amount of pie, while Charlie and Kevin attempted to explain LARPing to Seraphina by acting out their favorite battles from a long distance D&D game the two were participating in. After everyone was full to bursting and the gifts were exchanged, they scattered across the library to talk and half-watch It’s a Wonderful Life, playing out on Sam’s laptop.

On New Year’s eve, Sam and Seraphina were watching the others breathlessly try to continue a snowball fight they had tapped out of moments before it turned into a wrestling match. Charlie was sitting atop Castiel, trying to shove snow down the back of his coat while he laughed and flailed. She was not succeeding because Dean was tugging her off the former angel by a leg. None of them were doing much damage because they were all laughing too hard. Sam was leaning against a tree and Seraphina was warming her hands by snaking them under the hunters multiple layers of flannel, her icy fingers against his stomach. She watched the three with a thoughtful look on her face. The hunter nudged her in question.

“I see now,” she said.

Charlie squealed as Dean finally managed to tug her off Castiel and fling her over his shoulder.

“What?” Sam asked.

Cas scrambled up to his feet, gathering a fistful of snow.

“Why you keep fighting,” she said slowly, trying to make sense of the feeling in her chest, “Why, after all the blood and pain, you keep going, even though you don’t have to.”

Dean tried to duck Castiel’s snowball, the redhead slung over his shoulder unbalanced him and they toppled into a snowman, who came undone in an explosion of white. Through giggles and gasps, the three finally struck a truce.

“It’s for this,” Seraphina continued, indicating the three laughing figures covered in snow, “To protect this.”

The only reason the girl ever had to survive, to keep fighting Naomi and the other angels, was because that is what her father decreed. When she fought a thousand wars she had no stake in, it was because her commander ordered it. When she pulled Sam from Ashes heaven, it was because her creator would have done so. Castiel used the word “love” the few times he actually spoke to Seraphina before sending her off on some bloody mission, but she had no idea what it was. Before landing in the icy waters of Lake Superior, it was not love nor wonder nor joy that drove her; it was fear and obedience. Before losing her Grace, she had been one thing and one thing only; a weapon, wielded by Castiel or hammered into unrecognizable shapes by Naomi.

Resisting Naomi, siding with Gabriel and resurrecting Sam had all been done in an effort to rejoin her father, the commander who could again direct her, wield her, give her purpose. Over the last two months, having been flung into the forge of humanity, the weapon was reshaped and refined into something else; a person. She had choices, thoughts and desires that were not imposed by any outside force, but which bubbled up from her core; they were hers alone. Sera looked to the three
men for guidance, taking her cues from them, but no one had ultimate control of her anymore. There were no cages, she was not leashed. The girl understood this in its most basic of forms when she offered to watch over Sam.

She could have wiped away that hell inspired nightmare and then said nothing; no one would know. It was the sudden relief in Sam’s sleeping face, the peace that settled there, which drove her to action. During her training, Seraphina was sent into every major conflict on Earth, but nothing she did ever truly mattered; the train tracks she sabotaged, the sniper who’s neck she broke, the abbey she warned of the coming bombs, none of it mattered. As soon as the girl was pulled from one war into another, the original timeline would reassert itself and the train full of munitions arrived safely, the sniper pinned down the squad that would have liberated the camp and the nuns stayed where they were, only to perish in the flames. But when Sam’s panicked breathing calmed and his whole body relaxed, Seraphina knew that it couldn't be undone. The fires of Hell burned her as surely as if she’d been there herself, but every second was worth it when she saw the relief flood through Sam when she touched him. She affected the world in a way that was real and for the first time, she felt her power.

“You choose this. You choose them,” Seraphina said, a revelation washing over her.

She looked up at Sam and realized that she too, could make a choice. She could stay or leave without punishment. She was not under duress, she owed nothing to no one. The whole world and every road in it stretched out before her and yet everything in Sera called out to the man looking down at her, his face perplexed.

“I choose this. I choose you,” the girl said.

It took a heartbeat for the words to sink in and then Sam’s face was breaking into a smile. He knew that in the beginning, the girl stayed with them out of loyalty to Castiel and quite frankly because she had nowhere else to go. Sera claimed him in Heaven, she scattered the demons still haunting his dreams, but if she decided to leave them, the hunter could not argue; after everything she’d already done for him, he had no right to demand anything else. Though he reveled in the fact that she Watched Over him, Sam had not been completely certain of her internal drives. But now she was looking up at him with that grave face, her mouth set in a determined line, choosing him. He felt clean and for the first time in his life, he felt lucky.

Sam kissed her.

The tug in his chest, which made itself known every time her fingers brushed against his forehead to wipe away his nightmares, intensified. Her lips stayed stiff for a moment, and then her hands were at his ears, pulling him closer. The hunter laughed, breaking the kiss. Sera watched him, that burning look she got after he pulled her out of one of her own nightmares settling on her face.

“Does that mean you choose me too?”

“Yeah.”

One corner of her mouth quirked up. A low whistle intruded on their little bubble of joy and they found the others gaping at them.

“So I guess it is like that,” quipped Charlie, grinning.
Chapter Summary

*spreads her arms wide* Behold, the smutty smut my tags have been promising for so long.

The new year stretched out before them like a clean wide field of crunchy Kansas snow. January was a remarkably quiet time for hunting. Sam and Sera got into the habit of taking short road trips to all the archives within a day or two drive of Lebanon; collecting local folklore and gleaning new spells or protection sigils from the largely overlooked local collections of the Rockies and the Midwest. Charlie decided to stay for a while longer; take a break from hunting and help Sam digitize the most important demonology texts in the bunker. Meanwhile, Cas and Dean spent an inordinate amount of time in their bedroom. They gave up all pretense and the former angel took a whole ten minutes to gather up all of his things and move them to Dean’s room.

It took them weeks to build up to anything more serious than heavy make out sessions or blowjobs. Cas noticed how jumpy Dean became, even under his calming hand. He understood why and he understood Heavens part in it, which made a deep sadness and a fierce protectiveness settle in his gut. The man was effectively born into hunting. His life may have burned to the ground on a November night in 1983, but his family was marked generations before. Dean could only vaguely remember feeling protected and settled and cared for; trust had been beaten out of him early and letting his guard down was not something he did easily. His memories of Hell certainly didn’t make things easier. Getting naked meant vulnerability and exposure and an impediment to escape; emotionally, it cost him something to let the layers go. Dean knew that Cas would never hurt him, would do his best to keep him safe, but giving up control voluntarily went against every instinct that kept him alive.

When it came to Dean, Cas had no intention of taking anything that was not freely given, so he didn’t push. He knew that at certain critical moments, control needed to be wrested from the hunter for his own good, but crossing the boundary into actual sex was not that moment. The former angel wondered though, how Dean would react to being given more control than he was expecting. Meanwhile, Dean believed he was easing the former angel into their physical intimacy by taking things slowly, despite how excited his libido was about the addition of a warm and willing body to his bed. But it was never Cas who pulled away when their closed-door activities became heated. It was never Cas who flushed with embarrassment or became shivery with anxiety when their bodies slotted together so perfectly and with such enthusiasm, that actual sex seemed like the only logical conclusion.

One day, weeks after Christmas, Castiel pulled away from the hunter after a particularly enthusiastic make out session and pinned him with a look the other man couldn’t quite sort out. They were on their sides, facing each other and Cas moved his head back as if to get a better look at the hunter. His lips were spit-slick and flushed, but the former angel licked them nervously anyway, indecision in his eyes. Dean’s t-shirt lay discarded at the foot of the bed and his hand was clutching at the hem of Castiel’s, ready to yank it over the angel’s head, but the look on the other man’s face stopped him.

“Cas?” he asked, his vision still blurred with lust.
The other man took a breath as if to speak, but then held it instead, his eyes searching Dean’s face.

“Cas?” he asked again, letting go of his t-shirt, concern edging into his voice.

“I want…,” again the hesitation, the searching look.

“Cas, buddy, anything,” Dean answered, fear crawling up his throat at the thought that he might have done something wrong, overstepped some boundary or spooked the other man.

“I want…,” he began again, his eyes flickering down the hunter’s body, his hand twitching up to settle on Dean’s hip.

A little ‘oh’ escaped the hunter and anxiety washed over him. This was the logical conclusion to their activities. Although Dean had always known that this bridge would have to be crossed someday, he always assumed it would be in the future somewhere. But now Cas was looking at him with those blue eyes, the desire bright even behind the cloud of uncertainty. Dean wanted this too and yet his mind rebelled. It had always been easier for him with women; he knew the script, what was expected of him and nine times out of ten, he really enjoyed himself. His past with men was different and difficult and thinking about those encounters made his gut clench; not all of them were pleasant. More than anything else in the world, he did not want to hurt Cas and Dean was afraid he would do the one thing that would hurt him the most; demonstrate a lack of trust by flinching away.

Castiel's hand rose from his hip to Dean’s cheek, eyes burning with something more than desire now.

“I will never, never hurt you Dean,” he growled, his face fierce.

The hunter nodded numbly, feeling his internal walls of resistance crumbling, even while his scalp prickled with panic. His own words rang in his ears; whatever you want, I’ll give it to you. He was incapable of refusing Cas.

“But that’s not what I was asking for,” the former angel continued softly, the ferocity melting into tenderness, something like shyness appearing, “I want… I want you to show me.”

It was like a clearing wind blew through Dean’s cluttered mind and he understood. Cas kept his hand on the hunters’ cheek, his thumb stroking gently. The shivering anxiety ebbed slowly from his limbs. This was something he could do. As the panic receded and his desire rose, he wondered what exactly he’d been expecting to happen. He was safe in the bunker, Hell was just a memory and Alastair was dead. The hunter knew that Castiel would never cross boundaries once they were set; it was something he taught the former angel almost as soon as he became human.

It had been just over a week after the slamming of the gates. If he hadn’t heard his own name, Dean might have walked past the kitchen without glancing up from the complex and inadvisable Persian resurrection spell he was poring over. He would have missed Crowley crowding Castiel into a corner of the kitchen, his finger jabbing repeatedly in the former angels chest, hissing something nasty under his breath. Dean caught his own name and by the time he was fully paying attention, the only other thing he heard clearly was the word “useless”. There was anger flaring in Cas’ eyes, but edged with a hint of fear, and he was doing nothing to defend himself. The hunter didn’t think, didn’t consider, just saw that stubby finger jabbing into his friend’s now very human chest and stepped forward.

“You ever touch Cas again without his damn permission, I will break every bone in your body. Slowly,” Dean growled into Crowley’s ear.

The former demon left the next day with a ‘58 Bentley pinched from the garage, but even the loss of the car couldn’t sour Dean’s relief.
“Don’t ever let anyone put their hands on you like that,” the hunter told Cas.

The man had looked away with something like shame washing over his face.

“But he’s right,” he ground out, “I’m useless to you.”

Dean was so wrapped up in his own sorrow, that he had little time to consider what a former Angel of the Lord might be feeling while confronting his sudden humanity. It would take him by surprise, over and over again during the following months; how little Castiel thought of himself, how easily he dismissed his own needs, how he always assumed he was a burden and not the one saving grace of Dean’s life. But he kept calling himself useless and the hunter kept denying it.

“You’re not useless, dammit!” the hunter finally yelled.

Cas only raised his eyebrows skeptically.

“Show me,” he said; a challenge.

The next day, they started sparring.

“What did you mean, when you told Crowley not to touch me without my permission?” Cas asked, “No one asks permission in a fight.”

“That’s why you fight back,” Dean answered, somewhat stumped by the question, “But you know… Otherwise… It’s not like people can just put their hands on you whenever they want.”

After a few sparring sessions and some halting and fumbling explanations from the hunter about what kind of touch was acceptable in public or between strangers versus friends, the former angel squinted at him in confusion.

“What if I want to be touched?” Castiel had asked, all sincerity and innocence.

Dean gulped.

“I suppose you could ask,” he barely managed to breath out, his gut clenching, “But it’s not really something people usually, you know, do.”

“Why not?”

“I guess, um… People are afraid to ask for what they want,” the hunter mumbled, unable to meet Castiel's eyes, “Just in case, you know… they don’t end up getting it.”

The former angel nodded, looking somewhat disappointed. None of this stopped him from tentatively sitting closer to Dean when they watched a movie or pressing his back against Dean’s when they ended up together in one bed. Now that the wall between them had finally been breached and lay crumbling, there was no hesitation on Castiel’s part; until this instant. The hunter flashed back to that moment he’d walked in on, in the bunker kitchen, and the slight edge of fear in the man’s eyes. He remembered the blinding flash of anger directed at Crowley, the nauseating thought of what might have happened if he hadn’t been there and the surge of protectiveness for the former angel.

Cas was so much braver than him, Dean realized, and he didn’t even know, didn’t understand this about himself. All of his own fear and hesitation evaporated and he surged forward, kissing the former angel hard. The hunter pressed Cas into the bed with his whole body, his need rising. Before the kiss could suffocate them both, Dean pulled back, searching the other man’s face.
“Are you sure?” he asked.

Cas nodded, his face serious, his eyes never leaving Dean’s. The former angel breathed an internal sigh of relief when he saw the trapped look melting away and a new kind of focus settling across the hunter’s features.

“OK,” the hunter breathed, “OK.”

He pulled the other man’s t-shirt up over his head and threw it across the room, not caring where it landed. They were left in just their boxers and Castiel made a move to pull his off, when Dean stopped him. Instead, the hunter straddled him and leaned forward to pepper his chest with barely-there kisses, making stops at both nipples. The former angel gasped, but kept his eyes trained on Dean as he made his way back toward Castiel’s lips. This time, they didn’t crash together, there was only sweetness there. The hunter tried to communicate through his touch, telling the other man that he was loved and worthy and so much more than he believed himself to be. The former angel was flushed, his pupils blown out wider than Dean had ever seen them and eventually, he bucked up against the hunter, an impatient sound escaping his throat. Dean chuckled.

“OK,” he said again, more to steady himself, than to assure Cas, “OK.”

Their boxers came off before either of them could really consider it and suddenly, Dean was completely naked, hovering over the other man. Goosebumps spread across his forearms but before he could say anything, Castiel turned over and pulled open the drawer of a bedside table. It was on the hunter’s side of the bed and with a jolt, he realized that the former angel knew exactly where he’d squirreled away a small bottle of lube, hoping for (and dreading) this exact moment. He wondered how long Cas had been wanting this, wondered how long he’d been hesitating and started mentally kicking himself for denying this to both of them. The internal diatribe that was just barely gathering steam died in its tracks because the former angel was handing Dean the little bottle, shooting a shy smile over his shoulder without a trace of doubt or anxiety.

“OK,” Dean said one final time and then, “If anything doesn’t feel good…”

But Cas cut him off, “I trust you Dean.”

That was all he needed. In moments, his fingers were slicked up and he was leaning over the angel again, this time peppering the back of his neck and his shoulders with sloppy wet kisses. He let his hand descend, rubbing gentle circles against Castiel’s tight ring of muscle. The gasp this first contact produced sent a pleasant shiver down Dean’s spine and he hardened to the point of discomfort. He shushed the other man gently, soothing him with words that were out of his mouth before he even had time to consider them and pushed in a single finger. The other man’s breathing quickened, his whole body tensing and he buried his face in a pillow. Dean didn’t go any further and focused on leaving a trail of kisses up the other man’s spine.

“Breathe, Cas,” he whispered, “I’ve got you.”

Incrementally, Castiel relaxed, until his whole body was slack. Dean took this opportunity to rotate his finger and show his angel what this thing they were doing was all about. After a few moments, the other man was panting, sweat breaking out across his back, making noises no Angel of the Lord should have any right to make and it damn near drove Dean right over the edge. The hunter took a deep breath, pausing in his work and trying to think of something other than the hot, tight muscle trapping his finger; he failed miserably. Cas made a soft frustrated noise and pushed up against him, reminding the hunter that this wasn’t really about him. The former angel’s seeming enthusiasm for what was happening spurred Dean back into action. Slowly, gently, he slid in a second finger, earning him a shudder and the first full-throated moan of the evening. He wondered at his partners
unselfconsciousness, a kind of euphoric affection filling his chest. He worked Cas open slowly and with plenty of lube; the first time was never completely free of a burn, but he was going to make damn sure he wasn’t hurting the man who had put so much trust in him. By the time he worked in a third finger, Dean was pretty sure there was little blood left to supply his brain.

“D-dean,” came the stuttered sigh and the hunter knew it was time.

He withdrew his fingers, lined himself up and took a breath.

“Tell me if I’m hur-,” Dean began, never to finish.

Cas rocked back against him and all sense left the men. The hunter hadn’t intended to bottom out, but apparently his slow and gentle approach was not exactly what the former angel had in mind. Dean’s brain and vision blanked. Castiel threw back his head, a bone deep sigh escaping him, and then there was nothing but movement and sensation and attempting to drown in each other while both were set ablaze. The supernatural link between them made them feel like they were infinitely expanding and imploding at the same time. Dean had no idea how long it took, but he could feel the tremors starting to build in the other man’s body; the shivers and spasms radiating out from his core. He tightened his grip on Castiel’s hips and concentrated on hitting that spot that was making his partner tremble. Cas came untouched, his muscles clamping down all at once, wringing a groan from the former angel. Within a heartbeat, the hunter reached the crest, emptying himself with a barely audible “Holy crap”. It was the most powerful high either of them had experienced and as quickly as it built, the feeling exploded and then dissolved, leaving behind something like an exhausted shuddering euphoria. The two men collapsed, buckling under the intensity of their orgasms and lay in a tangle of limbs and sweat and cooling cum.

“Thank you Dean.”

Those growled words brought the hunter out of his climax-induced stupor. He buried his face in the former angel’s neck, not caring about how sweaty they both were and pulled him even closer.

“That was…friggin amazing, Cas,” Dean gulped.

Castiel twisted around, sticky and slightly tangled in the sheets beneath him, until he was facing the hunter, a lopsided grin on his face.

“Well, I certainly enjoyed myself,” he said.

Dean’s face lit up. He wasn’t consciously anxious about his partner’s experience, but there was an ever present fear of failure that skirted the periphery of his daily existence. Castiel’s words wiped away whatever was left of his performance anxiety. The former angel brought his hand up to cup the hunter’s face, his thumb stroking across Dean’s bottom lip. Almost on instinct, he allowed his jaw to slacken and his lips to fall open, so that the thumb was now skirting the inside of his lip. Castiel froze, his eyes searching the other man’s face and when Dean allowed his eyelids to fall half closed, the other man’s eyes darkened and he surged forward, kissing the hunter hard.

“Later,” was all he growled.

Dean found that the prospect of ‘later’ did not make his gut clench with anxiety, but in anticipation. This night was definitely turning out better than he had ever imagined. Eventually, Cas tugged him up off the bed, got them bundled in robes and led the way to the showers. Charlie was making her way through the bunker in the opposite direction, raking her fingers through her damp hair and muttering about cheap drugstore combs. When he saw her coming, Dean’s instant desire was to duck into the nearest unlocked door and hide until she passed by, but Cas just kept walking and he
followed. When the young woman did notice them, her face broke out into a huge grin, a hand still tangled in her hair. The former angel only nodded and Dean tried to duck his head, but he still caught the wink she sent in his direction. The hunter groaned internally; Sam was sure to hear about this little encounter.

By the time they actually made it to the showers, Dean was so distracted, that Cas pushing him up against a wall took him completely by surprise. It must have shown on his face, because the former angel stopped short the kiss he was about to deliver and loosened his grip on the hunter, giving him just enough wiggle room to escape if he needed to.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he said softly.

“I know,” Dean breathed out, allowing his body to relax.

Cas watched him closely for a moment and then nodded, stepping away to get two shower heads going. They stripped and washed like they regularly did, until the former angel got out from under the spray of water, walked over to their abandoned robes and came back with Dean’s little bottle of lube. The breath caught in the hunters throat as he met the other man’s eyes; there was a desire there that he desperately wanted to satisfy. Castiel tilted his head in question and in answer, Dean simply turned around and braced himself against a wall. After a single heartbeat, the former angel stepped forward and Dean could feel how close he was, the heat radiating off him, even with the steam rising all around them. He peppered the hunters shoulders with kisses, mimicking what the other had done less than half an hour before and then wrapped an arm around his waist and stepped forward until their bodies were flush. They stayed like that long enough that Dean was starting to wonder if he’d misinterpreted the others intentions.

With the hissing of the showers, he never did hear the bottle cap pop open, but Cas pulled away far enough to allow access and the probing fingers at his entrance were enough to wipe away any doubts about what was about to occur. The lube was cold in comparison to his body and he jerked in surprise, although the arm around his waist kept him from going too far. The fingers stilled.

“Are you alright?”

Dean only managed a nod and focused on relaxing. This was Cas, his Cas. He would never hurt Dean, never demand anything that was not freely given. He pushed thoughts of Alastair out of his mind. The hunter knew that what was happening was something that he wanted; his dick was certainly eager, having again hardened to painful proportions so soon after his last orgasm. Cas however, had frozen; Dean could practically feel the worried eyes on him.

“I trust you, Cas,” he ground out, using the other man’s words as if this was an established ritual.

The fingers at his opening still hesitated, teasing him in a way he was certain Castiel didn’t quite understand yet. Dean decided to use the former angel’s previous move against him and rocked back against the fingers. A single finger found its way inside of him; it was enough to make the breath stutter in his throat.

“I want you,” he choked out.

There was a growl behind him and suddenly, teeth were sinking into his shoulder, just hard enough to sting, but not hard enough to break the skin. Dean shuddered in response, throwing back his head. The bite was almost more sensual than the probing digit inside him. He could feel Cas taking some steadying breaths; it was good to know that he wasn’t the only one overwhelmed by what was happening.
After a few moments of stillness, the former angel asked, with some uncertainty, “Where?”

“Down, keep going…” and then the finger inside him found its mark and the hunter was beyond words.

Cas took his time, bringing Dean to the edge and then pulling away, until the hunters legs felt like jello and the arms propping him up against the shower wall started to shake. The former angel might have started out the night as the blushing virgin, but he learned quickly and certainly took a considerable amount of delight in pleasuring his partner. The small part of Dean’s brain that was still functioning decided that he could definitely get used to this. Eventually though, he managed to get out a sound that let Cas know he was ready. The other man wasted no time and almost before he even registered it was happening, Dean was being filled up in the most delicious way. Again, they sank into sensation and the only thing the hunter was aware of was the building pressure at the base of his spine and the sharp snap of Castiel’s hips. They went over the edge together.

“Son of a bitch,” Dean gasped, seeing stars; he hadn’t come twice in one night since he was in his twenties. In fact, he was impressed that he still could.

The two men uncoupled, but still clung to each other, too shaky to stay upright on their own. The hot water beat at their shoulders and washed away the stickiness of their love making. Neither was sure how they made it back to their bed, but they awoke late that morning, suffering something like an orgasm hangover. Dean reasoned that the two of them had been so miserable for so long, that a sudden surge of dopamine and oxytocin made them drunk.

They did not manage to escape the grin and waggling eyebrows Charlie threw their way when they finally wandered into the kitchen the next morning. To make up for it though, Sam saved them a huge plate of bacon, Sera made sure there was fresh coffee and the two managed to drag Charlie away long enough to let them eat in peace.
“Dean!”

His name was hissed in panic and when he looked up from the soap opera he’d been neglecting recently, his insides went cold. Seraphina was rushing toward him across the War Room, her eyes wide with fright. He unstrapped the revolver hidden on the underside of the table and sprang from his seat, ready for whatever might be coming. Dean ran through a mental checklist; the warding in the bunker was still active, the UV paint on the demon’s trap at the bottom of the stairs was touched up only days before and Cas and Sam were out on a supply run. That left the one seasoned hunter, the hunter newbie and a tiny but dangerous former angel. With a hint of dread, he wondered what could have spooked the girl so badly.

“The witches orbs?!’” Dean guessed, wondering how many had shattered and if anyone in the bunker was already possessed; this could get very ugly very quickly.

“No,” Sera groaned, “It’s Charlie.”

She cast a glance over her shoulder, making sure the coast was clear and turned back to the hunter.

“She wants us to have ‘girl time’,” Seraphina hissed, using the most distressed air quotes Dean had ever seen, “I don’t even know what that is.”

All the dread and fight building up inside the hunter evaporated so suddenly that his mind went blank. The laugh that burst out of him was part relief and part surprise. Dean decocked the revolver, placed it back in it’s hiding spot and sank into his chair, rubbing at his face in an effort to cover up the jittery relief of knowing that the orbs were all intact and they were safe. Briefly, he wondered if Cas was the one who taught her how to use air quotes. Seraphina only huffed in response, crossing her arms.

“Ok, number one, don’t ever do that again,” Dean said, trying to keep the laughter out of his voice, “And number two…”

The hunter never made it to number two because Charlie bounded into the War Room, a huge smile on her face.

“You ready?” She asked, practically bouncing on her feet.

Seraphina threw a panicked look in Dean’s direction. He made a valiant effort to keep a straight face and cleared his throat.

“Where are you two headed?” he asked.

“All to that new arcade complex in Salina. They’ve got laser tag and mini golf and a trampoline park, not to mention a whole section of vintage arcade games!” This time, Charlie actually did bounce in place, beaming at the very thought of getting to sit in a fully restored Williams Blaster cockpit.

Dean’s mouth dropped open. When Sera said ‘girl time’ he was expecting a litany of shopping goals and spa treatments, although laser tag did seem more in Charlie’s wheelhouse than manicures.

“Can I come?” Dean asked hopefully, ready to abandon his soap opera.

“Yeah, can Dean come?” Echoed Sera.
“Nope!” Charlie chirped, looping her arm through Seraphina’s and pulling her toward the metal stairs leading out of the bunker, “I distinctly recall you not being a girl, Dean Winchester.”

“But laser tag!” Dean protested weakly, “I’d kill at laser tag!”

“He would,” Seraphina said, nodding, a note of desperation evident through her serious tone.

The hunter wondered if the former angel even knew what laser tag was, but appreciated the valiant effort she was making to include him, despite her selfish purpose. Charlie only shook her head, rolled her eyes and urged Sera up the stairs with a shooing motion. The girl complied, but managed to shoot a distinct ‘you’ll pay for this’ glare in Dean’s direction. He only shrugged, indicating Charlie with a ‘what can I do?’ helpless sweep of his hands.

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“And you just let them go?!” Sam yelled, dialing Charlie’s number for the fourth time, only to get her voicemail again.

