Hail to the God Machine!

by Maldoror_Chant

Summary

Sam and Dean Winchester grew up in Paradise 342, some two hundred years after the Apocalypse ripped the world apart. Now that was a messy business, humans dying left, right and center - but then Evil was defeated, and earth became a promised land, as was foretold in Revelations.

Now humans dwell peaceably in the eternal sunshine of a world unchanged since 1836. God lives among them in the form of a Machine managing all their needs, from their marriages to their daily meals, while their angel overseers keep the humans safe and content. The system is perfect. The angels all say so.

Dean and his friends in the human resistance beg to differ. The angels, particularly that new Seraph who just blew into town, can take their ‘perfect’ Paradise and suck it.
Though quite a few of the elements are based on canon, this is an AU, NOT a what-if or a meta fic. Bobby is a lot older in this fic, around 90, though he looks the same as in the show, and Castiel is a Seraph right out of the gate.
"I heard a loud voice from the throne. It said, "'Now God's home is with people. He will live with them. They will be his people. God himself will be with them and will be their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death, sadness, crying, or pain. All the old ways are gone.'"

--- Revelation 21: 3-4

It was another perfect day in Paradise, so perfect it had Dean listing means of suicide in his head. Not with any intent, of course, there were plenty of better ways to die. It was mere idle whimsy, the way he’d whittle a piece of wood down to the core to excise the urge to cut something.

Jo came sauntering up, tapping her tray against her leg as if to emphasize the fact that she was wearing men’s trousers for the occasion, and not a goddamn dress. In tartan shirt and tough canvas boots, she was dressed much the same as Dean. “Can I get you boys a refill before they drag us out of here?”

“Yes, please,” Sam said absently, still poring over his book.

“Dean? How’d you want your apple juice?”

“With