Dean and Castiel watched the younger hunter pace the War Room, distress in every angle of his body, and leave another message on the redhead’s phone. The women had been gone for most of the morning and the afternoon. They were supposed to get several feet of snow and the sky outside the bunker was becoming more and more ominous, but the storm wasn’t predicted to hit until much later that night. Although Charlie knew about the impending weather, she insisted that ‘girl time’ had to happen, since she was intending to go out on her own again that week. Spending the holidays with the Winchesters in the bunker had been a mini-vacation, but it was the new year and it was time to head back out into the world. The hunters and former angels would have welcomed her on a more long term basis, but the years she’d spent bouncing from identity to identity after the car accident were a part of her makeup now.

“Charlie said ‘girl time’ and I ain’t a girl,” Dean replied, a note of defensiveness edging into his voice.

“Dammit, I should’ve bought her a cell phone,” Sam growled, looking at his own as if it were personally offending him.

“They’ll be fine!” Dean assured, elbowing Cas to back him up.

The former angel nodded emphatically, “Seraphina is more than equipped for any emergency situation.”

“Except maybe girl time,” Dean muttered under his breath, which earned him a slightly panicked look from Cas.

Six hours after their initial departure, the two women stumbled back into the bunker, giggling uncontrollably. With Charlie’s arm slung over Sera’s shoulders, they looked like two high school girls returning from an adventure at the local mall that may or may not have involved some shoplifting and a makeout session with the hot guy from the Sunglass Hut kiosk. Sam fumed like a worried parent while Dean looked up from the soap opera he was finally caught up on and spread his arms in a “See? Everything is fine!” gesture. When they caught the younger hunter’s look, Charlie and Seraphina sobered, stopping at the base of the stairs and attempting to look chastened. Sam crossed his arms and the two burst out laughing again.
“Are you two drunk?” the younger Winchester demanded, exasperated.

The laughter stopped and the two looked at him as if he’d accused them of kicking puppies. It was a legitimate question, considering that none of the men had ever witnessed Sera do anything more than occasionally grin, let alone giggle in conspiratorial delight. Charlie reminded Sam that the only thing she needed to enhance her mood was copious amounts of coffee and video games.

“Although, I suppose sugar is a type of mind altering substance,” she mused, “And we’ve had quite a bit of it.”

The redhead admitted to introducing Seraphina to cotton candy and that perhaps the former angel had consumed an unnecessary amount of it. In fact, the young women consumed quite a few inadvisable things, including corn dogs, cheese fries and multiple helpings of deep fried pickles. Sera described all the deep fried food at the arcade cafeteria with wide-eyed wonder and lamented the fact that she had run out of room before she could try all of them. After a millennia of army rations, even greasy arcade pizza seemed exotic to the girl. Sam finally laughed, relaxing, and promised to take her to the county fair that summer, where she could sample all the fried foods she could find.

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“You don’t have to worry about me,” she said later that night, “I’ve faced more terrifying opponents than teenage boys armed with laser guns.”

Knowing full well where her mind was headed, Sam pulled Seraphina into a hug.

“I know you’re capable of kicking ass,” he assured, “I just didn’t want anyone out there to… misunderstand you.”

“I speak perfectly good English,” the young woman said, confused.

He laughed, stroking her cheek as she peered up at him. Sam wasn’t sure he could explain what he was feeling. After these few weeks of knowing her, he understood how unique Seraphina was and loved every one of her strange human-angel hybrid quirks. She didn’t sit on couches or in chairs, so much as perch on them. She would slip sideways through doorways to accommodate the wings she no longer had. She still treated angel blades with more caution than other weapons. She spent a chunk of every night telling him the equivalent of hunter bedtime stories, recounting her many lives and the supernatural creatures she’d run across in her millennia of life. Sam treasured all these things, constantly in awe of the fact that an angel chose him and not only that, but was content to remain human and by his side. Despite her skill with weapons and hand to hand combat, it was her newness to humanity that gave him a flutter of anxiety in his gut any time she was out in the world without him; she was vulnerable to the random cruelty of that world and Sam wanted to protect her.

“I actually had…,” Seraphina trailed off, a pensive crease between her eyes, grasping for something she was still trying to understand, “…fun.”

Heaven was never fun, unless you were one of the anonymous humans making your way to a personal heaven unharassed. War was never fun, although soldiers the world over tried to snatch such moments whenever possible, including the ones Sera found herself with time and time again. Hunting wasn’t exactly fun, despite Deans attempted argument to the contrary, though it proved far more satisfying than anything she had done in Heaven. Until Seraphina gave up her Grace and
claimed her place among the Winchesters and their ragtag little family, the girl had experienced very few moments of levity.

When Seraphina froze up at the arcade, her eyes darting to the exists, her senses straining to keep track of all the people and potential threats around her, shoulders tense and fists balled, she’d asked Charlie what the purpose of it all was. Why were all these people here? Why was she here? Charlie opened her arms, taking in the flashing screens, the gaggles of excited people and the cacophony in one grand sweep.

“It’s a playground,” she grinned.

Sera only stared. “Angels don’t play.”

Charlie put her hands on the other woman’s shoulders and shook her gently, something like sympathy and a dash of regret in her face.

“You’re not an angel anymore,” she said softly.

Spending the winter holidays with the hunters, her father, and their friends showed her that not every moment of her existence had to be a battle. Those few hours spent with Charlie opened her eyes further to a state of being that, to her, was profound. Play was not only acceptable, but expected and came naturally to most humans. Seraphina was human now; a fact that slipped her mind sometimes.

Charlie was gone within the week, promising to keep in touch. Dean helped Sam find their least beat up smartphone in a shoebox of back-ups and once they got Sera set up with it, they found that Charlie was true to her word. The red head made a habit of sending them all little missives a few times a month. Dean would get photos of classic cars or pie stands laden with his favorite pastry. Sam would get photos of historical markers, old brick buildings and snippets of lore about whatever town Charlie happened to be passing through. Castiel’s inbox slowly filled up with photos of flowers or garden sculptures or other people’s pets. His favorite was a miniature pig in a harness, snapped at a brewery somewhere in Colorado that Charlie suspected had a poltergeist problem. Seraphina ended up with photos of every deep fried food America had to offer, although she was horrified to learn that deep fried butter was an actual possibility.

Dean and Charlie continued to exchange emails; they usually involved the older hunter giving the newbie advice on how to approach reconnaissance and which lies were the most convincing when it came to prying information from local law enforcement. The redhead would in turn talk Dean through some of his anxieties when it came to his relationship with Cas and prod him into taking time to actually befriend Seraphina.

You’ve seen the way Sam looks at her, dude, she would write, There’s some serious twoo wuv in the air.

She could always rely on Castiel to keep her apprised of the progress the others were making; how Sam’s nightmares were becoming less and less frequent, how Dean’s panic attacks were being kept at bay, how Seraphina managed to go on a supply run without getting pulled over. Sera and Charlie got into the habit of talking late into the night at least once a week. The former angel was curious about the other woman’s relatively normal life prior to the Winchesters appearance and would interrogate her about the most mundane aspects of that life. What was Christmas like outside of a muddy trench or the bunker? Did high schools like Sunnydale or Lawndale actually exist in the real world? What was the rationale behind having a lizard advertise car insurance? Had she ever gone to brunch? What was it like to be tucked in at night? What were you supposed to do at a birthday party? What was it like to have parents? What was the deal with football? Was she a cat person or a dog person and what exactly did that mean?
Those late night phone calls were usually punctuated by laughter from both women and would devolve into Charlie attempting to pry some juicy tidbits from Seraphina about how Cas and Dean were getting on. This line of questioning usually resulted in the former angel wrinkling her nose and explaining to the redhead that she had no interest in the “gooey” parts of the two men’s relationship. Charlie would laugh and then effortlessly pivot to Sam and Seras relationship, claiming that she would be happy to give advice about the “gooey” parts, but the former angel always demurred. Beyond that one kiss on New Years Eve, nothing much changed between the two. Considering some of the nightmares she was privy to, Sera was grateful Sam even let her touch him. She had no desire to push those boundaries with the hunter and hoped that in a few weeks time the memories would be bled of their power, so they could both rest.
Between Sam and a Bullet

It was the end of February and all four of them were in southern Arkansas, hunting something murderous. There was a string of deaths, with several witnesses and survivors claiming that the killer was a recently deceased loved one. Sam thought the creature was a ghoul, while Dean was certain it was a wraith. None of them could find a solid reason for the killings themselves and the deeper they dug, the more it seemed that this thing, whatever it was, just liked taking lives. They tracked it for almost two weeks, as it worked its way across the state, leaving bodies in its wake, frustrating the hunters into impotent anger and exhaustion. It kept moving from county to county, jurisdiction to jurisdiction, leaving the locals to believe that each death was an isolated incident. They were ragged and worn out and they tried to be prepared, but when they finally faced the creature, it was not what they were expecting and Sera had the wrong bullets in her SIG.

They tracked it to an abandoned house somewhere outside of a spit of a town called Bodcaw and it was neither a ghoul nor a wraith. The house was mostly empty, bits of broken or abandoned furniture the only other thing filling up the interior besides shadows. It was the middle of the day, but the house was dark, save for a few errant streaks of sunlight coming through the gaps in the haphazardly boarded up windows. Cas and Dean cornered it upstairs and because the older hunter had been expecting a wraith, his gun was full of silver bullets. Sam and Sera, who stayed downstairs to make sure the thing didn’t double back or somehow sneak past the others, were not expecting the second creature, nor were they armed with silver. All of their attention was focused on the staircase leading to the second floor; the only route of escape unless it went out a window. They tensed when two shots rang out.

“We’re good,” came Dean’s voice.

Sam and Sera glanced at each other, relaxing their stances. It was a rather anticlimactic end to a hunt that consumed them for two weeks. Then, there was an anguished scream from behind and Sam was being flung into what used to be the living room, his machete clattering out of reach. Sera managed to get off one shot before she was tossed in the same direction. The hunter was sprawled on his back, unconscious. The former angel scrambled to her feet, her vision going blurry from the hit. She knew her aim was true, the bullet should’ve landed square in its chest, and yet there it stood. The ‘it’ looked remarkably like a human woman, except for the hole in the middle of her t-shirt that didn’t seem to faze her. Undeterred, Seraphina emptied her clip. The woman glanced down at her own chest and the former angel could see that the bullets had done nothing. The most disorienting moment came when the creature looked back up and was inexplicably wearing Sera’s face.

“Shapeshifter,” Sam gasped from the floor.

The hunter clawed his way back to consciousness, his vision clearing just in time for him to register that the creature had a gun of her own, a revolver, and was raising it. For a moment, the shifter aimed at Seraphina and the former angel braced for the bullet she knew would come. Her doppelganger seemed to reconsider and leveled the weapon at Sam instead.

“You take mine, I’ll take yours,” the shapeshifter snarled.

Before the creature was even done speaking or aiming, before Sam could stop her, Seraphina pivoted and dropped, blanketing the hunter with her own body, their faces centimeters apart. A shot rang out.

“No,” Sam breathed, as the young woman’s eyes went wide above him.

A body hit the floor. Sera sat up, straddling the hunter; she was bullet hole free. Dean stood at the
foot of the stairs, his own weapon drawn, Castiel looking on in horror. The former angel scrambled up to help Sam to his feet. The four of them stared at Seraphina’s copy, who had crumpled the moment Deans silver bullet pierced her heart. As they watched, a pool of blood slowly started to form under her body, edging toward the toes of their boots. Sam stepped back, pulling Sera with him, his hand clamped around her upper arm. The younger hunter kept looking between the two women, one dead at his feet, the other gazing at him with concern. Sam’s face was ashen, his Adam’s apple bobbing, like he was trying to swallow and failing. His eyes snapped to Dean.

“How the hell did you know which one to shoot?”

Dean holstered his weapon, looking miffed.

“It was a pretty solid bet the Sera putting herself between you and a bullet was the one I wanted to keep,” he answered, his tone annoyed, “Plus, she has a SIG on her, not a revolver.”

The older hunter tapped the shapeshifters gun with the toe of his boot to drive the point home. Sam glared down at the weapon, which was slowly being surrounded by the growing pool of blood and then glanced at the useless SIG still in Sera’s hand. The young woman refrained from adding that Dean knew how many rounds were in her magazine, that he probably counted the shots as he tore down the stairs. Sera tried to shake off the hunters hand on her bicep; his grip was becoming painful, but he wouldn’t let go. His eyes scoured her face and she realized that his breaths were coming in short and shallow, like when he was having a nightmare. There was a long uncomfortable minute of them watching Sam watching Sera. Finally, she reached up and touched his fingers, which had gone white, they were gripping her arm so tightly.

“You’re hurting me,” she said gently.

The hunter took a big shuddering breath and let go, his fingers coming away reluctantly.

“Promise me you’re never gonna do that again,” he said, his voice a mix of anger and pleading.

Seraphina squared her shoulders, her brow furrowing.

“No.”

Sam made a disbelieving strangled sound in the back of his throat, eyebrows shooting up in shock. The young woman shook her head in an attempt to cut off the protest that she knew was forming on the hunters lips and turned away from him.

“I’m getting the shovels,” Sera declared, skirting the pool of blood and brushing past the other hunters before Sam could start arguing.

Her avoidance of the subject didn’t stop him. Every time she thought he was finally done or out of breath enough to concentrate on digging instead of grunting about how stupid the position she’d put herself had been, he would start anew. It didn’t help that after some prodding from Sam, Castiel seemed to agree that she had taken an unnecessary risk.

“You could’ve died,” Sam growled under his breath, as the four of them took turns digging a grave that would hold two bodies, instead of the one they had been expecting.

Their coats and flannels, all their customary top layers, lay discarded in the grass. It may have been the tail end of February, but the American south was in the grip of an unseasonable heat wave. The dogwood and redbud trees were already flowering, leaving streaks of white and pink across the otherwise brown landscape and helped obscure the house from view. Sera wiped at the sweat beading on her upper lip.
She sighed. “People die.”

The hunter stopped digging and glared at the young woman, his jaw working as if he was rolling around different retorts on his tongue like marbles before deciding which one to spit out.

“Yeah, people die all the time, but you’re not just…,” he sputtered, “You’re not people, you’re not just anyone, you’re one of us!”

Sera narrowed her eyes at him. “As I recall, you’ve all died multiple times and yet, here you are.”

Sam blinked at her in disbelief long enough that Dean huffed something about being too tired for this shit and grabbed the shovel out of his brothers hand, pushing him up and out of the hole they were digging. The young man started pacing, running his hands through hair that was getting long enough to tie back, clearly frustrated.

“We got brought back because… because we were useful tools,” he finally said, stopping in front of Sera, “It wasn’t a gift, it was utility.”

Cas gave a little huff of protest.

“And yes, sometimes it was sheer stubbornness on our part. Or you know, an actual gift,” Sam admitted, nodding at the former angel, “But there were always bigger forces at play. Heaven, Hell, the angels, the demons. We’re on our own now. The gates are closed. It’s not like Gabe can just keep tossing you off a cloud every time you…”

She looked away, staring across the overgrown lot, trying to to concentrate on keeping watch. There wasn’t much danger of them being seen; the property was covered in hip high grass and was several miles from the nearest neighbor.

“Sam is right,” Cas said, in what he hoped was a sympathetic way.

“Wouldn’t you put yourself between Dean and a bullet?!” She finally yelled, exasperated, when her father joined the diatribe, “Wouldn’t he do the same for you? How is what I did today any different from what you guys have done over and over?!”

Sera didn’t stick around to hear their answer but marched off through the grass, heading for the Impala. Dean found her an hour later, curled in the front seat of the car, watching the sunset through the windshield. The corpses were salted, burned and buried and the others were doing a final sweep of the house, making sure they didn’t leave behind any incriminating evidence. The hunter knocked all the excess dirt off the shovels, dumped them in the trunk and slid in behind the wheel with a tired sigh. He was sweaty and grimy, the seventy degree muggy Arkansas weather adding another layer of stickiness. The young woman didn’t acknowledge him, so Dean watched her watching the sunset, a muscle starting to twitch in her jaw. Finally, she sighed and met his gaze, her chin up in defiance.

“Are you going to tell me I’m an idiot too?”

Dean gave a little shake of his head. “Nope.”

Willingly putting oneself between Sam and danger was something Dean Winchester understood on a molecular level. After these months of getting to know the girl; hunting with her, watching her care for Sam, listening to her stories, the hunter was fairly certain he understood her motivations. Sera spent almost a thousand years fighting in wars where her actions meant absolutely nothing and when she did get to act in real time, with real consequences, all she did was kill her own kind. Ostensibly, she’d been killing to bring peace to Heaven, but she never got to see the fruits of her efforts. Now, she actually got to help people, to affect the world in a way that mattered. Yes, it still involved a dash
of murder, but at least it was a fight she’d chosen. There were many choices to be made in the life of a hunter and laying down your life for the ones you loved was one of them.

“You’re not angry about what I did?”

He gave another shake of his head. “Nope.”

She blinked, her mutinous posture deflating. This wasn’t the answer she was expecting.

“In fact, I think you deserve a burger and a beer,” the hunter mused, “Just have a back up plan next time.”

Sera snorted. “You never do.”

Dean only grinned in response.

When the other men finally made it back to the car, they silently slid into the back seat together. Sera was no longer fuming, but she kept her seat in the front, not wanting the discussion she fled to start up again. Dean pointed the Impala back toward Hope, Arkansas and their motel. Despite Sams half-hearted protests, he pulled into the parking lot of a local pub first. He promised Sera a burger and beer and he was not about to go back on his word. They sat in exhausted silence, but when the drinks came, he raised his glass pointedly, his eyes on the young woman.

“To family,” he said simply.

She smiled into her beer.

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“Guess you’re officially one of us now,” Sam sighed, as they finally made it to their motel room.

“You don’t sound thrilled,” Sera observed.

There were few people in the world whom Dean felt strongly enough about to call ‘family’, but it seemed that her intention of shielding Sam from a bullet had finally landed her in that category. It took time and experience for Dean to trust people and she understood his need to keep her at arms length for the first few weeks of their acquaintance. But now she was a Winchester, a hunter, not a weapon to be used by others and it made a warmth settle in her chest. She watched Sam as he jerkily pulled clean clothes from his duffel bag, clearly still upset. Sera made her way across the room and gently caught his wrists, stilling him. It took her several moments to catch the much larger man’s eye; his gaze kept bouncing around the room, unable to settle, but he didn’t pull away from her. Finally, he sighed and looked down at her. She gave his wrists a little shake, tilting her head to the side in question. He swallowed thickly.

“I don’t want to lose you,” he finally breathed out, the words barely audible.

Sera sighed. “I’m not going to stop. You know I can’t. Just like I’d never be able to talk you out of doing the same for me.”

They both remembered previous hunts; the countless times that Sam put himself between the former angel and oncoming danger. Those were all threats that he could see and counter. He’d known that she was well and truly one of them within days of her settling in the bunker, but if he didn’t say it out loud, maybe the universe wouldn’t notice. Tonight, Dean called her family and it sent a shiver of dread down Sam’s spine, not because it wasn’t true, but because she was now in real danger. None of their family escaped unscathed. Some of them were thankfully still alive, but many hadn’t been so
lucky; becoming a Winchester put you under the watchful eye of a vengeful universe. The more time she spent associated with them, the more likely it was that she would be taken from them, that tragedy would befall her and in turn, Sam. It wasn’t the monsters of the world that he wanted to protect her from, it was the cruel turns of fate that seemed to haunt them everywhere they went.

This convoluted logic was one of the main reasons they had never moved passed that one kiss on New Year’s Eve. Sam was terrified that if he loved her, if he claimed her the same way she had claimed him, some dark force would swoop out of nowhere and steal her away. They continued to share a bed, to scare away each other’s nightmares and venture out of the bunker together on random little road trips for hikes and historical archives. But any time she pressed herself against him for something other than comfort, when her lips sought out his, Sam would freeze, terror washing over him. Sera read his moods as if he were shouting them through a megaphone and always pulled back, content to lay with him quietly or run her hands through his hair instead of up his thigh. He searched her face every time something like that happened, but he never found hurt or disappointment there, just calm, followed by a reassuring smile.

She stood before him now, her strong little hands gently holding his wrists, looking up at him so earnestly, that his anger from before washed away. No matter what he did, no matter how he sought to protect her, Sera would always be tainted by her connection with him, the Lucifer Sword. He could feel it in his bones; the universe would find a way to hurt her, to hurt him, to maim them all. Something in his face or demeanor must have alerted her to the turn his mood had taken and she let go of his wrists, gently prodding him onto the bed.

The back of his legs hit the edge of the queen and the barely-there pressure of her hand against his solar plexus didn’t waver, so he let himself sink backward. Sera clambered up and blanketed herself over him, her head tucked under his chin. Sam was still sweaty and grimy from the hunt, but the burger and beer were settling him into a pleasant stupor and he let his eyes fall shut. The former angel shifted and he could tell she was propped up on an elbow now, watching his face. Another shift in weight and there were warm lips on his. The kiss was brief and chaste and she pulled back quickly, as if afraid to hurt him with even this light touch. A wave of shame passed over him and unbidden, a tear escaped, snaking its way across his temple and into his hair. Sam hoped she missed it. She didn’t.

“I’m sorry,” Sera whispered, already pulling away from him.

He grabbed the former angel before her comforting weight disappeared.

“Don’t,” he croaked, not opening his eyes.

None of this was her fault; none of Heavens machinations, none of Hells atrocities and certainly none of the self loathing Sam heaped on himself. Being bred by Heaven to be Lucifer’s vessel was only half the reason he pulled away from Sera, there were other, more terrible reasons. When he was with her, so much of that fell away and felt distant; he didn’t feel the stain on his soul. He didn’t want the memories of Hell to control him, always to snatch away whatever joys or pleasures the world was willing to offer him. He couldn’t be afraid and ashamed forever. After a heartbeat, the former angel leaned forward again, her lips brushing his. This time, he responded, his hand going to the back of her head to deepen the contact.

“Are you sure?” she asked, as they came up for breath.

Sam finally opened his eyes and met her gaze; she didn’t look worried, only curious, searching his face for confirmation. The hunter nodded. With a grin, she dove in, her hands in his hair. When his tongue probed her lips, she opened them, making a small surprised sound when he licked into her mouth. That sound did something to his bruised soul and Sam crushed the former angel against him,
desperation starting to edge into their exchange. Seraphina didn’t seem to mind, snaking a hand between them to find his zipper. The breath hitched in his throat, equal parts fear and need. Memories he’d rather stay buried started to claw their way to the surface.

“Are you alright?” The former angel asked.

She knew he wasn’t, but was instead looking for permission. From what she had gleaned of his nightmares, Sera knew this day would come eventually and that it would be painful for Sam, but it had to be his choice and his alone. Healing didn’t come from forgetting, but from confronting the terrible things that haunted you.

The hunter nodded, “Keep going.”

She moved aside, undid his jeans and with a hiss of surprise, he was in her hand. The memories gnawed at him and he squeezed his eyes shut. It’s not as if he remained celibate after his stint in Hell; his time with Amelia hadn’t scared him this much. But then again, he’d been doing his best to wall off thoughts of the cage and quell the flashbacks with exercise and complex home improvement projects. Sam tried to concentrate on what the former angel was doing, a buzzing winding up his spine, the pressure starting to build. But now, her hand was on him and the dam he’d carefully built around those terrible moments in Hell began to crumble.

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It’s amazing what the human mind can grow accustomed to. Sam had no concept of time in the cage, but eventually, the torture was practically old hat. Pain was predictable. Lucifer became predictable. Sam knew that no matter what terrible new punishment was thrust upon him, the devil would eventually get bored. It was better for Sam when he got bored, because then he would turn his attention to the other occupants of the cage and the hunter would be left in relative peace. It seemed the boredom kept coming for Lucifer and there were long stretches of time that the cage was quiet, everyone in their own corners, just trying to make it through the next moment. He should have known better. Boredom made the devil creative and when he finally settled on a new tactic of terror, Sam almost missed those other times, when he was sliced and diced and either left to drown in his own blood or lost his voice from screaming.

It started rough and painful and dirty, his clothes gone in an instant, Lucifer on top him, the whole thing over so quickly he didn’t even have a chance to protest. He managed to stagger back to his corner before the shame and helplessness finally hit him. But then it got so much worse; the devil started taking his time, drawing it out, making Sam see things that drove him into a hopelessness he wasn’t sure he’d ever climb out of. Lucifer never bothered to show him anything but the cage while he sliced and diced, until the hallucinations became part of the game.

One day, the devil grabbed Sam by the elbow and the cage melted away, replaced by a smoke filled casino, complete with pretty cocktail waitresses and clanging slot machines. The sight shocked him, and for a moment, he believed they were out in the real world, so he ran. Sam bolted for the exits, already formulating a plan; call Dean, jack a car, figure out what city he was in. He ran through the crowd, dodging tourists and security staff, the front doors only inches away when the whole scene froze, the hunter suspended mid-stride like an unfortunate cretaceous-era insect caught in amber. Lucifer laughed for so long that Sam hoped he’d provided enough entertainment for the night, but the devil is insatiable. He made sure he had a firm grip on the hunter before the scene unfroze and then dragged him out onto the street, still chuckling. They were in the middle of the Las Vegas strip, palm trees swaying in the dry breeze, the street lit up like mid-day, despite the dark sky above them. There were people everywhere, but none of them were real, none of them could help the hunter. Even if he got away, they were still in the cage.
“Should’ve thought of this sooner,” the devil crowed, watching Sam’s face as that bright spark of hope sputtered and burned out.

“Fuck you,” Sam spat out.

Lucifer laughed, a sharp sound that burned his skin. “You first.”

The human constructs abruptly stopped going about their business and gathered in a tight circle around them, watching Sam with a hunger that made him grow cold inside. Lucifer let him go but he wore the same terrifying expression, like he wanted to consume the hunter, take a bite out him and keep going until there was nothing left but the sweet aftertaste.

“Strip,” he commanded, as the constructs started to jeer.

The scene repeated a thousand times, with new additions and variations. He tried to fight the first few times, but one day, after Lucifer invariably overpowered him, there was a pause. Sam could feel the hot breath on the back of his neck, the devil nuzzling the spot below his ear as if he were a lover and not a monster about to take what wasn’t his.

“I do enjoy it so much more when you fight,” that smooth dangerous voice said, “That Winchester spirit. It makes your soul so much more delicious.”

Another layer of his soul was flayed away that day and he stopped fighting. Sam started to grow numb, even to this, so Lucifer changed tactics again. Next time, they were alone, in a penthouse suite with a view of a glittering city below them. The hunter didn’t bother giving the view more than a perfunctory glance, none of it was real anyway. He just stood there quietly, waiting for it to begin, as the devil poured himself a drink. Sam knew better than to run or act on his own; he pretended to watch his own feet, all the while keeping Lucifer in his peripherals, intensely aware of every movement, every sigh and flick of the wrist. This was always the worst part, the false calm before the pain and the humiliation started.

This time wouldn’t be different than the others, he assured himself, except now there was a bed involved and his knees wouldn’t be bloodied by the pavement. If only it had been that simple. The hundred thousand times he had done this before, it was about pain, but the devil landed on a new tactic; pleasure. It was so much easier when Lucifer just took what he wanted from the hunter and all he had to do was endure. Now, the devil wanted something so much more awful from him.

“I want you to come for me Sam,” he purred, smiling that hungry smile, as the hunter lay panting on the California King, with its crisp white sheets that smelled vaguely of orange blossoms.

Sam squeezed his eyes shut. This was worse than any of it; being gutted or burned alive or having his eyes cut out. This was definitely worse. It felt like he had been in the cage for a thousand years and all that time, he never once begged. He stayed silent or he screamed. In the worst times, he called out for Dean, but he never begged. Until this moment.

“Please,” he breathed out, hands fisted in those crisp sheets, trying desperately not to give the devil what he wanted, “Stop, please.”

This wasn’t something that belonged to Lucifer; this explosive feeling that he associated with release and the softness of women, this feeling that was private, this feeling that was only allowed with those he trusted. But that was what the devil did; took the beautiful, pleasurable things of the world and twisted them into ugly painful shapes. No one could resist Satan, not when he was right on top of them, smiling that hungry smile and stripping away layers of soul for dinner. After all those years in Hell, this was the first time Sam felt tainted. Even after all those bits of his soul had been peeled
away, there was something deep within him that Lucifer couldn’t touch. Until this moment, when he finally broke.

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Sam’s breathing became erratic as the memories washed over him. He could do nothing but be carried away in the flood, remembering Lucifer’s hands on him. Sera stilled, her free hand brushing his forehead but only managing to drain a sliver of the terror radiating from the hunter. His nightmares were all composites; snatches of real memories woven together with whatever his flayed mind might supply and infused with terror. Seraphina could easily brush them away because the fear had no anchor. With a soft touch, she would bleed the nightmare of its power and it became nothing more than a string of disjointed and ugly moments that slunk away as soon as Sam awoke. But this wasn’t a nightmare; this was a full, solid set of memories that tore at him now.

“Look at me, Sam,” Sera said gently.

He did as he was told, clawing his way out of that glittering hotel room with Lucifer and back into the shadowed Arkansas motel with Seraphina. The blood was pounding in his ears, his eyes were wet and numbly, Sam realized he’d gone soft in her hand. He didn’t even have the energy to feel ashamed. The former angel held his gaze. With anyone else, it might have been awkward, but focusing on those sapphire eyes grounded him and the memories began to retreat.

“This doesn’t belong to him,” Seraphina said fiercely, “You don’t belong to him.”

“He asked, trying to blink the tears away.

Sera cocked her head to the side, a worried crease between her eyebrows. “No one. You’re free.”

“But what if… what if I want…,” the hunter stumbled over the words, terrified of what he was asking for, terrified of what Seraphina might say, “I want to be yours.”

For a moment, her face didn’t change, the concern and confusion evident in the way her eyes narrowed, the way her head tilt deepened. Then, her hand moved to his forearm, where a hand print used to glow and a little shock, like the discharge of static electricity hit him. Instead of confusion, there was a look of piercing certainty on her face.

“Then you are mine, Sam Winchester. I chose you, remember?”

“How can you possibly want me?” Sam choked out, “Knowing what he… how he…”

The young woman shook her head, her other hand finding his tear streaked face. “You are not what was done to you, Sam. You’re perfect.”

Sera leaned forward, her lips cool against Sam’s flushed forehead; a benediction.

“Your soul sang for me in Heaven and it was the most beautiful thing I’d ever heard,” she whispered this against his lips, hovering millimeters from him, giving him the opportunity to turn away.

The hunter was so much larger than her, but Seraphina felt the power she held in this moment; Sam’s vulnerability was laid bare and she would do nothing to hurt or scare him. She kept talking, telling him how brightly his soul shone in Heaven, how strong she knew he was, how blameless. She peppered him with light, chaste kisses, taking her weight off his body, in case he needed to move away. Under this onslaught of love, the memories of Hell could do nothing but skitter away, robbed of their strength. Sera didn’t need what little power the traces of Grace gave her; all she needed was the truth. As that truth tumbled from her lips, a shiver ran through both of them and the place where
her hand met the skin of Sams forearm started to tingle. A feeling like warm honey poured into both of them, loosening their limbs and cocooning them in security. The suffocating weight of Lucifer's cruelty started to lift away and Sam knew that this was the last time a memory of Hell would control him. As his fear fell away, he reached for her, his lips seeking contact. The former angel resisted only for a moment.

“Is this what you want?” She asked.

Sam answered by pulling her down on top of him, his hands looking for purchase in that short unruly hair, his tongue an appeal against hers. Sera made a happy, enthusiastic sound in the back of her throat and opened her mouth to his. The hunter crushed her against him, desperate for contact, their kiss devolving into laughter. Somehow, she managed to snake a hand between them again, her cool palm against the overheated flesh making Sam moan. She resumed her ministrations and Sam threw back his head, making noises that only served to enthuse the former angel. There was something Sera was doing with her thumb that was making him arch up into her hand and when a whine escaped his throat, she nuzzled his neck, increasing the pressure. His heart was hammering, his breath coming out in little gasps, one hand twisting in the sheets, the other holding on to Sera for dear life. She shushed him gently, butting his face with her own like an overzealous cat. Through the haze of pleasure, Sam realized that the former angel was saying something, encouraging him, assuring him that he was safe, saying all the things he desperately needed to hear. With a gasp, he was coming.

It took a few minutes for him to come back to himself and when he did, he found Sera blanketing him again, ignoring the sticky mess between them. The young woman was tugging gently on one of his ears with her clean hand, watching him intently. She smiled, relieved, when he finally blinked and allowed his eyes to focus on her.

“There you are,” Seraphina sighed.

He started reaching for her, unsure if she wanted him to reciprocate, but she pushed herself off of the hunter, grabbing his hand and pulling him up and into the bathroom.

“We’re filthy,” she muttered, pulling off his flannel and tossing it onto the tiled floor.

Sera wasn’t tall enough to pull Sam’s t-shirt over his head, so he obliged, grinning, as she grumbled about him having a whole foot on her. His jeans were already undone and he stepped out of them and his sweaty boxers when the young woman pulled them down to his ankles. In what felt like milliseconds, he was standing naked in front of her. Seraphina let her eyes wander over him and to his surprise, it didn’t feel invasive; none of that gut-tightening fear appeared. For a moment, he hesitated, his hand hovering at her shoulder, but then a wicked grin crossed that lovely, dirt streaked face, and they found themselves naked, under a spray of almost scalding water.

Sam wasn’t sure how they ended up soapy or when he decided to sit down in the tub so that the former angel could massage shampoo into his hair. He was drunk off the joy of having someone love him; someone who’d seen the most terrifying part of his existence and still reached for him. Sera tipped him forward, still sitting cross legged in the tub, to get him under the spray of water and wash the shampoo out of his hair. He laughed, sputtering that the water was getting into his eyes and the young woman clambered over him, putting herself between the spray and his face. They stayed like that for a moment, Sam gazing up at the former angel standing before him, the water bouncing off her back, creating a full body halo of spray and mist. His eyes traveled down her body and a new desire spiked through him. The hunter reached up, cupping her butt and pulled her forward gently, nosing the inside of her thigh.
“Is this ok?” He asked, uncertainty galloping through his chest.

Seraphina stared down at him, suddenly very still, her eyes wide. No one had ever done this for her before. This type of intimacy was hard to achieve on a battlefield or in a trench. Whenever an army she was part of descended on the women of the enemy, she had walked away; participation was unthinkable. The few times she ended up female had not been particularly pleasant either. But here, with Sam, anything seemed possible. He let his hands slide around to rest on the front of her thighs, a thumb softly gliding up into the crease between her legs. She held her breath but he didn’t continue.

“I need…,” he began, but the young woman interrupted him.

“Yes,” she said, a breathlessness edging into her voice, “Yes.”

The tightness in his chest loosened and he leaned forward, licking into the crease, the water running down her stomach mixing with his spit and her own wetness. Sera sighed, relaxing into the sensation, unable to look away from the sight of Sam Winchester below her, eyes closed, licking her in the most pleasurable way. There were lines of bliss shooting down her legs, into her toes and a buzzing pressure building in her very core. She dug her fingers into his scalp, trying to steady herself and he groaned in response, his own fingers working inside of her. The noise of the shower faded into the background, she couldn’t feel the water against her back, all of Arkansas might as well have blinked out of existence. Almost before she knew what was happening, the buzzing became a crescendo and her whole body convulsed, her fingers tightening in Sam’s hair against her will. The hunter kept her upright with a hand against the small of her back and as her body went slack, he stood up, keeping her tucked against him. They grinned at each other stupidly.

“Well, that was… delightful,” she sighed against his chest as he got the last of the soap out of their hair.

They managed to towel off and stumble into bed without incident, tangled together under the sheets in a way that Sam could definitely get used to. Sera wondered what Charlie would say when she inevitably found out.
Give and Take

Chapter Summary

Dean's guilt is about to send him spiraling out of control, but Cas knows just what to do.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The hunt went badly. They were in the Cascades, in a little town outside of Mount Rainier National Park, and a freezing mist was rolling off the mountains; the southern heatwave did not make it this far north and March in Washington felt worlds away from February in Arkansas. In the end, they found the Shtriga and killed it, but not before another child died. Dean was not taking it well. They pulled up to the motel and as soon as the engine went dead, the hunter lurched out of the Impala and into the room he shared with Cas. The three of them sat in silence for a few moments, until Sam announced that he was hungry. Sera only nodded, pointing silently to the bar down the road, with a flashing pink neon sign announcing the best burgers in town. They unfolded themselves from the car painfully, Sam shooting concerned looks in Castiel's direction. The hunter leaned against the trunk of the Impala, his back to the two former angels, pretending not to listen as Seraphina squeezed Castiel's elbow.

“You OK?” she asked quietly, her breath coming out in white puffs that hung between them.

Cas sighed, but nodded, shoving his hands deeper into the pockets of his trench coat.

“Dean gonna be OK?” she asked.

Cas looked toward the motel, his brow creased with worry.

“I’ll take care of him,” he responded, loud enough so that Sam could hear.

Sera set her lips in a determined line.

“OK,” she said after a few moments of consideration, “We’ll be out for at least an hour.”

There was an unspoken agreement that the issue needed to be resolved before Sam and Sera made it back to their room. The walls were thin and she had no intention of subjecting Sam to the sounds that sometimes emanated from a room that Cas and Dean shared, especially not after a hunt like this. If all was quiet and stayed quiet through the night, the younger hunter wouldn’t worry himself into a now rare nightmare. The loss of the child to a Shtriga hit all of them hard and Sam was just as likely to suffer from the kind of debilitating guilt his brother carried, just more quietly.

“I’ll take care of it,” Cas assured her.

A fine drizzle started to fall, making the night feel even colder. Seraphina only nodded, letting go of his elbow to trudge over to Sam and grab hold of him instead. The younger hunter wrapped a protective arm around her shoulders and steered the girl toward the burger joint. The two passed under a street lamp and Castiel watched them for a moment, walking in sync under the rain, their shoulders drooping with exhaustion, toward the warmth and comfort of the eatery. He took a breath and steeled himself for what he would find behind the door of the motel room.
The shower was hissing in the darkness, the thin yellow light of the bathroom seeping out from under the closed door to illuminate the ratty motel carpet. Cas shucked his clothing as quickly as he could; Dean shouldn’t be left alone in the brittle time between a painful hunt and the come-down. The hunter carried guilt like water in the desert; as if suffering were the only thing that might keep him alive. Cas walked into the little bathroom naked. Dean was already in the shower, trying to let the tension drain from his shoulders under the punishing heat of the water. The former angel didn’t wait for an invitation or for permission; he simply pulled the plastic curtain aside, stepped into the shower and pulled the curtain back into place. Dean stiffened, not turning to look at the former angel. Cas didn’t require anything of him in this moment, so he ignored the hunters rigid posture and soaped up as quickly as he could; he couldn’t let Dean out of the shower before him because he might make a break for the Impala and then he’d be lost to the former angel, at least for the night. The men managed to maneuver around each other and the single stream of water without a word; months of shitty motel bathrooms had at least given them that skill. Cas was in and out faster than even he expected. Back in the room, he pulled on his boxers, but nothing else, waiting for Dean to make his exit. The hunter came out of the bathroom with boxers already on, reaching for a t-shirt in his duffel as if this were any other hunt, any other night.

“Dean,” Cas said, a warning in his voice.

The hunter set his lips in a hard line, pulling on his shirt and then jeans and finally settling on the edge of the bed.

“Don’t,” Dean said, shaking his head and fishing for his boots.

“Dean,” Cas repeated, now a little bit of pleading in his voice, reaching for the boots and pulling them out of the hunter's hands.

Dean froze, as if wondering if he was really gonna walk out of the motel room without any shoes on. He seemed to come to a conclusion and surged forward, toward the door, as if knowing what Cas was about to do and trying to head him off. But he wasn’t quite fast enough. Dean managed to pull the motel room door open only a few inches before Castiel came up behind him, throwing his weight against the hunter, the door slamming shut from the momentum and pinning him between the door and the former angel. Every line of his body was tense and rigid, even with Cas enveloping him from behind.

“Don’t,” he breathed.

Castiel hadn’t put his hands on the hunter yet, only leaning his weight against the taut body, one hand holding the door shut, waiting for Dean to make the next move. They stood like that, breath ragged, knowing what was to come next, but neither quite ready for it. The hunter didn’t try to throw an elbow like Cas always expected him to; he simply tried to twist away. They grappled silently for a few moments, momentum taking them away from the door and back into the room. Dean managed to break Castiel’s grip on his shoulder and forearm only long enough to have the former angel twirl him around and firmly secure the hunters wrists behind his back. Once he knew he was in control, Castiel threw them on the bed, his weight bearing down on the hunter, Dean’s wrists trapped between them. Dean panted into the bedspread for several moments, testing the former angels grip. There was no give.

“Don’t,” he said again.

Castiel settled atop the hunter, straddling his legs so he couldn’t twist away.

“That’s not the word we agreed on,” he said softly.
Several weeks ago, Castiel had been rough with Dean in their lovemaking, leaving livid bruises on his wrists. Sam noticed, throwing questioning glances in the former angels direction. Cas was horrified at himself, nauseous at the thought that he’d left marks on the man he promised he would never hurt. Those bruises made him believe that Dean was not always ready to acknowledge when something was too much for him. He’d demanded to know why the hunter hadn’t said anything, when Dean, eyes downcast, mumbled that he didn’t mind it rough sometimes. Cas set his face in rigid opposition.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he’d ground out.

“But you didn’t hurt me,” Dean pleaded.

Castiel didn’t understand. If there were bruises, there must have at the very least been some discomfort, if not pain. Dean denied it. Finally, after some coaxing, exasperation and threats to reduce their intimacy to nothing but cuddling, the hunter explained. He liked it when the former angel manhandled him; because it proved that Cas was just as strong as Dean. Until recently, the hunter trusted only himself to keep him safe. Every time Cas took the reins, withstood the hunters resistance and patiently waited for him to relax, to accept the angels control of the situation, he proved to Dean that he was strong enough to also keep him safe. The bruises were his own fault, the hunter asserted, proof of the fear he was still battling, but also proof of Castiel's willingness to show Dean, over and over again, that he would be there to catch him, no matter how hard he fought against being caught.

The former angel huffed at this, displeased by the bruises and not fully comprehending the hunter’s explanation. What he did understand, was that Dean was being honest with him; honest enough that it was making the hunter stutter and his ears flame red. Castiel knew that the closer his words came to truth, the more uncomfortable it made Dean; until recently, the man had spent very little time actually considering his own feelings or needs and the experience was still new.

Castiel sighed. He was unwilling to continue as before until Dean gave him his word that there would be more effective communication between them. Dean only nodded, avoiding the other man’s eyes, his wrists hidden behind his back and suggested that if he ever said “stop”, that he actually meant it. This was not the in-depth discussion of consent that Castiel had been hoping for, but it was enough. And now, Dean was not using the word they had agreed on. The hunter was pinned beneath the former angel, his face pressed into the bedspread, resolutely refusing to say the word “stop”, so Cas pressed on. He may have been physically in control in that moment, but he had no idea what guilt-ridden or angry corner Dean’s mind was occupying. There was one way to find out, although it didn’t always work out in his favor.

“I’m going to let you go,” Cas said gently, “It’s up to you what happens next.”

A grumble escaped from the hunter's throat and Cas wondered how much fight was left in him. However much it was, he was sure he’d be able to handle it. He released Dean’s wrists, but remained on top of him. For a few beats, the hands didn’t move, but then, with a slight shudder, they migrated from the small of his back to above his head. The hunter was relenting; granting Castiel complete control willingly and trying to cool the guilt and self-loathing which had sent him careening toward the door. The former angel smiled, relieved, and leaned down to place a trail of kisses along the back of Dean’s neck and shoulder, until he felt the bunched up muscles relaxing. He rested his forehead between the hunters shoulder blades, breathing slowly, giving him time to settle and decide what he wanted to come next. Cas was expecting Dean to turn over and silently ask for what amounted to an angel-blanket; the hunter liked the feeling of having the other man completely on top of him, anchoring him to the bed. Cuddling was usually the best option after such an emotionally draining hunt. Instead, Dean took a stuttering breath, then another, and rolled his hips against the
former angel. It was not a very subtle suggestion about what should happen next.

Castiel did not respond right away, considering. He was fairly certain he understood what the hunter wanted. He felt guilty about the lives lost on this particular hunt, which meant he probably wanted the former angel to be rough, to leave bruises; it was a strange form of penance that Castiel could not abide. He had watched for too many years as Dean threw himself into the proverbial meat grinder, taking blows meant for others, bearing burdens which might have been shared, blaming himself as the world gladly tore itself apart. No, there had been enough pain; he would not inflict any more. There were other methods to washing away what Dean was feeling.

Finally coming to a decision, Cas sat back, grasped the hunter's hips and angled them up, propping him up on his knees so that he could pull the jeans and boxers down. He could hear the breath catch in Dean’s throat and he felt a wave of love for the man; there was trust in this moment and he wasn’t about to let his lover down.

“Who am I?” Castiel asked softly, as he dipped toward Dean’s ass, his tongue flicking out.

The hunter gasped, burrowing his face deeper into the blankets, but not answering. This wasn’t what he expected. The former angel allowed his tongue a few circuits of the firm ring of muscle, drawing more sharp intakes of breath from Dean before he asked again.

“Who am I?”

Dean shuddered as Cas worked his tongue, finding his most sensitive spots.

“You’re muh-my partner,” the hunter stuttered.

This was not what the former angel was hoping for and he hummed his disapproval, Dean beginning to writhe under his ministrations. Cas wasn’t about to push though; he wasn’t sure how much the hunter could take tonight, after such a difficult hunt. The former angel pointed his tongue and worked his way inside Dean, earning him several low moans.

“And why am I doing this?” he asked, pausing in his work, his hands keeping Dean’s hips from rocking back into him.

The man underneath him took a ragged breath, very close to a sob, and shook his head. The hands on him were gentle, the pace was slow and deliberate. Somehow, he never expected this tenderness, even though the angel seemed to think he deserved it, always waiting for the hands to turn rough and demanding. Cas frowned, releasing a hold on his hip and reaching around to grasp Dean, hot and heavy in his hand. This earned him another gasp.

“Why?” Castiel pressed, his hand stroking the hunter’s length deftly, his own cock hard and straining in his boxers.

“Because,” Dean whispered, the words stuttered and unsure, “Because… You… You…”

He couldn’t say it and Castiel growled in response, releasing Dean to pull down his own boxers.

“Say it, Dean,” the former angel purred, while lining himself up with his lover's spit-slick opening.

Dean gulped, barely able to get a breath, and shook his head, the words not coming. Instead, he propped himself up on his elbows to get ready for what was to come. He would answer the question eventually, when the friction between them stopped being enough and those walls built of self-loathing and guilt crumbled under the pressure of his need. And then Cas was filling him up. The hunter moaned, throwing back his head and trying to rock backward against the angel, but the grip
on his hips was strong. Cas held him steady, working his way in slowly and then pulling back just as slowly; he was in no hurry. Dean dropped his head, his breathing short and shallow as the former angel took his time, just barely brushing his prostate, never quite filling him up all the way.

“Please.”

There was a hint of a whine. Dean couldn’t take this, the strong hands on his hips, the slow, gentle thrusts, the thing that Cas was asking him to admit. He wanted numbness, oblivion, not this tenderness, not this soft glowing warmth that was slowly lighting him up from the inside.

“Why am I doing this?” the former angel asked again.

“Because you… you…,” again Dean stammered, unable to face the thing that was right in front of him, obvious as gravity, inevitable as fate, “Because you love me.”

Castiel dove into him as soon as the words left his mouth and all Dean could do was utter a strangled cry as the former angel hammered him from behind, landing over and over on that explosive inner part of him like a heat seeking missile. The hunter tried to hold back until he felt Cas’ hips stutter, but he didn’t last long, spilling all over the other man’s hand, which had found him again. A few moments later, the former angel went over the edge himself, empty and shivering on top of Dean. Cas still had enough sense left to steer the other man’s collapse away from the sticky pool below him and pulled him close, breathing in his scent and nuzzling the nape of his neck.

“Yes,” he sighed against Dean’s sweaty skin, “I do.”

When he was an agent of Heaven, Castiel never imagined that this kind of intimacy would ever be available to him; he would have probably recoiled at the idea. But now, lying here, with Dean in his arms, calm and pliant and sated, he didn’t understand how whole millennia had passed without the truth becoming clear. Heaven and the angels were not sacred, they had no real claim on the divine; it was all cold, heartless machinery, compared to the depth of emotion a lowly human could experience in a single afternoon. Galaxies could be born and dissolve into heat and dust and never reach the exquisite heights of human joy or folly. For all of their claims of superiority, no angel could ever sacrifice as much or with such abandon as a human being could. Humanity stumbled through the dark, doing terrible things, grasping for the light, with every reason to lay down and give up; with terror around every corner, with angels and demons pulling the strings, with new and ancient gods demanding their allegiance, they still somehow managed to love each other, to love the world, to find joy and create beauty.

Castiel did not rebel against Heaven because he thought Dean could beat the devil. He rebelled against Heaven because Dean was willing to try. Human, squishy, breakable Dean Winchester, with all of his weakness and fear, was willing to do what the entire Heavenly Host would not; fight for Creation. Castiel, Angel of the Lord, had always tried to do his duty, had always tried to love humanity as he’d been commanded. But one cannot command love. And though he tried, he never quite understood how God could cherish humanity above the angels, until the moment he realized that in God’s absence, his perfect brothers and sisters wanted to burn all of Creation to the ground. Dean imperiously demanded his help; Heaven’s help. And in all of the chaos and betrayal, trusted Castiel with not only his own life, but with the lives of those he loved. That was the moment when the truth finally dawned on him; humanity was the keeper of Creation, angels were just administrative staff with too much power. He learned to love humanity because he loved Dean, because no matter how many times the world failed him, the man still believed that the world was worth saving. More importantly, after every mistake and blunder and deception, he still saw something worth saving when he looked at Castiel. When Dean looked at him, he didn’t feel like an angel or a tool or a soldier, he felt like a person. And that, that was worth fighting for.
Cas kissed Dean’s neck and pulled him closer, so that their bodies were flush. He could tell the other man was still awake by his breathing and wondered if he was going over the events of the day; the hunt, the child they failed to save.

“We tried,” he said softly against the freckled shoulder of the hunter.

“It wasn’t enough,” came the hoarse reply.

“It will never be enough,” the former angel sighed, “The darkness and the death will always keep coming. From all sides. Forever.”

Dean snorted through his orgasm induced haze, “You really know how to cheer a guy up.”

Castiel pressed his forehead against Dean’s shoulder, his hand reaching around to press against Dean’s chest. He could feel the thump of the hunter’s heart against his palm; it was calm.

“The battle is eternal,” Cas said softly, “The point is that we keep fighting. No matter what; no matter the losses, no matter the wins. No matter how many we can’t save. No matter how our hearts break for them and for ourselves. We have to keep fighting.”

He could feel Dean swallow a few times and he wondered what the other man was feeling. He wondered if the hunter was remembering the others, the ones he couldn’t save or the battles he had so spectacularly lost. Finally, there was something like a little nod, a sigh and the tension left his body completely.

“I’m starving,” Dean said, turning around in the former angels arms and meeting his eyes.

Cas held on, placing a few tentative kisses along his arm and the rise of his shoulder, waiting. He looked Dean over, gauging the energy in the others body. He still looked haunted by today’s hunt, his eyes sorrowful, the corners of his mouth turned down, but Castiel saw nothing that set off alarm bells.

“There’s burgers,” the former angel suggested.

“Sold,” Dean said, extricating himself from his lovers arms and making his way to the bathroom, “Gimme a sec to clean up.”

They were dressed and making their way down the road toward the flashing neon sign in record time. The burger place was dimly lit, with deep booths along one wall. Individual lights hung above each booth, casting just enough light to see your food, but otherwise succeeding in only casting deeper shadows. Slightly scratchy, nondescript country music was churning out of a speaker system that had seen better days. It was crowded enough that no one noticed their entrance, but roomy enough that Dean quickly zeroed in on the booth Sam and Sera were huddled in; their burgers having only just arrived. The hunter made quick note of the exits and for a moment, Castiel wondered if coming out was a mistake, but then Sera spied them, waving them over. The smile that broke out on Sam’s face when he saw his brother could’ve blown out the fuses in the restaurant and Dean couldn’t help but reciprocate, clapping the younger man on the shoulder and shoving him gently further into the booth so he could claim a seat. The two former angels exchanged relieved grins.

“I’ll get you guys some beers,” Sera said, enthusiastically popping up from her seat before they could stop her.

Then she was back with a round for all of them; fruity wheats for herself and Cas and lagers for the hunters. The waitress eventually caught on that there were newcomers and sauntered over to take their orders. When she left, throwing an appraising glance at Dean and Cas over her shoulder, they
all raised their glasses, as if on some silent command.

“What are we toasting?” asked Sam.

“Those who didn’t make it,” answered Dean, somber.

They drank. Cas raised a glass again, the others looking at him questioningly.

“And to those who keep fighting.”

For a brief moment, Sam and Dean’s eyes misted over as they gazed at each other and then at their respective angels. This time, they finished their pints.

Chapter End Notes

Sings off key, “Sexual heeeaaaaling!” The boys need some serious therapy before I send them back into the melee. Hope you’re all enjoying these little interludes of smut and fluff before we get back into the serious business of saving the world... again.
All Quiet

Chapter Summary

After months of hunting together, Team Free Will takes some much needed me-time.

Chapter Notes

100% fluff...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The beginning of May found them in southern California, fresh off a hunt for a pack of werewolves. Dean was glad Cas got Sam and Seraphina to come along; the pack ended up being larger than expected. His shoulder was still smarting from where one of the monsters tried to chew through his leather jacket and one of his knees was making an unhealthy popping noise that was slowly convincing him to let Sera take a look. It was the morning after, they were clean, semi-rested and the hunter was gearing up to pack them all into the Impala and head Northeast, toward Kansas. Dean located the rest of his little crew in the dining room, shoveling bacon into their mouths like they hadn’t been fed in days; this was one of those rare times they dipped into their Richard Roman Enterprises fund and ended up at a much nicer hotel than they were used to, one with a huge free breakfast and a pool with a sauna attached. Although, this was California and Dean was pretty sure there was a law on the books requiring even the shaggiest little motel to have a pool. The hunter piled his plate just as high as the others and settled into a seat next to Cas with a grunt and a knee pop.

“We got a long drive ahead of us,” he said after a deep thankful gulp of coffee, “You got your gear squared away?”

The question was meant for Sam and Sera, since he’d already seen Castiel’s packed bag, but when he looked up, the two were gazing at the former angel beseechingly. He glanced between the three. Had they found a new case so soon? Or had they read a headline that revealed a much larger pack of werewolves than they’d killed last night? The former angel sighed and pinned Dean with a look that said ‘Please hear me out’ and the hunter lowered his coffee cup, looking between them suspiciously.

“We’re all pretty tired Dean,” Cas began, his eyes sliding over to Sera, who was nodding at him encouragingly, “Yesterday’s hunt was... challenging. Another night off, before we hit the road would not go amiss, I think.”

The hunter took in the eager looks across the table from him.

“...OK…,” he said slowly, not agreeing yet, knowing there was more to this request.

“So we thought, maybe…,” Castiel began, but his methodical approach was not working for Seraphina and she cut in, her words coming in an excited rush.

“There’s a huge spring festival in town today and we can afford to spend another night out here and the weather’s so nice and there’s a whole booth of deep fried sandwiches and there’s gonna be hot
Sera looked at him with huge hopeful eyes and Dean blinked, for a moment not able to reconcile the eager girl sitting before him, bouncing in her seat and the blood spattered woman from the day before, standing over a pile of werewolf corpses, her machete dripping with gore. Her eyes grew wider than he'd ever seen them before.

“Pleeaaase?” She asked, stretching the word out like a little kid begging for ice cream before dinner.

“It’s been months since we’ve done anything fun,” Sam prodded, “Plus, that sauna looked inviting.”

Sam twisted in his seat, making a face at the popping noises his back made and reminding Dean of his own knee. The sauna definitely sounded like a good idea. When Dean looked to Cas, the other man grinned, already seeing the onslaught wearing away any resistance the hunter may have had and delivered the final blow, “There’s a farmers market in the morning.”

Dean was a sucker for seeing his little family happy and with only a minimal show of disgruntled grumbling, he let the others drag him along. He tried to dissuade them from buying anything perishable, reminding them of the twenty hour drive back to Lebanon, but Castiel insisted on filling their now empty beer cooler with all of his finds. They spent almost half an hour at a stand selling strange looking mushrooms, Cas humming happily over the selection and Sam trying to convince Seraphina that they’re actually delicious and a good source of essential nutrients. She only wrinkled her nose and shook her head.

“Mushrooms are a survival food of last resort,” she insisted, looking to Dean for back up.

The hunter threw his hands up in a gesture of surrender, watching Cas pick through boxes of crinkly orange fungus.

“Hey, you toss anything in some butter and garlic and it becomes edible,” he said, though not very convincingly.

They ended up with two bulging paper bags of chanterelle and porcini mushrooms, despite Seraphina’s nose wrinkling. Castiel spent the rest of the morning talking to a local beekeeper, asking him about beehive construction, temperature, location, species and honey collection, finally walking away with a wistful look on his face. Dean made sure to buy a few jars of honey and carefully tucked the man’s business card in his pocket.

There was an artists alley at this farmers market and while Sam and Cas were off fondling produce, Dean noticed Sera zero in on one particular booth. There were canvases hanging on the back wall behind the artists table and several boxes of prints and postcards, all wrapped in plastic sleeves that crackled slightly as people looked through them. The pictures were abstract, all line and curve and color on a dark background. As Sera examined them, her brow creased and her eyes kept bouncing between the images and the artist, her gaze half awe and half suspicion. The hunter edged closer to the former angel.

“What’s up?” He asked under his breath.

The young woman motioned him over to one of the bins, slowly flipping through the prints.

“They look like angels,” she whispered, her voice reflecting the awe in her face, “Like their true selves, without vessels. The paintings look like angelic energy signatures.”

And after a beat, with sadness in her voice, “I recognize some of them.”
Dean narrowed his eyes, looking over the images Sera was slowly flipping through. There was something to her claim. If he unfocused his eyes and relaxed, the colors started to pulse and swirl, becoming living things. There was something vaguely familiar about the interplay of shape and shade, like a forgotten memory tugging at the back of his mind. Dean and Seraphina both took a sharp breath as she flipped to the last image and for a split second, the hunter was engulfed in heat and flames and pain.

Sera tugged the print out of the bin, holding it at arms length, studying it with a shine in her eyes. “It…,” the breath caught in her throat and she tried again, “It looks just like Castiel.”

The heat and flames and pain were swiftly replaced by the memory of a cool soothing presence; Dean let out his breath. The hunter had seen his partner in true form only once and he wasn’t sure if he could ever call that memory back, or if he even wanted to, but yes, there was something in that piece of art that made him think of Cas and the safety of wings. Seraphina glanced between Dean and the print and then marched over to the artist with a determined air. She carefully counted out the bills, thanked the artist and promptly thrust the print into the hunters hands. He looked at her, confused.

“Happy birthday,” she announced triumphantly.

Dean blinked at her. “My birthday was in January.”

The young woman shrugged. “So happy belated birthday.”

Dean looked back at the artist, his brow wrinkled, until Sera put a hand on his arm and led him away, shaking her head. She could see him trying to work out if they posed a danger, could see him rifling through a mental encyclopedia of monsters and trying to decide where an artist who could see angels might fit. Sera squeezed his arm reassuringly as they walked away.

“Art is many things Dean, but it is not monstrous, as long as it tells the truth.”

She pointed at the print in his hand.

“That is truth.”

As the day faded and the farm stands started to close, the other side of the fairgrounds came to life. The atmosphere was a heady mix of spring festival and state fair, with the roar of hot air balloon burners, the twinkling lights of a Ferris wheel and ubiquitous delighted shrieks of children running past. The smell of popcorn, generator fumes and trampled grass filled the air and all around them swirled the frenetic yet oddly comforting sound of clanking carnival games, rattling rides and Wurlitzer music. The first order of business was to visit the deep fried sandwich stand; Dean and Seraphina were excited about the prospect, while Sam turned a little green when he saw what they ordered. The older hunter ended up with a monstrosity that was stuffed full of bacon, the girl scarfed something down that oozed cheese all over her fingers and Cas took thoughtful bites out of a deep fried peanut butter and jelly sandwich, offering Sam a piece when he saw the other hunter was empty handed. He only shook his head, watching them eat in horror and then dragged them to a smoothie stand so he could have something green and distinctly not greasy.

They eventually found the game alley, with Dean and Seraphina getting increasingly competitive with each other at the shooting gallery. Sam laughed at the looks on their faces when they were thwarted first by a little girl wearing sparkly purple fairy wings and then a string bean of a teen boy who bobbed his head apologetically in their direction. The older hunter finally triumphed, winning Castiel an unwieldy but very fluffy stuffed guinea pig. The thing was large enough that the former
angel suggested they drop it off at the car. The look on Dean’s face at this suggestion prompted Sam to steer Sera toward the Ferris wheel, muttering about them probably being gone for a while. The two men disappeared into the crowd, their fingers sticky with cotton candy and their lips tasting of funnel cake.

When they found the car, Cas gently placed the stuffed animal into the back seat and turned, ready to return to the noise and the lights. Dean, however, pressed him against the side of the Impala, his knee finding its way between the former angel’s legs and kissed him hard. The other man smiled against the warm lips and snaked his hands under that cracked and well worn leather jacket, pulling him closer. It had taken months, but Cas finally stopped wearing Jimmy Novak’s suit, although he would always reach for the trench coat at any sign of cold weather. It was nearing summer and they were in southern California, so he was dressed in an AC/DC t-shirt and a pair of jeans the hunter convinced him to buy before Sam and Sera showed up, the waist riding low on his hips. All day, Dean watched Castiel as he moved through the world, happy and mostly unharmed, grinning at something his brother said or putting his hand on Sera’s shoulder to guide her through a crowd. All day, those damn jeans would ride lower and lower on his hips, revealing the band of his underwear, until the former angel would hike them back up with a single finger hooked through a belt loop, performing a little wiggle that Dean was certain was completely unconscious. But there was something about seeing him happy and comfortable and so unconcerned, that spiked lust in his belly. And the wiggle probably had something to do with it too.

Dean took a furtive look around, making sure the coast was clear. Cas answered him with a laugh and pulled him through the open passenger door, knocking the guinea pig over. Dean wasted no time and divested the former angel of those wonderfully low slung jeans, while also trying to kiss him senseless. The two men spent enough time in the Impala with similar intentions in the past, so it was no surprise when not one, but two little bottles of lube were quickly located and put to good use. He felt like a teenager on a forbidden tryst and kept expecting a security guard or a lot attendant to rap their knuckles on a window irritably. But Cas was below him, breath coming out in little gasps, legs wrapped firmly around the hunter, urging him deeper and all thoughts of the world beyond the Impala melted away. They came with their sweaty foreheads pressed together and Dean’s hand between them, working until the former angel was arching his back, his eyes squeezed shut, the orgasm rocking through him, with the hunter close behind.

The two men lay there, thoroughly fucked and satisfied and just for a moment, considered taking a nap instead of returning to the fair. The night started to cool the interior of the car and Cas mumbled something about rides he still wanted to try. So they cleaned up, found their discarded clothes, made sure they weren’t too disheveled and made their way back to the pulsing light and cacophony of smells and sounds.

They rode every ride, Sera cackling with glee on the ones that went fast and high. The former angels liked those the best and rode them over and over again, until the hunters tapped out, nauseous. They took pity on the men and found a slightly neglected looking swing chair ride on the edge of the fair grounds, with acres of untouched grass stretching into the darkness behind it. Sam and Dean found a patch of soft grass, away from the foot traffic and free of the detritus of the fair and stretched out atop their jackets, trying to keep their lunches from coming up. From this low vantage point, they watched Sera and Castiel, strapped into those little plastic seats, swinging above them in wide arcs over and over again. Their faces were lit by the yellow light, undulating from the underside of the rides roof, spinning like a giant bio-luminescent mushroom from Wonderland and Sam noticed something.

“They’re smiling,” he said.

The wild delight of earlier rides was replaced by something more peaceful, more settled. As the hunters watched, the two former angels reached across the space between them and took hands,
turning their faces into the wind, eyes closed.

“It probably reminds them of flying,” Dean said, his voice hushed.

Seraphina never did get to ride a hot air balloon, but she was too happy to care. It took them three days to get back to Lebanon. On a whim and in uncharacteristically high spirits, Dean took a detour to the North rim of the Grand Canyon and they spent a lazy afternoon sunning themselves on the balconies of the Lodge, with beers they managed to sneak in. Castiel took an unnecessary amount of photos, and found that it took little convincing to get them all to hike to Bright Angel Point. He even got a portly tourist, who was taking panorama shots with his iPad, to put the device down and snap a few pictures of them, grinning and squinting in the sunlight.

Dean’s favorite photo, however, was taken by Sam when the other men weren’t paying attention. The Grand Canyon, unfocused and in the background, showed Sera standing between Cas and Dean, atop the low stone wall separating the trail from the rim, her back to the camera and one hand up, shielding her eyes from the sun, with her other hand resting lightly on Castiel’s shoulder for stability. Cas was turning toward Dean, who was leaning against the same wall, shoulders relaxed, a grin on his face, one hand wrapped around Seraphina’s ankle, an unconscious and protective gesture to make sure she didn’t tip over the edge. The two men were saying something to each other, smiling, their faces wholly untroubled. There was something so familial, so comfortable about that photo, that Dean printed it out as soon as they got home and set it lovingly next to the old battered snapshot of him laughing with his brother; both now leaning against the print from the farmers market.

After the Grand Canyon, they spent another long afternoon at a hot spring in the San Luis Valley and then another day in Denver, dropping in on Kevin and his mother. The mushrooms Castiel purchased were fried up on an old cast iron skillet over a campfire with the promised butter and garlic somewhere between the canyon and the hot springs. Even Seraphina admitted they were good. By the time they rolled into Lebanon, it felt like whole lifetimes had passed. It was the first time in a long time that they allowed themselves to relax, to breath freely and just for a few days, to not worry about the world at large. They took care of themselves and each other and all was quiet on the supernatural front.

But this, like all good things, wouldn’t last.

Chapter End Notes

I want them all to be extra happy before I tear out their hearts.
Harbor Green

It all started innocently enough; if active demon signs could be called innocent.

“Get this!” Sam said in lieu of a greeting, clomping down from the library into the kitchen, laptop in hand. It was early in the morning, the others were only just getting to their breakfast, bleary eyed and still sleep rumpled. He dropped into a seat at the table, pushing aside anything in his way so they could all see the computer screen. Castiel grunted, reaching around the hunter, trying to get his coffee cup back, while Seraphina groaned, watching the plate in front of her suddenly get shoved to the opposite side of the table. The two hunters took a moment to meet each other's gaze and attempt to suppress snorts. It turned out, angels were not morning people; at least not these two. Dean got the coffee cup back to Cas and pushed the plate of butter and jam toast back at Seraphina, navigating around the laptop. The former angels graced him with a deep look of thanks and the two fell to their caffeine and breakfast, while Sam attempted to pique the group's interest.

“Demon signs!” he exclaimed, spreading his arms like a magician after a trick.

Castiel sipped at his coffee, his eyes narrowed to slits, Seraphina licked jam off her fingers and Dean blinked at him owlishly.

“S’what?” the older hunter mumbled around a yawn, trying and failing to steal a piece of toast from Sera’s plate. Only after he silently admitted defeat did she graciously hand him a triangle covered in strawberry jam. “Find it, bag it, tag it.”

Cas and Dean had been hunting the left over demons long enough, that the prospect didn’t elicit much excitement from him, especially since they started using the witches orbs. The hunter didn’t feel any satisfaction with their current method, mostly because it was mere containment and not elimination of the threat. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end any time he thought about what might happen in the bunker if the orbs failed and their prisoners somehow made it out of the demons trap. That anxiety was the reason he kept finding himself in the dungeon, staring at the bright red box meant for Christmas ornaments as if it were a puzzle he was trying to solve.

“It’s a huge cluster of signs!” Sam exclaimed, obviously frustrated by the groups indifferece,  “Electrical storms, a water spout, asperatus clouds, a local church reported one of their statues started crying, and a local man is missing. It’s been going on for weeks; a sign here, a sign there, which is why I didn’t catch it before...”

The group was not engaged. He watched incredulously as Cas grabbed the last piece of toast from Seraphina’s plate while she was replenishing her coffee. The girls pout, when she saw her empty plate, was perfectly theatrical. With a flourish, Dean unveiled a dish piled high with bacon and the two former angels again looked at him with the deepest gratitude. It was a game they all played, especially at breakfast, when words were too hard and facial expressions sufficed. It was also a strange little ritual in intimacy, taking food from each other. Over these last months, Sam noticed a pattern; Seraphina would steal food from his plate and Castiel would add food to Dean’s plate, while the two angels would occasionally exchange small tidbits. Sam always ended up with the lettuce from Sera’s burgers, while Dean got her pickles. The three men would invariably deposit any raspberries they ended up with on the young woman’s plate; they were her favorite. It was sweet and made something warm gather in his chest; it made him feel like he was part of a family. He felt a grin sliding across his face, but then shook it off; there was more to his information and he needed them to share his level of urgency.
“All the signs are centered around Harbor Green, Wisconsin,” he said with great gravity, pulling on his best bitch face.

The others paused in their consumption of the bacon, sensing that Sam’s patience was wearing thin and glanced at each other. The town name obviously meant nothing to them. The hunter crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair.

“You know, sometimes I wonder how we ever survived this long,” Sam muttered, expelling a long suffering sigh.

Sera grinned, munching loudly on a brittle piece of bacon. “Supernatural meddling and your own unerring gumption,” she declared.

“Hear, hear!” Dean responded enthusiastically, clanking coffee mugs with the girl, forgetting his brothers slightly sour mood.

Sam glared at them. “Harbor Green, Wisconsin is only a few miles from the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore.”

The mood in the room turned icy and the men looked at Seraphina. She swallowed her bacon loudly and looked between them, her eyes wide and anxious. The Apostle Islands was where they landed after being expelled from Heaven; where Sam was left standing naked on a rocky beach and the girl plummeted into the frigid waters of Lake Superior. Her gaze finally dropped into her lap, where her hands were balled into fists.

“My Grace,” she said quietly.

They were packed and ready to leave in less than twenty minutes, but it took them almost fourteen hours to reach Harbor Green, mostly because they were trying to avoid driving straight through any large cities. They made an exception for Des Moine, but Dean was adamant about detouring around Minneapolis and St. Paul. He shuddered at the mere mention of Route 94 and Hiawatha Avenue.

“People died while I was trapped in traffic, Sammy,” he yelled, when the GPS suggested driving through the Twin Cities, “Find me another way!”

Sam wasn’t sure if his brother meant that people had died of supernatural causes while he was there on a case, or if he had throttled someone while stuck in gridlock, but decided not to press the issue. They detoured east and when the younger hunter mentioned crossing the Mississippi River, Seraphina popped up from her slumped position in the back seat.

“The Mississippi?” she asked, adding particular emphasis on the first word, “Can we stop? Can I see? Can I put my toe in? Please, please, please?”

The girl was bouncing in her seat, her chin practically on Dean’s shoulder; he swatted her away. She was sullen and combative most of the trip until that point because he refused to let her drive. Despite Gabriel gifting her a ridiculous lime green Prius, the car became more Sam’s than hers, due to her questionable interpretation of speed limits and civilian rules of the road. When the girl expressed an interest in taking a shift driving Baby, Dean had asked about the last time she’d driven anything besides the green hybrid. Seraphina screwed up her face, trying to remember.

“Last thing I drove was a stolen Panzer on the Western Front,” she said laughing, “Crashed it into a
river.”

Dean looked horrified, while Sam tried to cover up his laughter with a cough, and refused to let her get behind the wheel.

“C’mon,” she pleaded, “I’ve never even seen the Mississippi. I just want to dip in one toe. A pinky. I’ll be quick!”

“No,” he growled, annoyed.

They were eight hours into the drive, Dean having only just started his four hour shift at the wheel and he was in no mood for sightseeing. The closer they got to Harbor Green, the more solemn their musings became about the sudden re-emergence of demonic activity. Seraphina was stubbornly insistent that it had nothing to do with her lost grace, while Sam and Castiel came up with more and more ominous theories about how the two might be connected. After hours of enduring this, Dean finally snapped at them all to shut up, popped in a Led Zeppelin tape and took the turn east, before Minneapolis could darken their horizon. An hour later found them crossing the Hastings Bridge, the Mississippi River a murky green below them. Sera rolled down her window, craning her neck, trying to see further upriver. The hunter slowed their progress, but refused to stop.

“It’s just a river,” he’d grumbled in response to the girls disappointment.

She only sighed in answer, rolling up her window slowly and gazing wistfully behind them as the bridge and the water disappeared from sight.

They managed to find a motel room in the center of Harbor Green, despite it being almost midnight and despite the fact that the official population of the town was just shy of six hundred. The bleary eyed girl at the front desk didn’t give them any dirty looks when they opted for a single room with two queen beds, reasoning that they would be safer together. It had been almost half a year since any major demon signs surfaced and they weren’t ruling out a trap; it was possible Abaddon knew they were hunting her and this may be a way to draw them out. Sam and Dean were first in the room, while Cas was still rummaging around in the back of the Impala and Sera dropped all of their fast food wrappers off in the dumpster at the other end of the parking lot. The older hunter elbowed his brother good naturedly.

“No hanky panky, Sam,” Dean grinned.

Sam only rolled his eyes.

“Keep your hands to yourself for a full twenty four hours and then maybe we’ll talk,” he responded, depositing his duffel on the bed farthest from the door.

Dean snickered. “I got self control, it’s Cas that’s got wandering hands.”

Sam groaned, waving a hand at Dean, as if trying to wave away the image he’d conjured up.

“C’mon man, TMI.”

The four of them were too exhausted by the emotionally draining drive to get up to much trouble that night; they were asleep within minutes of finally settling in.

The next morning, they did decide to split up for reconnaissance, in order to avoid arousing too much suspicion. Two FBI agents working in tandem made sense; four was overkill. Dean and Cas played
the agents, looking into the disappearance of a local man named Arnold Hugh, while Sam and Sera played the happy couple on a roadtrip, eager to get ahead of the tourist crowd and equally eager to collect stories of strange happenings from the locals. It didn’t take them long to find out that Arnold, the local man who’d gone missing and eventually led Sam to suspect demon activity, was not loved by the town. He had been a local trouble maker from his youth and the Harbor Green police chief didn’t seem to mind that the man had disappeared.

“Son,” Chief Warren sighed at Dean, sounding like a man who fought the same battle too many times, with no change in outcome, “That Arnold has been a thorn in my backside since I was a recruit. And his papa before him was no prize neither. If he’s gone… well, safe travels to him. But I’m not about to waste what little manpower I have out here on looking for a man I’d rather stay gone.”

Besides the police chief, there were only four patrol officers for the town and surrounding area. Dean and Castiel assured the man in charge that they would never dream of taxing his small unit and would happily spearhead the investigation without local involvement. They did manage to pull some useful information from the man, despite his reluctance to help the agents; until he was declared dead by the state, Arnold was still the owner of several acres of land outside of town. That land used to host a prosperous greenhouse operation before the economy went to shit in the 80’s and the family turned to shadier business.

“The greenhouses are still out there, rotting away and I suppose…,” the police chief admitted grudgingly, rubbing at the stubble on his chin, “If he were hiding out from his creditors or his dealers, I’d probably look there.”

“But you haven’t?” Castiel had asked, dutifully scribbling away in his notepad, like a good agent.

“Aw hell boys,” Chief Warren groaned, leaning back in his chair, “I got enough problems with the damn opioid overdoses at the high school and the tourists ready to overrun my town as soon as the warm weather hits. You want Arnold? He’s yours. If you can find him.”

With that, he waved them away impatiently, turning to the piles of paperwork on his desk.

Sam and Seraphina had a leisurely brunch at the diner in the center of town, chatting up the waitress and the locals. Apparently, odd stories were coming out of the local reservation about shooting stars that looked like women, strange lights in the depths of the lake and even stranger people haunting the shore at night.

“Buncha’ people saw the shooting star,” confirmed one of the waitresses, “We live right outside the rez and my husband was out on the back porch having a smoke when he saw it. Said it was brighter than any he’d seen before and it made the most peculiar sound when it came down.”

Seraphina chewed on the inside of her lip, rolling a blueberry back and forth across her mostly empty plate with a fork, avoiding Sam’s sympathetic gaze.

A little old lady at a neighboring booth nodded, her tight gray curls bouncing enthusiastically, “My grandson’s part of that star watching club or what have you. He reported it to the American Fireball Society.”

The man next to her shook his head, “It’s the American Meteor Society, Marge!”

“I know what I’m about Gunther,” the woman snapped at her husband, “Point is, they said it
shouldn’t a made a noise like that.”

Gunther made a clucking sound at the woman, shaking his head and waving her words away. He repositioned the baseball cap on his head and tapped the insignia on the front, which signified that he was a veteran of the Korean War, USAF.

“It was a damned Air Force experiment gone wrong is what it was! How else do you explain the lights in the water and all those strange folk coming ’round, asking about the islands and renting boats in the middle of the spring thaw?”

“If it was the Air Force, wouldn’t they have uniforms?” Piped up a young man sitting at the counter, “And wouldn’t they have just fed us some bullshit but ‘official’ story about a weather balloon?”

The whole diner was involved in the discussion at this point, without any direction or input needed from the couple now quietly absorbing all of this information. Reliving the fall made Seraphina squirm in her seat; she could feel the moment they reached terminal velocity, the moment they hit the atmosphere, the moment she thought she might lose her grip on the man in her arms. Heat raced down her back and more than anything, she wanted to dash out of that booth and through the door into the cool spring air. But then, there was a foot tapping hers under the table and Sam increased the pressure until she looked up at him. He laid a hand, open and palm up, on the table between them; an offering.

One of the main things that Seraphina had in common with Dean was that kindness directed her way always took her by surprise. While the lack of such would take Sam and Cas by surprise. She spent so many lifetimes in warzones, faced with the worst of humanity, that the simplest moments of care from those around her would swell her heart with love and tighten her throat. The sight of that large palm, trusting and inviting, nearly made her burst and she placed her own atop it, the heat of the fall retreating.

Eventually, the animated discussion about the “shooting star” devolved into local town gossip and the couple made their escape. When the four of them regrouped later that day, they all agreed the greenhouses should be their first stop because finding and neutralizing the demon, if there was one, was their top priority. The stories coming out of the reservation, however, made them all uneasy. The lights seen in the depth of the lake after Seraphina’s fall could very well have been her lost Grace.

“Even if it was, who would have the power and the know-how to harvest it?” Sam asked, his face earnest and imploring, trying to calm the young woman’s growing sense of unease.

“A Knight of Hell might,” Castiel said darkly.

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They decided to approach Arnold Hugh’s old property after sunset. The greenhouses were on the western outskirts of town, past a winery and an auto repair place, and down a rutted dirt road. Dean forewarned the police chief that the “agents” would be surveying the property and the man promised to keep his people apprised, so that the police officers on duty wouldn’t confuse them for trespassers or copper wire thieves. In the dark, it would be easier to hide Sam and Sera from view if any locals got curious and play it all off as two FBI agents performing their due diligence.

The property was large, but there wasn’t much left on it; the older a-frame greenhouses had rotted away decades ago and almost none of the other structures had any plastic sheeting left on them.
Decades of winter storms and general neglect even toppled some of the gothic arch greenhouses, scattering bits of metal framing, poking up through the layers of dead leaves and weeds like dull bones. Finally, they located a row of buildings that looked more-or-less intact, if still beat to hell by the elements. After almost six months together, they functioned well as a unit; clearing the buildings silently and efficiently. Cas and Dean had their handguns drawn and they acted as the forward unit. Since Sam and Sera were playing civilians, they only carried angel blades. It was in the greenhouse furthest from the road, in the very back of the building, that they found him.

“Fuckin finally,” a voice groaned from the darkness.

The four of them almost killed Arnold right then and there; but he flipped a switch and the lights came on, illuminating the scene. Several solar powered lanterns hung haphazardly from the metal frame of the greenhouse, casting a cold blue light across everything. A soggy sleeping bag was bunched in a corner of the room, surrounded by piles of raunchy magazines. There were empty cans of beans and tins of tuna littering the floor and a hand cranked radio sat on an upturned crate. The floor must have been cleared at one point, because underneath all the debris, the hunters could see perfectly crafted devil’s traps, surrounding what might be called the living quarters, in a protective arc. Arnold sat against one of the corrugated plastic walls of the greenhouse, the traps between him and the four intruders. The man was pale and rumpled, wearing what looked like a gray velvet jogging suit. Old sweat stains ringed his neck and radiated from his armpits and the reek of body odor made them all take a disgusted step back. The dull shine of a Glock, pointed in their general direction and propped casually on his knee, had their undivided attention.

“I was hoping it would be you guys and not Abaddon come to finish the job,” he sighed, looking almost relieved to see them and indicating his chest with his free hand.

What they had all taken to be a very large food stain on the front of his zip-up coalesced into an old bullet wound as their eyes adjusted to the light.

“The heinous bitch put a devil’s trap on the bullet! It must have bounced around in there ‘cuz I couldn’t find it. I’ve been stuck inside this disgusting body for weeks, hiding like a damn rat on this trash pile, trying to give off just enough signals for you idiots to find me,” he snarled at them, “I mean really, I thought you Winchesters were professionals.”

Sam and Dean exchanged looks, trying to gauge if the other had any idea what Arnold was talking about, while Sera and Cas started to move, almost imperceptibly, to put themselves between the loaded gun in the demon’s hand and their respective Winchester brother.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” the demon spat, getting up in one fluid motion, pointing the weapon at Dean’s chest, “You two can go stand in the corner, or I kill the short one first.”

The former angels froze while Dean glowered. Arnold may have been trapped in his particular body, but bullets wouldn’t do much to stop him. Bullets would, however, kill all four of them, no matter what healing spell Seraphina came armed with. They glanced at the hunters, waiting for confirmation and received two curt nods in response.

“Good birdies,” the demon smirked as Cas and Sera stepped away.

“What do you want?” Sam asked, trying to divert attention away from his brother.

“Didn’t think I’d get this far,” he muttered, almost to himself, “Been thinking Abaddon would get here first.”
The demon sighed, the glock in his hand lowering slightly. He scratched at the back of his neck with his free hand. The hunters exchanged confused looks again, while the former angels watched Arnold’s movements with laser focus, trying to gauge the likelihood of the gun being used against them. The odds were not in their favor. After several tense moments, Sam pulled in a breath to speak again, when the demon seemed to come to a decision and cut him off.

“I want to fuck her shit up.”

“Well that clears things right up, Arnie,” Dean growled.

The demon’s face contorted in an angry grimace and he refocused his aim on Dean’s chest. A low warning rumble rose from Castiel’s throat, directed at both Arnold and the hunter.

“I don’t want to kill you. Two Winchesters helping me take down Abaddon is better than one, but if you do anything stupid, I will blow you away,” Arnold declared, with all the bravado of someone who’s convinced themselves that they are in total control of a situation.

“Helping you?!” Sam asked, incredulous.

“Yeah Paul Bunyan,” Arnold said, rolling his eyes at them, “Helping me. Take. Down. Abaddon.”

“One. Why the hell would we help you? Two. Why the hell do you want to kill a Knight of Hell? You’re a freakin demon,” Dean said.

“She wants to reopen the gates of Hell,” he explained, “And I like the world just as it is right now, thank you very much; no angels to make my life difficult and no exorcisms to send me back to the pit.”

With his weapon still trained on Dean, Arnold explained why demon signs had gone almost completely silent in the last few months. He didn’t know what Abaddon had been up to right after the slamming of the gates, but within weeks, she started forcibly recruiting demons to her cause. Even before the Winchesters could track the leftovers, she would seek them out and give them a choice; join her or die. Many tried to run; many didn’t make it. Abaddon wanted to take advantage of the fact that Heaven could not intervene and would remain powerless; if the gates of Hell were reopened, there would be no angelic Host to stand in their way and humanity would be theirs for the taking. The hunters shifted uncomfortably, while the former angels froze, still as statues, as the implications of this information filtered in. If Abaddon succeeded, it would be the end. Even if Heaven wanted to help, Gabriel would be the only one able to leave and even an archangel stood no chance against all of Hell’s fury alone. It would be the apocalypse. Again.

“None of us want that,” Arnold said.

The other demons secretly objected to this plan, not because they had any love for humanity, but simply because they all hated Hell. Even for a demon, Hell was still… Hell. They didn’t much care if their brethren were trapped down there, as long as they were not. Arnold, unlike many before him, managed to escape. He realized that if there was anyone in the world ready and willing to stop Abaddon, it would be the Winchester brothers.

“So what,” Dean growled, “You wanna join the Scooby gang? Is that it?”

“Why not?” Arnold asked, “You worked with Crowley.”

“We’ve got trust issues when it comes to demons,” Sam answered.

Arnold rolled his eyes. “So get some counseling. Plus, I’ve got something to offer.”
All four of them arched an eyebrow skeptically, exchanging glances. The demon laughed and pulled a small glass cylinder hanging from the end of a chain from his pocket; it glowed blue. For a moment, the hunters didn’t understand what they were seeing, until the former angels gasped behind them.

“My Grace,” Sera whispered, her eyes going wide with wonder and her weight shifting as if she might take a step toward Arnold.

“Not all of it,” the demon said.

Seraphina froze, processing the information half a second faster than the others. She bared her teeth, taking an appalled step back, Castiel shifted toward her, as if to shield her from the glowing vial.

“Poison,” she hissed at Arnold, “THIS is what you have to offer?”

Arnold rolled his eyes. “It was going to be a negotiating tactic. Give you the Grace back piecemeal, to get at the Demon tablet. She knows you need all of it.”

“Abaddon… *broke* an angel’s Grace? In half?” Sam asked, incredulous, “How is that even possible?”

“It’s not,” Castiel cut in, his eyes narrow, his mouth set in a distrustful line, “She would’ve had to generate an unbelievable amount of power and with the Gates closed; she can’t tap into Hell.”

“That’s very true,” Arnold said darkly, his lip curling in disgust at the memory, “But it turns out a dying demon generates quite a bit of energy, especially when you put them into an amplification circle and kill them slowly. It took her four tries just to get it right the first time.”

The whole demon sign ruse was about self preservation for Arnold. Although the former angels and Winchesters wanted the same thing he did, they would not make good allies. The glowing cylinder hung between them, the light sputtering slightly, giving away it’s damaged nature. The demon illuminated the danger they were in, with Abaddon plotting against them, but was it enough for them to agree to work with him? Having a demon on their side would be helpful, but with Cas and Seraphina human, there would be no sure way to keep him under control. However, if they played their hand right, they might be able to take out a Knight of Hell and gain an angel at full power out of the deal. It seemed that both Abaddon and Arnold’s plans made a very big assumption; that they would be desperate for the Grace. The three men turned to Seraphina; it was her Grace, it was up to her how they would proceed. Her face wrinkled in disgust.

“No,” she said, shaking her head, “I’d rather be human than chase after that mutilated Grace.”

Arnold’s face contorted in rage.

“What?!” he screamed.

And then the gun went off.
The Gun Went Off

The gun went off. For a moment, Sam didn’t connect the sound to the deadly red flower blooming across Dean’s chest. Even the demon looked shocked, as if he hadn’t meant to do it. Maybe he hadn’t, but they would never know. Many things happened all at once, it felt like only the span of a breath, it took a millennia. Dean stumbled backwards and collapsed, blood spilling from his mouth. Castiel flew to his side, face pale, eyes begging for this all to be a lie.

“Dean, Dean, Dean, Dean.”

The whispered prayer, tripping from the former angels lips, like the toll of a distant church bell.

Dean, Dean, Dean, Dean.

It was the metronome of the moment and Sam followed its lead. He turned on the demon with murder on his mind, the angel blade warm in his hand.

"You!” Seraphina screamed, her face distorted by anger.

The demon turned to her, eyes wide, distracted. Perhaps he hadn’t been paying attention for the last decade, but when facing a Winchester, one never had the upper hand. He must have forgotten the lessons in fear that the tales of the Swords had wrought in him. He must have been absent the day the hunters beat the devil and thwarted the angels all in one grand sweep. It must have slipped his mind that the most dangerous creature on the planet is not a demon or an angel, but a Winchester, watching his brother die. Again.

Dean, Dean, Dean, Dean.

Sam launched himself forward, the angel blade in his hand sinking into the demons chin to the hilt and as its life force sputtered out, he caught the little glass cylinder before the dying creature could drop it. It was in the air before the hunter even understood what he was doing; the metronome was the engine that drove him. Sera caught the glimmering thing and with a cry, wrenched the top off.

What Sam would always remember about this moment was that the girl didn’t hesitate, didn’t brace herself or take a breath. She must have known, the hunter reasoned later, what was to come; what kind of pain was waiting for her in that tiny, glowing container. But she never faltered and drank that shattered, broken Grace.

Dean, Dean, Dean, Dean.

Seraphina turned to his injured brother and Sam managed to snap his eyes shut just as that searing light filled the room. He always expected the light of Grace to be hot, to burn his skin, but it was cool instead. It had a weight to it that was hard to describe; like water tension on your skin when you just barely skim the surface of a pond with your palm. The light moved too, Sam could feel it flowing past him, smooth and dangerous, a snake gliding silently over sand. There was a sudden intake of breath, like someone breaking the surface after a fathomless dive and Sam’s eyes flew open.

“Dean,” Cas breathed, his voice broken but relieved.

Sam almost laughed. How long had it been? Four seconds? Maybe five? It was a lifetime. His older brother was still on the floor, but the blood was gone, his mouth hanging open in shock, alive. Dean’s eyes were trained on the girl before him. Sam and Castiel would never know what it was that he saw in her face, but it made him take in a ragged, heartbroken breath. He might have yelled something, perhaps her name, but all the other hunter saw was her body going limp and the
inexorable power of gravity making itself known. Sam launched himself across the room again, catching Seraphina before her head hit the ground. The normal flow of time reasserted itself and the hunter struggled up into a sitting position, an angel in his arms.

“Cas?” he said, voice panicky.

Dean and Castiel scrambled to him, peering down at the unconscious form. There was blood flowing from her nose, her face ashen. Sam propped her up so she wouldn’t choke on the blood undoubtedly running down the back of her throat, while his brother pulled a bandana from his back pocket, trying to staunch the flow. Castiel's hands fluttered over her hair, her shoulders, her cheek, but it was pointless; he had no way to heal her. They sat like that in silence until the red bandana turned brown and could hold no more blood. Sam readjusted his hold on the girl and her head lolled sickeningly until he brought it to rest against his shoulder. The nosebleed finally stopped.

“Is she going to die?”

Dean swallowed; his brother sounded like a little kid, suspecting the answer and terrified of having it confirmed. Sam wouldn’t look at either of them, his face buried in Seraphina's unruly hair. She looked tiny like that; cradled in the large hunter's arms.

“The Grace,” Cas said haltingly, “It was damaged. Very damaged. I… I don’t know.”

Sam's arms tightened around the girl and he curled in on himself, his breathing loud and tightly controlled. Dean could tell he was trying to stay calm; his own body was starting to shiver in response, his mind catching up to the fact that only moments before, there had been a gaping hole in his chest. Action was the best antidote to panic, he decided, remembering his father saying something vaguely similar.

“We need to get rid of the body,” Dean said into the silence.

Sam balked, looking up at him in horror, crushing Seraphina closer to him.

“She’s not…” he began.

Dean cut him off, “The demon, Sammy.”

“Oh right,” the younger hunter said, dazed, his shoulders dropping a bit, relaxing his hold on the girl.

Dean's eyes roved over his brother and the limp form in his arms, eventually meeting Castiel’s. There was a moment of silent discussion, all accomplished through eyebrows and shoulders and they came to an agreement. The older hunter cleared his throat.

“Uh, Sammy, why don’t you stay here with Sera till she comes to. Keep her safe. Cas and I will take care of Arnold, ok?” he used that same voice any time dad came home injured, before Sam knew who they really were, what his family did. Dean would thrust whatever snack was still uneaten into his brother’s hands and steer the younger boy to the TV, telling him to stay put, while mentally bracing himself to stitch up his father with dental floss until they could get to Pastor Jim’s or Bobby’s. Sam only nodded numbly.

The hunter and the former angel made short work of the body. The soil was moist and responsive, so they dug a proper grave; a deep one. The two men salted and burned what was left of Arnold and covered the disturbed soil with an artfully placed pile of the detritus that had been abandoned along with the crumbling greenhouses. Sweaty and covered in a fine layer of dirt, the two men made their way back into the greenhouse. They found Sam in the exact same place they had left him; Seraphina was still unconscious in his arms. Castiel touched the younger hunter on his shoulder gently and he
“The healing spell,” Sam croaked, coming out of his daze, “We have to cast that healing spell she used on Dean. She always brings the ingredients with her on a hunt, just in case.”

Castiel glanced at the horizon and nodded.

“Yes, we can certainly try that,” the former angel said softly, his eyes mournful, “But we need to get back to the motel before dawn.”

Dean realized that the sky had begun to change color, getting lighter in the East. Cas was right, they needed to get behind closed doors before the sun rose; it would not do well to be seen hauling around an unconscious young woman, especially one covered in so much blood. Again, Sam only nodded numbly and managed to get to his feet without help. Castiel held one of the car doors open, while the younger hunter folded himself and the bundle in his arms into the back seat of the Impala. They made it back to the motel without incident and Dean breathed a sigh of relief after he locked the door and drew all the curtains. That relief didn’t last very long. They performed the spell, but nothing seemed to change. The former angel tried to console Sam, reminding him how long it took for Dean to come to after the spell had been cast. The older hunter suggested they all needed rest and the magic just needed time to work it’s way through her system. But Sam just shook his head and wouldn’t let go of Seraphina, as if putting her down would kill her.

“Dude,” Dean sighed tiredly, “You’re gonna need to piss eventually.”

Sam didn’t even glare at him, just took in a tremulous breath that sounded so close to defeat, that Dean’s heart clenched. Maybe the spell didn’t work on broken angels. What if it were Cas, the older hunter wondered. Would he be willing to take any shit from Sam if it were his angel, silent and still and covered in blood? So, he let it go and toed off his boots before collapsing onto the other bed. After pensively considering the younger hunter and the girl in his arms, Castiel surprised Dean by doing the same; except he went through the added step of pulling off his trench coat and folding it carefully over the back of a chair. There was nothing for them to do but rest and wait. The two men slept fitfully through the morning and when Dean awoke sometime in the afternoon, it was to a completely unchanged scene; Sam was sitting on the edge of the other bed with Seraphina in his arms. Neither had moved a muscle.

“We need to eat,” Dean grunted.

Castiel was the only one in the room who responded. The two exchanged a worried look.

“Any special requests?”

Sam only shook his head and readjusted his grip on the girl. The two men ran their errand in silence but returned to find that the younger hunter had finally relinquished his hold on Seraphina and carefully laid her on their bed. He continued his silent vigil at her side, gently holding onto her forearm the entire time. He released his grip on the young woman only to wolf down one of the burgers Dean silently offered him; he didn’t even pick off the onions.

“We should get back to the bunker. Arnold seemed to think that Abaddon was right behind us,” Dean mused, licking ketchup off his fingers, his eyes settling on Seraphina, “It’s safer there.”

Castiel shook his head, pointing out that they had no idea how truly injured the young woman was and that transporting her might do more harm than good. Should they be stopped for any reason, it would also be hard to explain an unresponsive young woman accompanied by three men being transported across state lines. If this happened, she would undoubtedly be hauled off to a hospital that
could do absolutely nothing for her. Sam only shook his head when Cas gently prodded him for his own opinion.

The day wore on, without them saying another word to each other and finally the older hunter sighed, rubbing at his eyes and gave in to the need for a shower. Castiel followed suit as soon as he was done.

“Sam?” The former angel inquired as he walked out of the now steaming bathroom.

The question encompassed all of the things he wanted to ask. Did you want the shower next? Are you hungry for dinner yet? Aren’t you tired? Don’t you want to look at something other than her pale face? Are you going to be alright? Is there anything I can do?

“Sam,” he said again.

This time, the phrase conveyed something more. I’m hurting too, it said. We’re all hurting. Sam finally met Castiel’s eyes and there was a moment of understanding, a flash of shared pain, and then the young man was on his feet. He brought a soaking washcloth out of the bathroom and without a word, started wiping Seraphina’s face. He worked his way tenderly and methodically across all of her exposed skin; wiping away the dry blood around her nose, the sweat on her neck, the dirt on her hands. Dean managed to keep the guilt on a tight leash throughout the day; the only reason Seraphina took back her Grace had been to save him, after all. Watching his little brother care for the girl with the same tenderness he’d once washed blood and mud out of Dean’s hair, made that terrible feeling well up in his throat. The guilt bubbled and ballooned until he thought he might choke on it; his scalp was tingling and the tips of his fingers were going numb. The way Sam was washing Seraphina’s hands painfully reminded him of a burial ritual and for a wild, blinding moment, she seemed so still and pale that Dean was convinced she’d died while he was in the shower and Sam just hadn’t told him yet. He was about to drown, until Castiel’s voice pulled him back to shore.

“We should go for a drive,” he said quietly, right into the hunter's ear.

Dean gulped; the wave of anxiety receding. He was right; driving would keep him calm. The hunter started pulling on his boots, while Cas laid a hand on Sam's shoulder and said something inaudible. The younger man nodded, never stopping in his ministrations of the still and silent angel on his bed. Dean just had time to pull on his jacket, before Cas grabbed his own trench coat and herded him out of the motel room and into the darkening Wisconsin evening. A whole day had passed like that; he was surprised none of them cracked up sooner.

The rumble of the Impala engine and the familiar vibration of the car beneath him calmed the hunter more than any pill or bottle ever could. He gripped the steering wheel and nodded gratefully at the man in his passenger seat; Cas always seemed to know what to do to pull him out of a potential spiral. Now, Dean took the road that passed for a highway out of town; a narrow two lane flanked by trees and fields, fading into the swiftly descending darkness. There was something meditative about driving down a rural blacktop without the glare of streetlights or office buildings, the road emerging out of the void of night a mile at a time, with only the headlights to guide you. It took them only half an hour to cross the peninsula, with the lights of the Siskiwit Bay marina announcing their re-emergence into civilization, but it was enough to bring Dean back to himself. He didn’t want to take the same road back, so they swung south to loop around to Harbor Green on an even narrower and less used backtop.

Slowly, the hunter became aware of Castiel’s gaze boring into him; the former angels presence gradually became a buzzing, intense thing and when he finally took his eyes off the road to throw a questioning look in his direction, he found something fierce in the other man’s face. Throughout their day of silent vigil over Seraphina, Dean caught Cas looking at him like this, but before he had any
time to process what he was seeing, the former angel would turn away or avert his gaze. This time, he didn’t blink and as the hunter fully took in that look, he felt something under his skin start to fizz.

“Pull off the road,” Cas ordered, his voice a low growl.

The fizz under Dean’s skin flared up and he was strongly reminded of the sensation that washing down pop rocks with soda had caused when he mixed the two on a dare. His gut clenched and heat raced up the back of his neck and into his ears. The hunter turned off on the first dirt road that presented itself in the gloom. The moon rose during their drive and in its cold light, he could see perfect rows of oaks stretching out ahead of them. It was a logging trail that dead ended in the stand of trees; there were no lights or buildings and no one would see them from the main road. Dean killed the engine and like it so often happened, Cas took him by surprise.

There were suddenly hands turning his face and warm, chapped lips pressed to his own. Dean barely had a chance to take a breath before a hot tongue was in his mouth. The hunter clung to Cas, pulling him forward, the other man bumping into the steering wheel. He groaned his frustration when the front seat proved too narrow to climb right into Dean’s lap and pulled away from the kiss that was threatening to drown both of them.


Even in the shadows of the Impala, Dean could see how wide Castiel’s pupils had grown, could hear the straining control in his voice. It undid him; he didn’t even think, just scrambled into the back and started pulling off clothes. The hunter had learned early on that not much was off the table when it came to sex with the former angel and neither of their roles were set in stone; sometimes Dean wanted to lead and Cas would melt beneath him in the most appealing way. Usually, though, it was the other man who took control and Dean knew from experience that when Cas got that look in his eye, it was best to comply and quickly, mostly because it meant he was about to be fucked boneless.

He was concentrating so hard on doing what he’d been told, that he didn’t notice the former angel getting out of the car instead of following him over the back of the driver’s seat. Just as he was pulling off his boxers, the door he was facing was wrenched open and a fully clothed Castiel was leaning in, his eyes roving hungrily over the naked body before him. Dean only had a moment to feel self conscious, to realize that he was completely exposed, when the former angel climbed into the back seat, slamming the door closed behind him. Without preamble, he straddled the hunter, pushing him down onto the cold leather, his face buried in the others neck.

“I almost lost you today,” he growled.

To anyone else, Castiel would have sounded angry, accusatory even, but Dean knew better. It had become a ritual, this type of lovemaking. Any time there was a close call, any time the former angel thought Dean had been in more danger than was necessary or acceptable, he would get like this; aggressive and possessive, as if he were claiming the hunter for himself all over again, as if marking him for all the universe to see; mine, no touchy. Dean was expecting the bite, but it always managed to surprise him when Castiel sank his teeth into his shoulder, forcing a gasp out of the hunter. Cas never broke the skin, never really did it hard enough to hurt the other man, but it was so carnal and greedy and human, that it jolted him.

For a moment, Castiel just breathed in the scent of the hunter and Dean lay still, taut, waiting for what was to come next. Then, he knew nothing but the former angels mouth, on his neck, his chest, his stomach. In the flurry of rustling clothing, he heard the distinct pop of a cap and when Castiel’s mouth found his again, there was a cold slick finger making its way inside of him. Dean gulped in surprise, a hand tightening at one of the angels lapels. There was a voice shushing him and after a few breaths, he relaxed and the finger found what it was looking for; it had the hunter panting into
Cas’ shoulder after only a few minutes. The hot buzzing tension was building up at the base of his spine, spiraling up into his gut and he clutched at the man on top of him.

“Not yet, not yet,” Dean pleaded, his eyes squeezed tight against the impending orgasm.

It was too fast, too much. He didn’t want to be alone in this, despite how much Cas might have enjoyed taking him apart like this. The finger inside him paused briefly, giving him a moment to catch his breath and when Dean opened his eyes, relieved, he saw the dark intent on the angels face. Perhaps it had been a mistake to refuse that orgasm. The finger began a painfully slow and light circuit of that buzzing explosive inner part of him and the hunter understood what Cas wanted now. He gulped again, trying to focus, but asking for what he needed had never been easy and it would take a few moments for him to get the words out. Meanwhile, the finger inside of him worked even more slowly, was joined by a second and Dean arched up, trying to get more friction, trying to get Cas to move, but a bruising hand on his hip kept him still. Those dark eyes bored into him, demanding.

“Not yet,” Castiel said, his voice a warning growl, using Dean’s words against him.

The hunter loved and dreaded this; the angels silent demand that he voice his desire, that he say it aloud. A petulant part of him wanted to growl back and call the angel a sadist and tell him to friggin move already, but the rest of him knew that the power really rested in his own hands, if only he would use it. Everything in him fought this, but he couldn’t stop the pleading moan that bubbled up in his throat. Castiel only shook his head, but the hot slick fingers did increase their pressure. Waves of slow pleasure were radiating up into his gut and down into his toes, but he knew from experience that if he didn’t ask for what he wanted, the angel would always best him in this particular battle of wills. If he didn’t ask for what he wanted, Cas wouldn’t relent until Dean was a shaking, blubbering mess, empty and spent, but without the relief of an orgasm. He couldn’t fight any longer.

“Please,” he breathed, hoping that it would be enough, that the other man would take pity on him and accept that one word without demanding anything else.

But this was not one of those nights. Castiel needed to hear it almost as much as Dean dreaded saying it. He still didn’t know why it was so hard for him, to say the words aloud. They made him feel raw and exposed, like a nerve open to the world and vulnerable for anyone to come by and poke at it. But the former angel would never just prod at the stripped down and unmasked parts of him and even though Dean knew that as solidly as he knew anything, it still cost him something. For a brief, dark moment, he wondered if every time this happened, it was a punishment for all those chances he’d missed, a rebuke for every time he’d turned away from the man who loved him. That thought fled almost the moment it appeared; no, this was for Cas. The hunter wasn’t the only one with fears and doubts that needed to be allayed with truths, either whispered or shouted or moaned.

“Please,” Dean said again, his voice steadier than before, but his hands betraying his desperation, trying to find purchase in the fabric of the trench coat, “I want you. Only you.”

It was all Castiel needed; the fingers were withdrawn, the sound of a zipper sounded oddly loud, almost echoing off the Impalas windows and Dean found his legs wrapped around the former angel, his back arching up, as the other pushed into him. The slight burn and sudden fullness punched a satisfied but involuntary grunt from the hunter and then he was lost in the sensation. Strong hands were holding his hips up, holding him steady, keeping him from sliding across the leather seat that was now warm and slick with his sweat, keeping his head from pounding into the door. The orgasm was washing over him almost before he knew it was happening. Castiel followed him over the edge a few moments later, letting out a relieved sigh and collapsing onto the man below him. They lay like that until the chill of the night crept into the Impala and Dean started to shiver. They cleaned up using
fast food napkins from the glove box. Cas stared at the hunter as he struggled to get dressed in the confines of the back seat, a new look settling on his face. Dean tried to ignore it, but the other man eventually caught his eye.

“It’s not your fault,” Cas said.

Dean gulped and tried to concentrate on lacing his boots.

“She would have done it for any of us,” the former angel pressed.

Dean only shrugged. They made their way back to the motel in comfortable silence; the buzzing anxiety they both felt retreating into its usual dark corner.

“Well, well,” a drawling voice greeted them as they stepped back into the motel room, “Don’t you two look refreshed?”

“Don’t start, Gabriel,” another voice, hoarse and weak, admonished the speaker from the vicinity of Sam and Sera’s bed.

The archangel was sprawled across the faded green armchair facing their beds, one leg draped over an armrest, the other propped up on an impromptu foot rest; Dean’s duffel bag. Sam stood in the doorway of the tiny bathroom, grinning with relief. To Gabriel's surprise, the two newcomers only shot perfunctory glares in his direction, Dean not even bothering to yank his duffel out from under the angel's foot. They crowded around the darkened bed instead, mirroring Sam's grin of relief.

“You’re awake,” Castiel said, sitting down on the edge of the bed and gently brushing a few strands of Sera’s hair out of her eyes.

Dean only managed a long, ragged exhale. They all grinned at each other for several moments, happy to be alive, reunited and all conscious.

“I’m glad you’re ok,” Dean finally said.

“For now,” came Gabriel's dark reply.

They all turned to him.

“I suppose we have you to thank for this?” the hunter asked, his voice begrudging, but his heart ready to give credit where it was due.

“ Nope. She woke up all on her own,” Gabriel answered, popping a handful of gummy bears into his mouth from a bag that hadn’t been there seconds before, chewing loudly.

“Then why are you here?” Castiel asked, his eyes narrowing.

Sam cleared his throat, guiltily chewing on the inside of his cheek.

“Samsquatch here is one hell of a loud prayer,” the archangel answered around all the gummy bears, sounding impressed, “Thought I should pop down and see what all the ruckus was about.”

Gabriel crumpled the now empty bag of candy and tossed it in the direction of the trash can, missing it by a narrow margin. Shrugging, he pulled out another bag from a jacket pocket and proceeded to ingest several rolls of Fruit by the Foot. The others watched him with something akin to fascinated horror. Halfway through roll number three, Dean’s mind snapped back into focus.

“Wait, what did you mean by ‘for now’?”
Seraphina and the archangel exchanged a dark look while Sam concentrated on the ceiling; his lips pressed so firmly together that his chin puckered.

“I didn’t heal her because I can’t,” Gabe started.

“You’re a friggin archangel, what do you mean, you can’t?!” Dean cut in, the tide of guilt within him turning back on itself and morphing into anger.

“I can’t precisely because I am an archangel,” Gabriel replied, springing from the armchair and advancing on the hunter, his candy forgotten.

Anger flashed in his eyes and every line of his body spoke of barely controlled violence. His voice tight, the words snapping from him like electricity from a live wire, he continued, “I’m a hydrogen bomb when what you need is a scalpel. Hell, the only reason she’s still alive is because apparently, my little brother is a master craftsman!”

Gabriel gestured in the girls direction.

“That’s one hell of a custom build, Cassie. Didn’t notice till now. A vessel made from scratch? Not even I would have reached the heights of that kind of arrogance, but it seems to have paid off.”

Castiel looked abashed at this proclamation, but when pressed by the hunters, explained that he never wanted Seraphina to have to depend on an available and willing vessel, so he built one from scratch.

Sam turned wondering eyes on the girl; this was always the way she’d been meant to look, even while her father sent her into war zones dressed up as a local soldier. It was no longer a strange coincidence that she looked so much like her creator. What Gabriel was alluding to however, was that by all rights, she should be dead.

“It’s what dearest Luci would do to those he felt betrayed him; rip out their grace, break it in half and shove it back in,” Gabriel said, with a disgusted curl of his lip, the anger in him fading, replaced by sadness.

Most of the angels only survived long enough to get back to their unit, long enough to have their brothers watch them die; it was essentially a terrorist tactic.

“Why didn’t I know about this?” Castiel asked, his eyes narrowed.

Gabriel shook his head, turning away from them, something like shame written in the angle of his shoulders. “I might be the only one left who remembers. Naomi’s team made sure of that.”

“Ah,” breathed Cas, his face tightening.

“Yeah,” Gabriel answered, remorse in his tone, “It wasn’t my call.”

The archangel caught his brother’s eye, willing him to believe him, hoping for something more.

Castiel watched him for several heartbeats, searching his face and finally gave him a small nod. It was all the forgiveness he was going to get.

“Prognosis?” Sam asked quietly.

“She’ll get better for a while, but eventually the shrapnel from that grace will work into something vital,” the archangel said darkly, compassionate eyes trained on the girl across the room, “You can keep trying the healing spell, but eventually it’ll stop working.”

There were only two options; they either had to find the other half of the grace, or she had to expel
what was left of the grace she’d swallowed. The first option would force them into a perilous negotiation with Abaddon, if they could ever locate her. The second option would almost surely kill Sera and anyone standing within close range; the expulsion of grace was like a bomb going off. The only way to keep the damaged grace from ripping the girl apart on it’s way out would be to contain the release of power somehow.

“How long do we have?” Sam asked tightly, his eyes never leaving Sera.

Gabriel shook his head, pacing the room, aggravated, and then stalked to the kitchenette. He pulled open the small fridge and glared, unseeing, at their leftovers. After several breaths, he slammed the thing shut and turned back to the group. Seraphina had schooled her features into neutrality, while the three men braced themselves for the bad news.

Gabriel’s brows knit together, the small bow of his mouth turning down.

“A month, tops,” the archangel finally said.
Sucks to be Sam

Cas poked him awake. Dean grunted, confused; the sky outside wasn’t even light yet. Blearily, he wondered what new emergency was befalling them, but couldn’t muster the energy to care just yet. Instead, he turned to face the former angel and snaked his arms around Castiel’s waist, pulling him closer.

“I promised Sam no hanky-panky,” he muttered, his words muffled as he buried his face in the other man’s neck.

“That is not why I woke you,” Cas whispered back, his voice serious, “Sam is gone.”

Dean’s head snapped up off the pillow and he glared into the darkness, trying to make out the shape on the other bed.

“She’s still breathing,” Cas assured him.

The hunter redirected his attention to the alarm clock. The glowing red numbers informed him that it was only a few minutes past three.

“Crap,” he hissed, scrambling out of bed, trying to find his pants and boots in the dark.

The last 24 hours were hard on all of them, but Sam especially. Dean wracked his brain, trying to narrow down the possibilities of where his brother would go. It all depended on where his head was. If he was angry or upset, Sam would go for a run. If he was worried or working on a question of lore, he’d be at the nearest cafe or bookstore with wifi. However, neither option seemed likely, considering Sera’s condition and the size of Harbor Green. If Dean could just catch a glimpse of Sam and figure out what he was up to, the older hunter could climb back into his warm bed and let the other man work things out at his own pace. Dean glanced at the lightly snoring lump in the other bed, worry spiking through him. His brother wouldn’t just leave Sera, as vulnerable and injured as she was, without a damn good reason. The hunter had no clear idea of where he was going when he pulled the door of the motel room open and hesitated at the threshold, glancing between the two angels.

“I’ll watch over her,” Cas said quietly, sitting up in bed, “Go find your brother.”

Dean nodded, gratitude overriding his worry and stepped out into the night. Harbor Green was silent before him, he couldn’t even hear the hum of distant traffic. He glanced up and down the road while crossing the parking lot, the car keys digging into his palm, desperately hoping that inspiration would strike him and he would just know which way to point the Impala.

A faint sound caught his attention and he froze, straining to hear it again. When the sound finally came, a mixture of relief and remorse flooded Dean; it was a muffled sob and it was coming from the back seat of the Impala. His little brother fled the motel room to let out his grief somewhere none of them would see. The hunter hung his head, raking a hand through his hair; this was his fault. Sam was weeping because another girl he loved, someone they had been so sure was capable of surviving an acquaintance with them, was dying. Part of him wanted to run from this, but the big brother part of him took a deep breath, pulled open the car door and slid in beside Sam. The younger man was so startled by his brothers appearance, that his heaving shoulders stilled and he looked up, panic in his eyes.

“Sera?” he asked, his voice hoarse and watery, his body already coiling for action.
“She’s fine,” Dean said, eyes searching the others face, “Still asleep.”

Sam’s shoulders un-bunched, but only by a small margin. He wiped hastily at the wetness on his face, trying to regain control of his emotions. But several shuddering breaths later there were still tears leaking down his cheeks and he turned away from Dean, curling in on himself. The older hunter didn’t know what to do; he desperately wanted to comfort his little brother but the gnawing guilt in his gut convinced him that it would be unwelcome. He felt trapped, like nothing he could possibly offer would be of any use or help and fear kept him frozen; what if Sam blamed him? The other man’s tears were pulling his own to the surface, but he stayed on the far end of the bench seat.

“I’m sorry,” he finally managed, his voice ragged with shame and grief.

“Don’t,” Sam said, his head between his knees, trying to take calming breaths amid the waves of tremors that were passing through his body.

Dean flinched as if his brother had hit him. It was his fault after all. His little brother was losing someone he loved because of Dean. That one word was the sum of all his fears; don’t touch me, don’t talk to me, don’t ever come back.

“It wasn’t your fault,” came the whispered reassurance.

The older hunter wanted to laugh. Here was Sam, so crushed by sorrow that he couldn’t keep himself upright, trying to reassure his big brother that he wasn’t to blame. It didn’t do much to alleviate the guilt eating away at his insides, but it released the tight ball of panic in his chest. Dean still blamed himself but at least his brother was of a different mind. He knew he would be in trouble the moment the people he loved started agreeing with his assessment of himself. Finally feeling brave enough, he reached out and put a hand on his brothers still trembling shoulder.

“H-how,” Sam stuttered between controlled breaths through his nose, unfolding himself slowly to look at the older hunter, “How did you do it?”

Dean only stared. “What?”

“After the lake, the Leviathan,” Sam croaked, finally getting his voice, if not the tears, under control, “How?”

Dean remembered the lake, the awful way Cas sank below the surface and disappeared. He remembered. The coat floating at the shore, mocking him and everything he’d lost. The numbness that seeped into his very DNA. The way his anger became a cold knife he sank into anything that dared to live while the angel remained dead. The drinking, the killing, the lying, the guilt. He remembered how low he sank but also how much effort he put into hiding it from Sammy. There were monsters to kill and a world to save; he didn’t deal with the angel’s death, he simply pushed it further and further aside, until the pain was somewhere outside of him.

There must have been something in his face that reflected all of these things, because Sam’s own face crumpled and he curled back in on himself, his whole body convulsing with the sob he was attempting to hold back. Dean slid across the seat and draped himself over his brother’s hunched form, wrapping his arms around him. The other man leaned into his embrace, which somehow managed to only make Dean sadder.

“We’ll fix this Sammy,” he choked out, “We’ll find a way. We always do.”
The next morning, Dean woke up with a splitting headache and Sam looked about as terrible as he felt. Not surprisingly, they managed to get very little sleep after their time in the Impala. Gabriel had offered to spirit them back to the bunker the night before, but the older hunter stubbornly refused, to the chagrin of the other men. Seraphina only tilted her head in question and after Dean fidgeted under her gaze for several uncomfortable moments, she simply nodded.

“We’ll drive back,” the girl told Gabriel and that was that.

The brothers were awake and ready to go at dawn, with Cas needing some prodding. Dean reminded him that Arnold believed Abaddon was tracking him; it was best if they got out of the area as quickly as possible. They managed to rouse Sera only long enough for her to brush her teeth and change her clothes; she was asleep in the Impala before their bags were even in the trunk. A full night’s rest had not been enough to wipe away the leaden weight of the broken Grace which settled into every cell of her body. The three men exchanged worried looks, but said nothing. Sam slid in beside the sleeping angel, rearranging her so that her head was in his lap; she never stirred.

They stayed off the main roads, in an effort to avoid any sentries Abaddon may have posted, and ended up on a lonely stretch of county blacktop somewhere near the Wisconsin and Minnesota border. They were an hour into the drive before any of them realized it had gone by in complete silence. Cas reached over to turn on the radio, but Dean slapped his hand away from the dial. The former angel tilted his head in question.

“Sera,” was the hunter’s only explanation.

Cas peered into the back seat. The girl was still asleep, curled on her side, her head resting on Sam’s thigh. Her face was sickeningly pale, in harsh contrast to her dark hair and the hunter’s tanned and calloused hand, gently stroking her cheek. Sam stared resolutely out the window; his emotions were still too close to the surface and part of him wished Dean would turn the radio on so that the fraught silence suffusing the Impala would dissipate, if only a little.

“I doubt anything would disturb Seraphina right now,” Cas said, turning away from the duo.

Dean made an annoyed sound, his hands clenching and unclenching on the steering wheel. He shot a glance in the rear view mirror. It showed him nothing of the road behind them, but was trained on the two figures in the backseat instead. Sam met his eyes and shrugged.

“Fine,” he growled, turning on the radio.

Eventually, Cas asked Dean how he thought this whole situation might play out, considering what Gabriel told them. The hunter grunted, doing his best not to glance at the rearview mirror again, nothing would have changed in the backseat. After some thought, keeping his voice low, he answered that the best case scenario involved them all making it out of this alive. The ideal outcome would involve killing Abaddon and getting Seraphina her Grace back. Castiel nodded grimly.

“Having an angel at full power would be beneficial,” he agreed, “Especially Seraphina.”

Dean couldn’t help glancing at the rear view mirror again. Sam kept his eyes trained on the wall of forest passing by the window in a blur, the clenching of his jaw the only thing giving away the fact that he was listening. They knew that the young woman now sleeping in the back of the Impala was unlike any other angel in existence, but they didn’t know the details. Dean managed to pull his eyes away from his brothers pained face long enough to quirk a questioning eyebrow at Castiel.
“She’s… her Grace….” the former angel struggled to find the right words.

Seraphina was different from other angels because her father followed no template. He modeled her Grace on bits and pieces of the multiple angel classes of Heaven. She carried the sheer power of the archangels, the combat prowess of a seraph, the loyalty of a cherub and the love of humanity of a grigori. When she was at full power, Castiel was the only one capable of controlling her if she got out of hand, and even then, he did so with the power granted to him by the souls of Purgatory. If he was honest with himself, he would admit that he avoided ever explaining to Seraphina exactly what she was (a tool of death) because he wasn’t sure what her response would be. But she never questioned him, never refused to do his bidding, never once attempted to rebel.

She only fully comprehended her original purpose once she became human, stripped of that purpose. For weeks, Castiel braced himself for an accounting from the young woman, fearing her anger at how he’d used and abandoned her. The confrontation never came and their meandering walks through the forest above the bunker became a pleasant ritual. Eventually, it was Castiel who brought up the subject. Seraphina only blinked at him in confusion. She owed her very existence to him, she answered, and although her early existence was not something that brought her joy, she was happy to have landed by his side.

Now, Cas wasn’t sure where she stood; whether she wanted to remain human or wanted to regain her Grace. At full power, she was a formidable weapon and more than capable, her father reasoned, of destroying a Knight of Hell. Had Abaddon understood Seraphina’s power, she would never have risked giving the girl back her Grace. Dean shook his head at all of this new information. It would certainly tip the scales in their favor if the young woman regained her Grace. Out loud, he fantasized about using her powers to wipe out all of the left over demons and possibly go after every other monster in the country. Silently, though, he admitted to himself that he just wanted her to survive. Sam wouldn’t care if she was human or angel, as long as she stuck around.

After another hour, Sera groaned and sat up.

“Dean. Stop.”

The hunter slammed on the brakes, the Impala lurching to a stop in the grass on the side of the road, throwing them all forward. Sam and Sera righted themselves and the girl blinked sleepily in the sunlight.

“No quite what I meant,” she muttered.

Dean turned, his face set into hard lines, ready to deal with whatever disaster was about to land on their heads, “What happened?”

She rubbed at her temples, a pained look on her face.

“What happened is that your prayers sound like they’re coming through a megaphone,” she grumbled, and then turning to Cas, “How did you get anything done when you had your Grace?”

“I learned to multitask,” the former angel responded, not missing a beat.

Sam burst into surprised laughter while Dean turned a deep shade of scarlet. Sera only glared between the two of them, certain something had gone over her head, as it often did with Winchester humor. The tension, which had been building for most of the ride, dissipated.

“So you’re not gonna hurl in Baby?” Dean asked.

The girl shook her head, “Just dial it down a bit, would you?”
She poked Sam in the ribs when he snickered, “That includes you.”

“I wasn’t praying!” The younger hunter protested.

Sera leveled him with a skeptical look.

“Not technically, no. But snarling in Heaven’s general direction still gets picked up on angel radio or by the nearest angel with an open channel,” she explained, “And Gabriel can’t help, so he really doesn’t deserve some of those things you’re threatening.”

All of the amusement on Sam’s face evaporated, his lips pressed into an angry line and he looked away from her, suddenly interested in the wall of green outside their window.

“He sure as hell could have offered to do more,” Sam growled.

Sera only frowned in response. There was an uncomfortable silence until the girl’s stomach rumbled. They never had a chance to eat breakfast, considering how quickly they left Harbor Green, and were all hungry. Cas pulled out his smartphone, scrolling through a map of the area and then showed Dean something on his screen. The older hunter snorted.

“Looks like there’s a place up ahead,” he said, pulling the Impala back out onto the empty blacktop, “And Sam, you’re gonna love it.”

Despite his dedication to sulking, Sam did crack a smile when the sign came into view; it read ‘Moose Junction’. There wasn’t even a stop sign at the intersection; just a ramshackle little house and a newer structure that looked halfway between a log cabin and wild west saloon. The newer building itself had no name on it, just a large metal moose head constructed out of scrap metal mounted above the door. Luckily, the place was open and serving breakfast. Their menu even featured a plate called “Hunter’s Special”, which gave Dean no end of amusement. They ordered food to go since the bar was too small for Sam’s liking, without a clear line of sight outside or an easy exit through the back.

They found a little unmarked picnic area a ten minute drive south with enough shrubbery to completely conceal the Impala from the road. The day was warm and sunny, the picnic tables were abandoned and the cottonwoods swayed in the breeze. There was enough food to feed a small army, the Styrofoam containers covering half the table, and the men began devouring the omelettes, biscuits and piles of hash browns with gusto. Sam and Dean kept pushing containers in Seraphina’s direction, but despite her rumbling belly, the young woman only nibbled on a piece of bacon halfheartedly. The hunters kept throwing worried looks in her direction until Castiel distracted them with theories about Abaddon’s potential plans and whereabouts. Eventually Sera sighed, putting her half eaten piece of bacon back into a container and got up. Sam sprang from his seat, ready to follow.

“I’m just going to the car for a sweater,” the young woman protested, motioning for the hunter to sit down.

Sam lowered himself back onto the bench reluctantly as she walked away, exchanging another worried look with the other men; they were sitting in direct sunlight and all three had already shed their outer layers in response to the heat of the day. They continued their discussion and after it was obvious they were all sated, Dean scraped the leftovers into a single container and pushed it toward Sam, who looked confused.

“In case she actually decides to eat,” the older hunter explained.

He gathered up the rest of the containers and headed for the trash can, leaving his brother and the former angel to discuss the possibility of modifying a healing spell to give Sera more time. Dean was
hoping to catch the injured angel on her way back from the Impala so he could… what? The hunter
wracked his brain; he still felt guilty about what happened in the greenhouse, but what was the point
of apologizing? What’s done was done, it’s not like he could un-shoot himself. He dumped the trash
and looked around. Dean’s confusing train of thought was cut short when he glanced in the direction
of the car and instead of seeing the girl rummaging through a bag in the trunk, he saw no one.

“Sera?” he called, concern edging his voice and his hand already on the .45 at his back.

Sam was there in a flash, eyes scouring the little park, his own weapon drawn. It was Cas who
pointed down the road at a church spire poking through the trees. The building was only a few
hundred feet from the picnic area, small and shabby, with a single beat up Honda Accord from the
90’s parked on one side. An equally neglected sign on the side of the road read “Saint Jude’s” with
no mention of a denomination or operating hours. The grass and anemone flowers grew wild all
around the building and they got the impression that it rarely hosted a service. The front doors were
thrown open to let in the warm spring air and the hunters detected movement inside the church.
There was a man crouching at the end of one of the pews, taking the pulse of a familiar pale wrist.
The hunters and the former angel rushed forward, startling the man out of his crouch. His eyes
widened with panic when he saw their weapons.

“We keep no tithes here, gentlemen,” he managed, his hands up in the air.

He was wearing jeans splattered with paint, a sweat-stained t-shirt and a fine layer of wood dust.
Behind him, on the raised dais that would usually host a podium for the priest, there was a beat up
old tool box, some power tools and a pile of freshly cut two by fours. He couldn’t have been much
older than the hunters themselves, but there was a sallow look to his face and he seemed gaunt. A
rumpled button down, tossed over the tool box, bore an embroidered name tag which simply read
‘Tom’. Seraphina groaned up into a sitting position, one hand on the back of the pew, the other on
her forehead, as if she had a pounding headache. The man turned his terrified eyes on the young
woman.

“Stay down miss,” he hissed.

Sera blinked in the direction of the three men and then waved a dismissive hand.

“They’re with me,” she managed, her voice hoarse.

Sam and Dean hastily stowed their weapons. The younger hunter covered the length of the tiny
church in only a few strides and crouched beside Seraphina, taking the place of the stranger. His big
hand cupped her cheek and she leaned into the touch.

“She’s burning up,” Sam said.

“What the hell happened?” The older hunter growled at the man, who still had his hands raised
uncertainly, while Sam and Cas helped Sera up.

“I got tired, that’s all,” she said, her eyes flickering to Tom for a moment, something like a plea in her
eyes.

The older hunter turned his formidable glare on the man but instead of crumpling, he lowered his
hands and squared his shoulders, turning to Sera.

“You don’t have to go with these men, miss.”

Dean rolled his eyes, pulling out his FBI badge and shoved it in the man’s face. He was getting more
and more irritated and suspicious by the moment, which usually brought out his best lies. “We’re her
security detail and we’re supposed to get her home in one piece. So what the hell happened, asshole?”

Tom’s eyes went round when he saw the badge, his arms shooting up again and stammered an answer before Seraphina could intervene.

“We were just talking. That’s all, I swear. About how we’re both sick.”

All three men turned horrified eyes on the young woman.

“She touched my face and then she fainted. That’s it. I swear. Please don’t arrest me.”

Seraphina shook off Castiel and Sam’s hands, pushing past Dean and stomping out of Saint Jude’s with more energy than she actually felt. Their stunned silence was the only thing that followed her.

“Shit,” Dean hissed, turning on his heel and stalking after the girl.

As Sam and Castiel followed him out, the younger hunter flashed his own fake badge. “Don’t tell anyone we were here. No one. Got it?”

Tom nodded, dumbfounded by what had just transpired but looking distinctly less sallow and gaunt than just a few minutes ago. Sam and Cas found them at the Impala, the car between them. Sera was leaning against one of the back passenger doors, arms crossed, her back to Dean. He was on the opposite side, hands resting against the Impala’s roof, his glare burning holes in the back of the young woman’s head. The hunter radiated an angry coiled energy that he was doing his best to keep in check, his breathes coming in short and sharp through his nose. The girl ignored him.

“Dammit, Sera!”

The words burst out of him like gunfire, punctuated by a hand slapping the shiny roof of the Impala and making her jump.

“Dean,” Cas said, the single word a plea to let it go, a placating hand on the hunter’s shoulder; it didn’t work.

“You promised me,” he growled at the girl, an edge of hysteria to his words, “You promised.”

Finally, she turned, meeting his gaze over the roof of the car, her brow furrowed in confusion.

“That you wouldn’t hurt Sam.”

The night before was flashing through Dean’s mind; his brother’s tear streaked face, the sorrow crushing him down, the whispered ‘How?’ . He understood why Seraphina drank the broken Grace, it was the same reason he’d sold his soul, out of love. But he couldn’t understand why she would siphon away part of her life for Tom, heal a complete stranger. How many days had she shaved off what little time she had left?

It was Sera’s turn to get angry. “This has nothing to do with Sam,” she growled, although she understood exactly what Dean meant.

No scenario would have left Sam Winchester unscathed. If she didn’t drink the Grace in that greenhouse, Dean would be dead and not only his brother, but Castiel too, would be mourning. If they didn’t find the rest of the Grace in time, she would die and then all three of them would mourn. If they somehow found the rest of her Grace and managed a negotiation or confrontation with Abaddon without any of them ending up dead, then she would be trapped by her immortality, unable
to follow Sam or the others when their time was up.

“Someone is going to end up in tears, no matter what happens,” she scowled, “I just wanted to do one good thing with the Grace I have before I become your personal demon killing machine.”

She must have heard them talking during the drive. Dean’s anger started ebbing away and he leaned into Castiel’s warm hand still resting on his shoulder, a new kind of guilt building in his heart.

“I’ll take back the rest of the Grace, if we can find it,” Seraphina continued, her own anger flagging, replaced with exhaustion, “I’ll do whatever you want me to do.”

She would give up her humanity and trade it for power. She would protect them and kill for them. She would destroy Abaddon and hunt down all the other leftover demons. They could wield her like the weapon of death she was built to be; command her as they wished. But before any of that happened, she wanted to leave at least one bit of kindness in the world.

“You’re not a weapon,” Sam said quietly.

While Seraphina was talking, he walked up behind her and now laid his hands on her shoulders, squeezing reassuringly.

“You are no one’s to command,” Castiel agreed.

“Having you at full power would be fuckin’ fantastic, but I don’t call us ‘Team Free Will’ for nothing,” Dean added.

The young woman looked hard at the older hunter. The other two men she believed, but she wasn’t sure about Dean.

“So if I decided that I didn’t want the Grace, didn’t want to be an angel again…” she pressed.

The older hunter shrugged. “Then I guess we’d have to find a way to get that crap out of you without it making you go all Chernobyl on us.”

“And if I decided I did want the Grace?”

“Then we’d better get a move on and find a way to draw out Abaddon,” Dean answered, somewhat exasperated.

“Aaaaaand?”

“And then you can heal all the Tiny Tim’s you friggin want! Or you can Hulk out and go demon hunting. I don’t care!” Dean yelled, “But I’m not gonna just watch you die, dammit! I’m not gonna watch Sam watch you die.”

Seraphina blinked at the hunter in surprise, her eyes searching his face with something like a new understanding. The four of them made a good team, but she never quite believed that Dean fully trusted her the way Castiel did or cared for her the way Sam did. She didn’t expect him to; she knew it might take years. But here he was, with a weapon of unimaginable power at his fingertips, and all he wanted was for Sam to be happy. Dean was willing to give up a sure fire way to destroy Abaddon because he didn’t see a weapon; he saw a person with free will. All those self-help books get it only partially right; how you see yourself is important, but sometimes how another person sees you can be earth shattering.

Seraphina nodded slowly. “I see,” and with that, she pulled open the car door and slid across the
bench seat, making room for Sam.

The three men exchanged looks; Sam shrugged, Cas gave a relieved sigh and Dean threw his hands up in the air.

“Well that just clears everything up,” Dean grumbled.

Two hours later found them in Minnesota, crossing the Hastings bridge again. This time, Sera said nothing, but her eyes devoured the river below them. Before the greenhouse and the gun and the Grace, the girl had finally explained why the Mississippi intrigued her so; it was all the fault of a World War II GI who died in a snowbank outside Alsace, France. He was darker than Turkish coffee, a better shot than anyone else in the company, drove a Jeep like a madman and spoke of the Mississippi in tones so reverent and intimate, that most of the other soldiers were convinced it was just a strange code name for the woman he loved. Seraphina spent time in many armies, on many continents, but she had never once laid eyes on the river that GI so loved. This time, Dean didn’t grumble or keep driving toward Kansas; he surprised them all by turning off the road and taking them to a little park right on the bank of the river. When he parked the Impala and turned off the engine, the others only stared at him wonderingly.

Dean swept his arm dramatically, indicating the river. “Well?” He asked.

Seraphina needed no other invitation, exploding from the car with more enthusiasm and energy than she’d shown since drinking the broken Grace. Castiel grinned at him and Sam snickered under his breath about him being a marshmallow. Dean rolled his eyes, getting out of the car before his brother could compare him to anything else soft and fluffy and followed Sera to the edge of the water. The younger hunter and former angel got out of the Impala and ended up leaning against the car side by side. Castiel expected Sam to follow them, but he hung back, watching the two. After a few moments of silence, he again muttered something about his brother being a softie. Cas nodded, a smile tugging at his lips. At the time he thought it was a tactical error, refusing Gabriel’s offer to spirit them back to Kansas, but now he could see the reason for it.

“Thought you wanted to dip a toe in,” Dean groused as Sera hesitated on the shore.

The young woman seemed to take that as a challenge and started pulling off her shoes and socks. The sudden change in position made her dizzy and she began to tip forward but Dean caught her elbow before she took an ungraceful nose dive into the shallow water. Sera shot him a grateful look, allowing the hunter to steady her as she finished pulling off her socks and rolling up her jeans. It happened naturally, the girl grabbing hold of Dean’s hand as he released her elbow, and a little shock went through him when she didn’t let go. He walked forward until the toes of his boots sank into the wet gravel of the bank and Seraphina was ankle deep in the river. She turned her face to the sky, closing her eyes, squeezing Dean’s hand gently. She remembered that freezing afternoon, sitting on a fallen tree, wrapped in Castiel's trench coat, when Sam told her that hands never lied. As the dappled sunlight played across her eyelids, the elms swaying in the spring breeze above her, she could just make out the hunter’s whispered prayer; it was asking her to survive.

“I’ll do my best,” she said quietly, the words almost lost in the breeze and the hiss of traffic in the distance.
Eventually, the healing spell stopped working. Sam started having nightmares again. Dean couldn’t sleep. Cas wouldn’t talk; if he did, it would be to say only one thing, “It’s my fault.” This one thing would be mumbled quietly under his breath as he leafed through Assyrian spell books and Catholic demonology texts, as he poured himself a seventh cup of coffee or brushed the hair from Sera’s sweaty forehead. That phrase was on his lips as he fell asleep and it would be the first thought that would pop into his head when he woke, even before he remembered what he was guilty of.

They exhausted every contact in the sparse hunter community. They re-read every book in the library. They discovered some new and highly inadvisable spells, none of which were of any help. The mutilated Grace at Sera’s core started acting in unpredictable and contradictory ways. Sometimes it would surge and blow out the electronics in whatever room the young woman was occupying or it would wane and she would fall into a sleep that might last for days, only to emerge more tired than before.

It was after one of these mini-comas that Sera wandered into the library, two weeks into this ordeal, to find the three men silent and still and not really seeing the research in front of them. There were dirty plates piled haphazardly under the table and sticky coffee mugs holding open books propped up on piles of other books. There was a tangled heap of chargers on a chair, chewed pencils scattered about and loose sheets of paper with barely legible scribbles layed out in no discernible order. She wasn’t sure if it was night or day; she wasn’t sure it even mattered. When she sat down among them, the only greetings she received were forlorn looks and heavy sighs. Castiel’s face was buried in his crossed arms, resting on the table, possibly asleep.

“No luck?” she asked anyway.

Sam only shook his head.

“It’s ok,” Seraphina said smiling weakly, “I’ve been praying.”

Sam shot her a confused look. “I don’t think Gabriel will be able to help, no matter how much we wish he could.”

The girl shook her head. “I’ve been praying to Grandad.”

“God?” Dean snarled, his grief stricken face suddenly transformed into a hateful sneer, “That asshole doesn’t give a shit.”

Seraphina jumped when the end of his sentence was punctuated by a book hurled across the room. Sam didn’t even raise an eyebrow at the abuse of an irreplaceable tome, just got up slowly, retrieved the demonology text and placed it back on the table, out of Dean’s reach. This was the point at which Castiel would usually put a soothing hand on the older hunter’s shoulder, say something encouraging and hopeful and they would all double down on attempting to find a solution. But this time, he only sighed, not picking up his head.

“He’s never going to answer,” Sam finally chimed in, his face as bitter as his brother’s had been angry, “Civil war in Heaven, the apocalypse, he let it all happen.”

“It’s my fault,” came the whispered confession, Castiel’s head coming up slowly.

Dean shook his head, his face pinched and tired, his voice draining of anger and replaced by exhaustion.
“For fuck’s sake, it’s not your fault. And if it is, then it’s all of our faults. I’m the one who got shot, remember?”

“And I’m the one who tossed Sera the Grace,” sighed Sam, rubbing at the fatigue settling in his eyes.

“And I’m the one who drank it,” the young woman concluded.

There was a sad smile on Castiel’s lips and his face was tight with pain.

“But I’m the one who rebelled.”

The others blinked at him in confusion and slowly, one after the other, they understood what he meant. None of this would have been possible without him. Had he not rebelled and sided with Sam and Dean as the seals were being broken one by one, they may not have had the strength of will, or the knowledge to stop the apocalypse, to stop Lucifer. It was Castiel who uncovered Uriel’s plan, helped them retrieve the Colt, sent them back in time to stop Anna, got the ring from Pestilence and on and on and on. Without his singular help and interference, without his rebellion, there would never have been a Team Free Will or a soulless Sam or a drained purgatory or a most powerful and magnificent abomination called Seraphina.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly, his gaze unfocused and looking at some point over Dean’s head.

If he’d only done what he was told, sure, the apocalypse would’ve happened as planned, but at least Sam and Dean would be safely dead. Neither of them would’ve survived the battle between Michael and Lucifer; the vessels would be so damaged in the final face off, that both souls could be set free and safely conveyed to Heaven even before the battle was decided. And wasn’t that worth it? Knowing now what love was and how much he achingly felt it for the three people in front of him, wasn’t all of creation worth their peace? Castiel looked at Dean’s tired face and wondered if he could give up every stuttered ‘I love you’, every morning coffee in bed, every grin meant just for him, in exchange for knowing that he was safe and warm and tucked away in some beautiful corner of Heaven. Could he give up his own humanity? Could he walk away and allow all this joy and all this pain to be wiped clean? Could he go back to what he was, if it meant that Dean would succumb to Michael and die in the final battle? If it meant that Sam would never end up in the cage? If it meant that Seraphina would never be, but stay peacefully and quietly in the great void?

Yes.

If the option were available, Castiel was ready to give it all up. The humanity, the love, the friendship, the daughter. But he couldn’t undo it; couldn’t take back that first decision he’d made to rebel and certainly not the hundreds of little decisions he’d made after that.

“Naomi said I had a crack in my chassis,” he whispered, “She said no matter how many times she erased my memory, no matter how many times I ended up in that chair of hers, I would never do what I was told. I’m defective. That’s why everything, everything, happened.”

His eyes sought out each of them in turn, a pleading look there, searching for absolution. Dean and Sam shook their heads, wry smiles on their faces.

“We didn’t exactly pay ball ourselves, Cas,” Dean said, “We’re as much a part of that whole mess as you are.”

“You…,” Sera started and stopped, looking at them all with something like confused horror, “You don’t know?”

The three men turned to her, questioning. The young woman’s mouth hung open in response.
“I thought you knew. I thought… you understood.”

After a moment of stunned silence, a small hysterical giggle escaped her.

“I suppose that explains a great deal…,” she muttered, rubbing her eyes and stifling another giggle.

Dean and Cas glanced at each other. Sam raised his eyebrows.

“That was the whole point. Your stubbornness, your ‘crack’... it wasn’t a mistake, it was exactly as it should’ve been.”

Imagine God as a novelist. All of Creation was his grand story coming to life. Gravity and photons and oceans and plants and animals; that was the easy part. Just set the basic rules of the game in place and let it run itself; life and death, photosynthesis, tides, erosion, the water cycle. Without too much outside interference, the whole system eventually reaches homeostasis. It becomes perfect and balanced and unimaginably boring. Every once in a while, when the world was getting a little too settled, God would poke it. Temperatures dropped and one type of bacteria would die off and make room for another. Sea levels rose and suddenly there was multi cellular life. Plants made their way onto land and suddenly there were centipedes the size of Golden Retrievers. Every new wave of life gave God more ideas and he made things more interesting, more complex. Even then, he’d end up bored. Sure, dinosaurs were great and all, but there’s not much drama. Certainly, there’s a limited number of stories to tell and no one to tell them to. Even God can get bored of watching the spectacle of the Ankylosaurus mating ritual.

So, with a well placed nudge, an asteroid became a meteorite and suddenly, mammals had a lot of empty niches to fill. Eventually, those tiny furry creatures peeking tentatively out of their holes became humans and things really got interesting. Like any obsessive writer, God had an endless stream of great but not entirely formed ideas. There was so much to do! So many lives to observe and tweak; so many promising story lines to direct and expand. There were civilizations to build and wars to meddle in; bushes to burn and towers to strike down.

Usually, when a writer abandons a story line, it doesn’t take on a life of its own; it languishes on discarded pieces of lined yellow paper, tucked under a coffee stained month-old newspaper. But Creation was not a cluttered writer’s studio, disturbed only by a wayward cat or breeze from the window. It was an MMORPG where unattended stories carried on of their own volition, morphing and evolving and turning into something else entirely.

The apocalypse story line had been a musing, a consideration, a possible escape hatch. However, unlike a game that could be rebooted or a page that could be crumpled up and tossed in a bin, Creation was a bit more ornery. Once the rules had been established and the ball got rolling, inertia became a problem, even for God. He could poke and nudge to change small things and the underlying structure of the universe wouldn’t be damaged. Hence, the occasional miracle. He couldn’t, however, suddenly decide that the speed of light was twice as fast as before or that neutron stars no longer existed or that water froze at room temperature. All of Creation had become vast, constantly expanding, it’s edges pushing against the nothingness beyond. With ever increasing mass and velocity, large changes to the structure of the thing would tear it apart. The longer something existed, the longer a story line ran, the harder it was to change it.

The apocalypse had been a way for God to preserve the underlying structure of the reality he had created, while wiping the Earth clean of humans. Or, at least, most of them. The story line had come to him in a dark time, ages after the Flood, when neither the angels nor the humans were giving him any joy and that whole free will thing was starting to become irksome. Sometimes, humanity was beautiful and sometimes, it was terrifying and disappointing. He’d been in the throes of depression and the writer’s block was so bad, that it seemed like a good idea to just start over. It was a spiteful
story line and highly satisfying. He didn’t mean for it to actually happen; it was supposed to get
tossed back out into the void after his black mood dissipated. But then, war broke out along the
Euphrates and he’d gotten distracted.

The apocalypse storyline was left unattended. It had time to take root. When God finally looked up
from the Middle East, it had grown to proportions that he hadn’t imagined possible. Even the angels
were on board. They had worked tirelessly to actually bring it about. He hadn’t seen them this
enthusiastic about anything related to humans since he’d sent the Grigori down to Earth. They had
already manipulated countless people, using the skills of the cherubim to create powerful bloodlines,
capable of playing host to archangels. God panicked. Inertia was at work. He no longer wanted this
story line, but it had taken hold and was barreling full speed ahead.

“God wrote himself into a corner,” Sera said, “He needed a way out.”

Immeasurable amounts of Heaven's resources had gone into creating the bloodlines that would
eventually lead to Sam and Dean. He couldn’t just call it quits halfway through. The machinery was
already built, it was already running. He knew the angels well enough by now to know that they
wouldn’t simply back down if he told them to drop that particular story line. They’d do it; but there
would be dissent among the ranks. He really didn’t want another war among the angels, especially if
Michael didn’t fall in line. It would be like the first war all over again and his heart couldn’t take it.

So how could God complete a coup d’etat against himself without harming the structure of his
universe? Without the creations themselves getting suspicious and potentially damaging all of reality?
He needed to throw a wrench in the plan. He needed an inside man.

“You,” Seraphina said, smiling at Castiel, who was listening with wide eyed wonder.

The angels had all been given free will, but they were too afraid to use it. There were consequences.
Loss of Grace, loss of wings, loss of immortality. But if an angel was willing to give all that up, they
could still live a mortal life and do as they pleased. Heck, once they became fully mortal, they were
welcome to become atheists if it made them happy. It was a built in fail safe. If one of the Heavenly
Host no longer wanted to serve Heaven, they could always leave, but they would also have to give
up their power so they wouldn’t be a threat. Most couldn’t imagine themselves without that God-
given power, so they stayed, even if they hated every moment of it.

But there was one angel who was different. There was an anomaly in his code, a crack in his chassis,
if you will. He had just enough doubt and courage to actually use what he’d been given.

“God needed to make it look like the apocalypse story line fizzled out because you disobeyed and
the Swords were too stubborn,” Sera said, “That was the only way he could get away with it and
keep the angels in line. But you had to make that choice on your own. It was either you or the world.
You made the right choice, you chose the world, you chose Dean.”

Castiel, who had been leaning forward, all of his attention riveted on the girl, tore his eyes away from
her and glanced briefly at the older hunter. He shook his head, sitting back in the chair and buried his
face in his hands.

“I disobeyed a direct order,” came the muffled confession, but there was a note of confusion under
the guilt.

“You were the first to reach him in Hell, even though Michael was part of the raiding party. You, not
Michael, reached him first,” Sera pressed, “After all that planning and strategizing, you think that
moment was chance?”
Dean was the last piece of the puzzle, because he would be the only one who could turn that kink in Castiel's code into a virus, the crack in the chassis into a chasm.

“Out of all the Heavenly Host, you were the only one who had a chance of loving him, and by proxy, loving humanity,” Sera said softly, “That was the key, that was the moment God was counting on. After that, it was all up to you guys how it ended. It could have gone a million different ways, but you chose your path. You did exactly what he was hoping you’d do.”

She looked at each of them in turn then.

“You didn’t disappoint him, you astounded him.”

There were tears streaming down Castiel’s face. For once, it was Dean who reached over and took his hand, squeezing gently.

“Don’t you see?” The girl asked, “Dean may have always been the Michael Sword, but he didn’t become the Righteous Man until you saved him. Without you, neither he nor Sam would have been able to stop Lucifer, to stop the end. You were always the key. Sam and Dean were destined, but you were chosen.”

It was the perfect Kansas City Shuffle.

“That’s why he never answers,” Sera continued, “You’ve already done the impossible. He trusts you.”

Sam was nodding.

“He may not answer our prayers directly, but He does keep bringing Cas back,” the younger hunter said, his eyes on his brother.

Dean chewed the inside of his cheek, watching Castiel’s face; there was a calm assurance there now.

“So why were you praying to God then?” He countered.

Seraphina shrugged.

“Just in case.”

“And how do you even know all of this?” Dean asked, his eyes bouncing between the two former angels.

That dark little part of him that always expected the worst and even reveled when it was proven right, was prodding him not to believe.

“Metatron liked the sound of his own voice,” Sera sighed, rolling her eyes, “He really hated that story, for how much he loved telling it. I think he was annoyed that Castiel got his very own plot line, direct from God, while he just played note-taker.”

Metatron was quite bitter about it actually, which only lent the tale more weight.

After a few moments of silence, Castiel got up. The four of them exchanged looks of hope and dread. There was nothing left to be gained by continuing their research. It was time to acknowledge the fact that Seraphina could not be healed. Plan B had been daunting, just to even consider, but the young woman’s words brought them courage.

“I think it’s time we start summoning demons,” Cas said.
They reasoned that because the Gates of Hell were locked, any demon summoned had to be one that was roaming top side. After what Arnold told them in the greenhouse, it was a good bet that any creature who ended up in their demon’s trap in the dungeon would have some connection to, or knowledge of, Abaddon. Each one summoned was given the same choice; strike a deal with the hunters and deliver a message to Abaddon or die. The first few either claimed no knowledge or refused. Depending on the condition of their vessel, the hunters either killed the demons outright or forced them into a witch’s orb. Sam and Dean ended up dropping off some very confused but very grateful people near phone booths, police stations and trucker stops further and further away from the bunker to avoid the suspicions of local law enforcement.

Eventually, they summoned a demon willing to make a deal. Morax was riding a plump young woman in a Best Buy uniform; her name tag read ‘Meg’. It claimed that Abaddon was already interested in a face-to-face with the hunters. The Knight of Hell figured out it was them spiriting her demons away and was ready to start negotiations for an exchange; the other half of the Grace for the angel and demon tablets. The hunters only agreed to a meeting and not to kill the creature next time they spoke. The brothers exorcised Morax, allowing the demon safe passage out of the bunker via witch’s orb. Meg was deposited outside an emergency room in Osborne.

Twenty four hours later, they summoned Morax back. This time, it was riding an older gentleman in a Walmart uniform. The name tag read ‘Clifford’. Clifford smiled at them in a way they doubted he’d ever smiled in his life before a demon forced its way down his throat. It was all teeth and cold eyes.

“Abaddon is eager to meet,” the demon said, “And she’s got the perfect location in mind.”
They stood inside the church uncertainly, eyeing the ugly black smudge on the floor. It bore a vaguely human shape and Sam swallowed, his mouth going dry at the memory of his last encounter with Abaddon. The abandoned church outside Sioux Falls hadn’t changed since the last time they were there. The window Sam was thrown through had never been boarded up, resulting in a large accumulation of wet, rotting leaves in one of the corners. The cracked demons trap was still on the floor, although the red paint was chipped and faded after more than a year. Dean glared angrily at the black smudge on the floor, hating Abaddon for surviving, for dragging them back to this terrible place and the memories that came attached.

*It’s probably why she chose it*, he thought bitterly.

The hunter glanced at his brother and noticed that that younger man kept clenching and unclenching his fists, much like Cas had done on the long, painfully silent drive back to the bunker so many months before. While Dean stared at the smudge that used to be Josie Sands, Sam’s eyes kept straying to the remains of a chair at the center of the demons trap. The hunter's eyes met and they both remembered the same moment; Sam’s death. Castiel watched the two of them, worry creasing his brow, trying not to recall his own painful, fiery return to Earth without his wings or his grace.

Abaddon was nothing, if not cruel; she wasn’t even here yet and the battle had already begun. They prepped the outside of the building the night before, planning escape routes and laying traps, leaving the interior of the building to Seraphina. She saw now, that it had been a wise decision, considering how Sam and Dean were reacting to being back here. The three men were trying to stay focused, while surrounded by demons that Abaddon did not control, but knew how to invoke. Sera was the only one unaffected by the little church, although she clutched at the strap of her bag anxiously, trying the keep the tremor from her hands; the broken grace making her weaker by the moment. She was quickly nearing the end of the month estimated by Gabriel.

They didn’t have a clear plan, except that the Knight of Hell could not be allowed to go free. Each of them had a gun with specially cast devil’s trap bullets, an angel’s blade and a witch’s orb; they practiced the trapping incantation until it’s words reverberated even in their dreams. But the four knew that none of the weapons they possessed could kill Abaddon. They had argued long and hard about bringing the actual tablets to the exchange.

“Even if she somehow overpowered all four of us, it's not like she’d be able to open the hex box!” Sam argued.

“The box hasn’t been tested,” Cas pointed out, “We don’t know what it’s capable of withstanding.”

“But if she doesn’t see the tablets, she’ll know we’re double crossing her,” Seraphina said, her eyes narrowed, her tone confused.
“We’re Winchesters,” Dean growled in response, “Of course we’re double crossing a Knight of friggin’ Hell!”

Sam rubbed at his face wearily, but eventually agreed with Dean, “If she kills all of us, at least the tablets will still be in the bunker, protected by multiple layers of enchantments. It might take her decades just to locate this place, let alone figure out a way to get in.”

“Wasn’t she riding a Men of Letters member last time? Wouldn’t she know where this place is and how to break all those enchantments?” Sera asked.

Castiel explained that angels and demons don’t just know everything their vessel knows, especially if that vessel was well trained to keep secrets like Josie Sands. A great deal of the information floating around in most people’s heads is irrelevant and incidental; to get at something meaningful, one would have to look for it with purpose. Abaddon never attacked them directly; she had sent an unwitting Arnold to deliver the broken grace to them instead. It was still possible that the Knight of Hell only knew of the existence of the bunker, but not it’s location or it’s weaknesses.

“I don’t like this plan,” Sera muttered, “If she kills us all, the tablets are vulnerable, even in the bunker. Isn’t the whole point for us to survive? For me to get my grace back and subdue Abaddon?”

“Well, that’s still the plan if everything goes right, but…,” Sam trailed off.

“But again, seeing as we’re Winchesters,” Dean concluded bitterly, “We just assume everything is gonna go to shit and plan accordingly.”

At the time, Seraphina only shook her head in response. Now, she observed the three men, wondering at the painful memories this abandoned little church in the middle of nowhere was dredging up for them. Castiel watched Dean and Dean watched Sam, all of them willing to die for the other and Seraphina’s heart ached for them all. It was her fault they were here, although she suspected that Dean was having a similar thought. The girl ran through her options again; she could expel the grace right here and now, risk death, but get her tattered little family out of harm's way. Or, she could stand her ground, fight for the other half of her grace and potentially lose one or all of the men she’d come to love. If she got her grace back, she could heal them, protect them from Abaddon, shield them until they were old and arthritic and ready to move on, to pass the burden of the world to someone else. Seraphina’s heart flared at the thought; to be able to fight beside her father and the Swords who dared to shake their fists at all the powers of the universe. It was selfish, but that’s what she wanted.

In that moment, the double doors of the church swung open and suddenly, none of it mattered. Not their planning, not their traps, not the hours they spent going over every possible contingency; none of it. The four of them looked on the pale face, framed by red hair and knew that they had already lost. The bullets and the blades; they might as well had come without them. Abaddon smiled her vicious smile, those hungry green eyes roving over them in triumphant satisfaction.

“Hello boys,” she said.

“No,” Sam breathed.

Dean’s shoulders tensed when the door swung open, but now, as he took in the scene, they slumped and he looked at Abaddon in horror.

“Charlie,” he said, his voice breaking.

Abaddon just kept smiling, taking in their dumbstruck faces with glee, until it seemed she couldn’t
help it and threw her head back, cackling. It was obscene, that skin crawling sound, coming from Charlie's mouth. Seraphina turned panicked eyes on Castiel; none of their discussions or plans ever touched on the possibility that the demon would meet them wearing anyone but a stranger. It was, after all, easier to kill a vessel and the creature riding it, when you didn’t know the poor unfortunate sods name. But now, Abaddon had a hostage and very real power over them. Despite her own selfish desires, Seraphina would have given up her grace in an instant, if it meant keeping the others safe. The four of them approached this meeting with only one intention; trap the demon. They never considered actually making the trade, which is why they decided to leave the tablets in the bunker. But now... Now they were at an exchange without the promised merchandise and Charlie would surely suffer for their miscalculation.

The horrible laughter stopped and Abaddon waved Charlie's hand imperiously. Two men stepped through the doors, flanking the demon. They chose their meat suits well; both were tall and well muscled, wearing nondescript jeans and t-shirts. Castiel wondered wildly what they had been doing moments before they were snatched out of their ordinary human lives and dumped into this nightmare. Had the one on the left been walking across his lawn to pick up the mail? Had the other one been getting out of his car, on the way to meet friends for lunch? Did they see the black clouds coming? Did they fight? His eyes were pulled back to the young woman before him and he realized in a flash how arrogant the four of them were to think that this would work. Beside him, Dean’s whole body was practically vibrating with rage.

"You fight her, Charlie," he ground out, pointing an angel blade at the redhead before him, “You fight her with everything you’ve got. We’ll get you out.”

Abaddon laughed again. She seemed to be thoroughly enjoying her triumph.

“Oh sweetheart,” she said, using Charlie's voice and contorting her face into what she must have thought was a concerned expression, “I wouldn’t have it any other way. It’s so boring when people just give up, don’t you think? I prefer a good fight; makes things so much more fun! And, throw in an unexpected variable or two…”

Abaddon didn’t finish the sentence, just shrugged Charlie's shoulders and unzipped the hoodie she was wearing, revealing a t-shirt that said “Join the dark side, we have cookies”. Sam let out a strangled sound and Dean’s nostrils flared. They might have laughed, had the joke not been at the expense of someone they loved; someone who might suffer untold pain because of them.

“Is that mine?”

Seraphina’s voice rang out, bright and high in the cold night air pouring in through the shattered window. The three men flinched, startled. They were so focused on the catastrophe before them, that they’d almost forgotten the dying girl standing beside them. Certainly, none of them had noticed the vial hanging at Abaddon's throat. The demon fingered the little golden tube almost absently, her eyes roving hungrily over Seraphina's pale, drawn face.

“You must be the fallen angel,” Abaddon said, in a voice that didn’t belong to Charlie anymore; it was predatory and smooth and Sera imagined it was a silk scarf, wrapping around her throat, ready to tighten and choke.

The demon took a step forward, her eyes eager. The men made a move as if they were about to close ranks in front of Seraphina, but she slipped between Sam and Castiel’s shoulders like a fish through sea grass. Half the church and the useless demons trap were still between them, but Abaddon radiated a presence that filled up the space with silence and shadows and pressed against the angels skin like a living thing. The two women regarded each other. One was looking for even a trace of her friend, the other devoured with her eyes. Charlie's face broke into a smile and for a moment,
Seraphina thought there was still a chance; a chance to use the witches orbs instead of the bullets and the blades.

“You’re broken,” Charlie's voice said with profane delight and that moment of hope was gone.

“Thanks to you,” Sera retorted.

“No one forced you to take back that Grace, little girl,” she snarled, losing any vestiges of Charlie, “I’m surprised Arnold even got as far as he did… But let me guess, one of your precious hunters was hurt?”

Abaddon didn’t wait for a response, stepping toward them, her eyes roving over the men standing silently behind Seraphina and she smiled that vicious smile again.

“Why Charlie?” Dean ground out.

Abaddon lost her smile.

“Because you can’t be trusted,” she hissed back at him, “And since I don’t see any tablets, I’m guessing my new meat suit will supply the motivation you need to get them to me. I’ll give you…”

She cocked her head to the side and put a finger to her cheek, pretending to consider her options.

“I’ll give you twelve hours. If the tablets aren’t here by then, I’ll start aerating this meat suit.”

Abaddon turned on her heel and started walking out of the church.

“That’s not enough time!”

“Leave Charlie out of this!”

“At least give us a whole day!”

The three hunters called out all at once, surging forward, past Seraphina. The demon turned on them, her teeth bared, her face contorted in rage, a knife shining in her hand. The men stopped as suddenly as if they’d been turned to stone.

“I am a Knight of Hell, you sniveling little nothings! You think you can double cross me and then make demands?”

With that, she lowered the knife, carving a nauseating gash into her own forearm. Into Charlie's forearm. The three men yelled and pleaded, their voices rising and mixing into an indistinct wave of sound while blood dripped onto the rotting wooden floor. None of them moved, for fear of what else the demon might do to Charlie. Out of the cacophony, a single voice rose up.

“I have them!”

Everyone froze and after a beat, all turned to Seraphina. The bag slung over the girl's shoulder, which Castiel thought was bulging with spell books was now empty and slack, a wooden box instead of a book held high over her head. In the confusion and the noise, she separated herself from the hunters and her father, choosing to stand in front of the broken window. Mist and icy air were pouring in off the wetlands. The demon twitched and for a horrifying moment, Sam thought the Knight of Hell was going to throw Sera through the opening his own body had created almost a year ago. But Abaddon was smiling, the movement he’d detected was the knife being tucked back into its hiding place.
“At least one of you has some sense,” she purred, her voice and demeanor snapping from rage to calm with unsettling speed, her eyes fixed hungrily on the box.

“Sera,” Sam breathed, horror struck, “No.”

The girl turned apologetic eyes on the hunter.

“I’m sorry,” she said, lowering the box and hugging it to her chest, “I have to.”

Sam and Castiel exchanged dismayed looks, but Dean’s eyes never left the girl. Stowing his angel blade, he pulled out a pistol instead. The barrel was still pointed at the ground, but the threat was clear.

“Sera,” the older hunter said slowly, her name more a warning on his lips than an attempt to get her attention, and held out his hand for the hex box.

The girls eyes flickered to the gun and then to Dean’s outstretched hand. For a moment, it seemed like she might step toward him, might relinquish the precious object and take her place at their side. In the tense silence, the only sound that could be heard was the steady drip of Charlie's blood. Sera took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and pulled her eyes away from the weapon.

“You can have the tablets,” she said, her attention on the demon before her.

Sera’s voice had an edge of terror to it, but her stance was defiant. Abaddon eyed her, appraising the situation. The hunters stood frozen, until Dean raised his weapon and leveled it at the girl. Sam and Cas turned stunned eyes on him. The women ignored him, although Dean would see a barely-there shiver run through Sera.

“And in return?” Abaddon asked, an eyebrow raised in disbelief.

“Charlie,” Sera breathed, her voice breaking, “And my Grace.”

The demon’s eyes roved over the girl, with the box clutched desperately to her chest, shivering in the cold night air. She must have seen the weakness in Sera’s grip, seen the flush of her cheeks caused by the mere effort of mentally squaring off with a Knight of Hell while poison coursed through her being. The angel’s gaze darted to the golden vial hanging from Abaddon’s neck and the demon smiled.

“No,” she said, cruel triumph flashing across her face, “You’ll be dead soon enough and then I can just take what I want.”

“Except you can’t open the box,” Sam said quietly.

Abaddon bared her teeth at the younger hunter, making a move toward him, when one of the other demons stepped forward. Without a word, he pulled up his t-shirt to reveal a sigil carved into the abdomen of his vessel. The symbol was intricate but bloody and from where the hunters were standing, they could only make out a circle within a triangle. Castiel took in a sharp breath, recognizing the design.

“Shax,” the former angel said, drawing shocked and confused looks from the hunters.

The Knight of Hell, the demon and Cas exchanged looks. After a tense moment, the former angel explained.

“Shax is a demon of deceit, unless he is bound within that sigil,” Castiel said, pointing an angel blade
at the bloody flesh, “Then, he can only tell the truth.”

It seemed Adabbon had thought of everything; she’d even brought her very own lie detector. She sighed theatrically, rolling her eyes, but then waved her hand imperiously at Shax. The demon nodded and turned his attention on Seraphina and the box in her arms. An orange light flared in his eyes for a moment and then he stepped back, shaken.

“Not even a Knight of Hell can open that,” he said quietly.

Abaddon bared her teeth again, this time in the direction of the demon. Shax however, just shrugged, regaining his composure, and sighed as if this were the most boring staff meeting he’d ever been to. Imperiously, he reminded Abaddon that if she didn’t want to hear the truth, she shouldn’t have bound him with the sigil. Meanwhile, Dean and Castiel cast proud glances at Sam; the box was his creation, after all. But Sam only had eyes for Seraphina, his gaze searching and apprehensive. Dean wavered for a moment, the pistol in his hand no longer feeling like a solution to the situation they were in. The Knight of Hell turned her attention back on the fading angel before her.

“Fine,” she growled, “You terms?”

“I will open the box,” she said, addressing Abaddon, but her eyes were trained on Shax.

The Knight of Hell directed an arched eyebrow at the demon, who glared at Sera with those flaming orange eyes. He was only partially successful at masking his surprise. He gave a nod, confirming her claim.

Shivering, her strength obviously ebbing, Seraphina laid out her terms. She would open the hex box and hand over the tablets. Abaddon and her demons would leave, tablets in hand, and deposit Charlie in the nearest town next to a payphone, with the vial of grace. This would give the demons enough time to escape before Seraphina became a full fledged angel again. After that, there would be no amnesty, no negotiation, nothing to keep them from tearing each other apart and each of them would have the weapon they so desperately sought.

Abaddon screwed up Charlies face, as if giving the ultimatum serious consideration, “Why not?”

Dean readjusted the grip on his pistol, still pointed at Seraphina. He remembered that day in the bunker, when he’d told the girl she could stay, the resignation with which she told him that she understood, the sadness with which she explained to Sam what they were agreeing to. His mind skipped forward and he pictured that fierce look she’d pinned him with and how she’d said *I’m not going to hurt Sam.* Something was off and he couldn’t quite figure out what, his trigger finger itchy, his mind picturing a bullet ripping through the girl’s chest. He could stop this; could end these ridiculous negotiations in their tracks and simply take the girl and the hex box out of the equation. The bullets weren’t meant for her, but they were laced with the metal of a melted down angel blade and she was half gone already. Dean’s finger tightened on the trigger.

“Open the box,” Castiel breathed, his eyes fixed on the angel he’d built with his own hands.

Dean faltered. Something was off. Castiel's voice held no warning in it and Sam was relaxed at his side. The hunter met the dying angels eyes and several things happened at once. Her pale little fingers wedged themselves under the hex box lid, popping it open with a strange sucking sound, like a wind finding its way through a barley cracked window. Energy crackled through the church, making the hair on the back of their necks stand up. Another memory flooded Dean’s awareness; the still raw pain of losing Sam, Crowley's unwelcome presence, Kevin explaining how the box worked. *The Mirror of Erised.* The pistol waivered. The hex box clattered to the floor.
“How is it that a demon deal is sealed?” Seraphina asked, turning to Dean, all innocence and gullibility.

The Angel and Demon tablets were suddenly in either hand, as if she had emerged out of the primordial foam of the universe with them, as if she were made to hold them, as if all of reality had conspired to bring her to this very moment. Her voice was light but her eyes were pleading. She wanted him to understand something, to see something he was missing. Panic and doubt were prickling at his scalp, making his hands go numb.

Dean lowered his weapon a fraction.

“With a kiss,” he breathed, hope and dread warring in his chest.

Abaddon ignored them, her eyes fixed on the prizes she so fervently sought but couldn’t have until the deal was sealed. Shax and the other demon stepped back, unable to hide their fear and awe at seeing the tablets. The Knight of Hell stepped forward, while Sam gently placed his hand on his brothers arm, bringing the gun down to threaten only the floor. The dying angel and the Knight of Hell closed the distance between them. Castiel reached for Dean’s free hand, his eyes never leaving the girl he created in the cold fires of Heaven, with his stolen power and his arrogance and his fear.

The angel and the demon came together like two ancient and opposing forces finding each other after lifetimes apart, two sides of the same coin, finally reunited. Even before their lips crashed together, Abaddon was reaching for the tablets in Seraphina’s hands; the dying angel didn’t resist. For a moment, nothing happened, they were just sealing the deal, as if it were any other crossroads agreement. Then, a blinding light flared in Sera’s chest. Time stuttered and slowed to a crawl. The light rose out of the girl’s chest; it traveled up her throat and down her arms, it clawed its way from one set of lips to the other, it lit up the tablets like lighthouse beacons. The Knight of Hell realized what was happening a second too late and then that broken grace was pouring from Seraphina’s lips into Abaddon’s very core, pouring from her hands into the tablets. There was a flash and a sound like the sun’s final howl and then the world was nothing but light and screams, the tearing of wood and the shattering of glass and stone, whispered prayers and the shrieks of demons fleeing their meat suits.

They would never talk about this moment afterward, but as the world tore itself apart around them, the hunters and the former angel all had the same word on their lips and in their hearts.

*Please, please, please, please, please...*

The shock wave leveled the church. The damaged grace was like a supernatural atomic bomb, it destroyed almost everything in its path. Almost. Sam and Cas and Dean found each other in the ruble easily, bruised and scratched, but otherwise unharmed. Two unconscious but breathing men lay in the mud outside of what used to be the church, fully human.

*Please, please, please, please, please...*

The men found them where they fell, wrapped in each others arms like two children protecting the other from a storm. For a horrible, gut wrenching moment, they seemed as still as death. Then Charlie moaned.

“Frak, fraking, frak,” came the hoarse voice, her eyes fluttering open.

The older hunter surged forward. “You OK? Charlie? What the hell happened?”

Dean pulled the red head up into a sitting position, holding her tight as the young woman started to
shiver, surveying the destruction surrounding them.

“She’s gone,” Charlie croaked, “Abaddon. Sera did something. It felt… It felt like…”

In fact, it felt like the sun itself had poured into her core, burning away that cold clammy darkness. It smelled like a campfire on a chilly night. It felt like her mother smiling at her. It tasted like a scream and burned like icy starlight. She had craved that beautiful terrible thing tearing its way through her when the demon was inside, but now she fervently hoped to forget every detail.

Sam gathered Seraphina in his arms.

“I’m gonna vote for never doing that again,” Charlie hiccuped with tears in her voice and clutched at her forearm, which held no trace of the wound Abaddon gouged there.

Castiel crouched by Sam, his hand sweeping dark hair from Sera’s cold forehead. The hunter adjusted his grip and her head lolled sickeningly, her whole body limp. He kept waiting for the nosebleed, for the groan, the flutter of eyelashes. He kept waiting for it to turn out like Harbor Green. All he heard was Castiel's sharp release of breath, Dean’s grunt of concern. Charlie struggled out of Dean’s arms, pushing Cas aside, her hands on the other woman’s face and neck.

“She’s not breathing,” the redhead squeaked.

“The extra Grace,” Dean growled.

Charlie ripped the little vial from her neck, but the glass was cracked and the glow was gone. Pouring her broken grace into Abaddon and the tablets had killed the demon and turned the stone slabs to dust. The resulting blast would’ve killed them all, but in that split second before the energy discharge could send them to the afterlife, Seraphina redirected it at the vial. That poor shattered grace absorbed what was left after the demon perished, protecting them. But now, there was nothing left for Sera. Charlie let loose an angry, frustrated wail and hurled the vial away from her.

Dean jumped into action, ordering Sam to start chest compressions, for Cas to find the nearest emergency room, for Charlie to help them both, all while heading for what used to be the front of the church to bring the Impala out of its hiding spot. The others scrambled to comply, but Castiel didn’t move, only shaking his head and gazing sadly at Sam.

“What? WHAT?” Sam demanded, making Dean pause, his eyes bouncing between the two men. Castiel's mouth opened and closed a few times, his hands spreading out in a gesture of helplessness.

“She’s already gone,” he finally said, the words apologetic, his eyes full of sorrow and sympathy, “A blast of spiritual energy that strong… She probably passed out of the Veil.”

Dean and Charlie froze, their horrified gazes settling on Sam. If the blast sent her on an express ride to Heaven, if her soul was no longer accessible in the Veil, there would be no way to get to her with the gates slammed shut. The younger hunter’s face turned to stone, something flared in his eyes, like resolve or desperation.

“No,” was all he said, shaking his head, his mouth a jagged line of anger and grief, “No.”

He hauled himself up, staggering slightly with the girl in his arms and tried to find a clear patch of dirt beyond the rubble. His intention was to start CPR, but then Sam heard the most peculiar sound, although he could’ve sworn it was only reverberating inside his own head. It was music; an unearthly and beautiful music. It made him feel warm and safe and like his insides were quivering in response. His very DNA was screaming at him to go toward the music, to find the source and hold it
so close that it melted through his skin and into his own blood. Without understanding how, he knew that it was the sound of Seraphina’s soul. No wonder she found him in Heaven, with this kind of homing beacon.

“I can hear her.”

And without further explanation, he started walking toward the sound. At first, it felt like it was all around him, like he was swimming in it, but with a little bit of concentration, he could tell that there was a distinct origin to the music. It was hard to stay focused, even with that sweet melody filling him up from the inside, with the others trying to pull him back. Their voices were muffled, their hands like annoying thorns catching in his clothes, keeping him from progressing.

“I can hear her soul dammit,” he spat at them, needing them to understand, to let him search. This wasn’t some grief-induced delusion. He heard her. It had to be her. I must be her because the universe owed him. He needed her back. He still had things to show her, things to share; like July 4th fireworks, like that little archive in Maine, like the old theater that was converted into an independent bookstore in Denver, like the herbal shop in Brooklyn, like swimming naked in that pond in Virginia he forgot about until this moment, like growing old together. The music promised him all those things.

“I don’t hear anything,” Dean said, tripping over fallen branches in the dark, anxious and impatient, wondering if it was time to grab the girl out of his brother’s arms and redirect them to the Impala. He looked to the others for help.

“We don’t hear anything either.” Charlie said softly, the darkness closing in around them as they worked their way around the rubble of the church and into the trees on the other side.

Castiel was the only one not trying to pull Sam back, his eyes narrow and focused, watching the hunter intently as they picked their way through the night. He couldn’t hear the music, but the moment felt familiar.

And then they saw it.

The thing was a spiky glowing ball that cast no actual light and yet was too bright to look at directly. It was like blown glass the color of gold, but kept changing shape the longer they watched. It bobbed inside a silver net more delicate than spider silk. Everything around it was fuzzy, the trees and sky flickering and twisting into strange shapes behind it and around it. They stared.

Sam laughed, dizzy with relief, the music flooding him with warmth. The shining thing strained against its binding, weaving impatiently, getting more ensnared. The younger hunter put Seraphina down on the damp ground, the others gathering around her body protectively, as he walked toward that beautiful thing emitting the music. He was going to untangle it, but as soon as his hands touched the silver net, the strands disappeared and the soul was free.

It whizzed toward them and settled on Seraphina’s still chest, sinking in until it and the music were gone. Within seconds, the girl was sputtering, drawing ragged breaths. The younger hunter helped her to her feet and pulled her into a fierce hug. She grunted in pain and Sam let her go, wiping at the wetness on his face. The others surged forward to hug her, Dean leaving a kiss on the top of her head, Cas brushing the hair off her forehead again but with joy in his eyes this time. When it was Charlie’s turn, the women hung on to each other fiercely, the red head sniffing.

“I’m really glad that worked,” Sera groaned, her body feeling raw, like she was sunburned from the
inside out.

“What the hell was that?” Dean asked, indicating the place where the silver net and her soul had been.

“Was that god, did he actually answer this time?” Sam guessed.

Seraphina laughed, even though it hurt. “No. That was the backup plan.”

Chapter End Notes

I apologize that it took THIS long to get you guys this chapter. It was a doozy. Hope you enjoy! One more chapter to come and then our adventures together will be over.
The End

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Abaddon was dead. The tablets were dust. She was alive. The world would spin for a little bit longer.

Sam didn’t let go of her the whole drive back to Kansas. Charlie fell asleep in Sera’s arms. Dean was too busy holding on to Castiel’s hand for reassurance, too shocked that this had all somehow worked out, to make any snarky remarks. Their tattered, strange, demon-defying little family rolled through the warm night, Baby dependably devouring blacktop between Sioux Falls and Lebanon. Long after the summer moon had set, somewhere in the middle of Nebraska, Dean squeezed Castiel’s hand.

“What do you think it means? The music?”

The hunter was thinking of that frigid winter morning, so long ago now, it seemed, when he burst forth from the bunker, his mind full of panicked buzzing and had been commanded to drive. He remembered the former angel’s story, the one he both needed and dreaded to hear, about the fire and the pain and the melody that brought them together. The music had saved him then. It aided in Sam’s escape. It led them back to Seraphina.

Castiel shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“I do,” came the muffled reply, “Gabriel told me.”

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Dean had been clear. Assume everything would go to shit and plan accordingly. Seraphina planned accordingly. While the men labored away in the library, hunched over their ancient demon texts, Seraphina enlisted Gabriel’s help via angel radio. Her grace may have been mutilated and sputtering, but it still retained some of its power. They thought of all the ways an encounter with Abaddon could go wrong; Sera going supernova before she could get her hands on the other half of the grace was at the tippy top of that list. The archangel, having used his own death to great advantage, suggested she do the same. The problem with this was two fold; if the explosion wasn’t contained somehow, the others would die and even if they managed to survive, she would still be dead and on an express train to the pearly gates. At the moment she died, she would be human, so there was no danger of the other angels realizing who she used to be, but getting out would be nearly impossible without exposing Gabriel's involvement and potentially destabilizing the situation in Heaven.

That was when the idea of the soul snare came up, which only created a third problem; being found. If a soul was left too long on earth with no way of escape, it would eventually start to deteriorate and become a destructive force. Seraphina didn’t want to end up stuck in the trees, alone and useless to the hunters.

“I always meant to ask you,” Gabe said, “How did you find Sam so fast after I broke you out of the Garrett? I was gearing up to keep my multitude of siblings occupied for days.”

Sera had shrugged, even though he couldn’t see her. “I just followed the music.”
There was a stunned silence. She wasn’t sure how she knew that the archangel was stunned, but the empty space left after her answer had the texture of surprise.

“You’re shitting me,” he finally said.

Archangels didn’t usually associate themselves with cherubs, but Gabriel was not a typical archangel. He had run into a few during the days he masqueraded as Loki and although he tried to steer clear of all the denizens of Heaven on principle, it wasn’t always possible. He’d come across her in Brazil and out of boredom, befriended her. Most cherubs were talkative, but this one especially so and she revealed some very interesting details about how certain bloodlines were poked, prodded and occasionally coerced into crossing. Souls that were linked by Heaven’s machinations were calibrated to respond to each other’s frequencies; it’s what brought them together, it’s what made them sing in each other’s presence. This usually happened only under the direct supervision of an angel, but sometimes, souls became linked outside of the prescribed meddling of Heaven. Most soulmates were engineered. Some sprung up on their own, like mutations in the wild.

It was Seraphina’s turn to supply the stunned silence.

“But…,” she sputtered, “Aren’t Sam and Dean soulmates? Because, you know… the apocalypse and Swords and…?”

Unlike engineered soulmates, the unsanctioned ones followed no rules and the angels had yet to figure out a way to unmake a bond once it had occurred. The largest soul clan the cherub had ever heard of contained eleven people; two nuns, eight orphans and the soldier who saved them. Apparently, it was the cherub’s favorite heaven.

“So when I die…,” Sera prompted.

She could almost feel Gabriel rolling his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. You and BigFoot end up in the same place. Along with the crabby coffee guzzler and probably my uptight brother.”

There was a heavy sigh.

“Heaven might implode.”

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There are still ghouls and vengeful spirits to contend with and on occasion, a rogue werewolf or two, but hunting becomes rare for them. With the gates closed, neither heaven nor hell can add any chaos to the world. The Winchesters suspect that there are some left over demons still wandering topside, but they’ve caught on and don’t cause enough trouble to attract the hunters.

It takes almost a year, but they manage to digitize the entire library and in the end, the bunker becomes more of a walk-in safe; just a repository for the original spell books and artifacts. Without any major threat beating at their door, they all eventually long for sunlight, windows, maybe even a houseplant or two. They buy an old farmhouse outside Topeka; their vast backyard butting up to a well wooded wildlife preserve and a river further in.

Dean repairs vintage cars; collectors find out about him via word of mouth. He only works on a few a month. He takes his time, enjoys it. The clients pay well, but they don’t need the money; it’s more a labor of love than anything else. He volunteers at a community center, teaching the local
troublemakers the difference between carburetors and fuel injectors. Turns out he’s pretty damn good at it and the other volunteers seek him out, sit in on his classes, try to treat the kids the same way.

Castiel starts a massive garden that’s successful enough to keep them fed through many a winter. He spends almost every warm day with dirt under his fingernails, muttering encouragement to the tomatoes and gently reprimanding the squash for sneaking into neighboring plant beds. One spring, Seraphina orchestrates a road trip for the two of them to the Missouri botanical gardens in St. Louis; Cas has always wanted to see the giant dome of the Climatron. While they’re gone, Sam and Dean build the former angel a greenhouse. It’s not quite done when the two travelers return, but Cas is so taken with it, that he cries actual tear of joy, crushing Dean’s mouth with his.

Seraphina ends up with the local volunteer ambulance corps, putting her vast years of experience to good use. Sometimes, she gets home so tired that the most Sam can do is convince her to get a few gulps of protein shake before she collapses into bed for ten hours. She’s always happiest after those shifts, knowing that people are safe or alive because of her and that no one can undo it.

Between Charlie’s hacking skills and Dean’s forged paperwork, Sam finds a place in the anthropology department at the University of Kansas. He fills in, teaching the Magic, Science and Religion course. His students love him so much that he eventually convinces the department to add a whole new class; it covers the role of ghosts, demons and other paranormal creatures and phenomenon in American folklore, urban legend and modern psyche. It becomes popular enough, that the university starts offering it as an elective to any student, not just anthropology majors. It ends up with a long, academic name, but everyone on campus gives it a nickname; Supernatural.

Sam is so thorough, that once in a while, an old student will show up back on campus, years after graduating, and cautiously ask him how much of what he teaches is real. He can hear the terror behind the question, the wild-eyed look of someone who’s survived the unexplainable and he’ll gently lead that person to his lime green Prius and bring them to dinner.

That’s how the Winchester farmhouse becomes a hunter sanctuary; where wounds can be mended, questions answered, bellies filled. Cas grows most of the spell ingredients they need. Sam supplies the rarer items through his university connections and a network of sympathetic academians. Dean fixes smashed EMF readers, helps newbies sharpen their machetes and walks them through making rock salt filled shotgun shells. Sera heals where she can and builds pyres when she must.

One night, years after Abaddon and the broken grace, a desperate hunter stands in their kitchen in the middle of the night with a screaming toddler in a cheap folding stroller. The grinning cartoon characters dancing across the pink stroller take on a horrific, garish nature, when they notice the splatters of blood. The child has been wailing for so long, that her voice is giving out, her face red, her eyes all but swollen shut. The hunter keeps rattling the stroller, his knuckles gone white on the handles, in a wretched attempt to calm her but only succeeding in the opposite. They can’t quite get the whole story out of him, except that his wife is dead, that he won’t stop until the thing that did this is also dead and he can’t do it with a kid in tow. His eyes stay focused on some distant point none of them can fathom.

“You can’t just dump her here!” Sera yells at his retreating back.

“Where the hell are you going?” Sam shouts into the night as the man keeps walking.

Cas watches with them, the tail lights disappearing in the blackness.

It’s only after they register the quiet, that they turn around. They don’t notice the diaper bag until Dean is rummaging through it, the girl clinging to his neck as he bounces gently and shushes her. Her face is wiped clean, a blanket wrapped around the shivering little body and from the depths of
the bag, a bottle appears. They don’t even need to discuss it; they rock her in shifts over the following weeks but she sleeps deepest on Dean’s chest. After months of trying to find her father, they do the only thing they can think of to protect the girl. Charlie digs up or fabricates the appropriate paperwork and Ava becomes a Winchester.

In time, there is a pack of children at the farmhouse. None of them abandoned in the gut wrenching way Ava was; but left in safe hands for weeks or months at a time. It’s best this way. They have friends that know exactly what it’s like to be the child of a hunter. They go to the local school, they ride the bus, they bring lunches in brown paper bags. They learn geometry and history. But at home, they learn how to spot a shapeshifter and how to release a vengeful spirit. Ava is told she simply has an enormous amount of cousins. Sera perfects a glamour charm. No matter how often their numbers or faces change, no matter how different they look from each other, no matter how implausible it is, the locals smile at the pack of kids, their eyes growing unfocused and mutter about what a nice family those Winchesters are…

Chapter End Notes


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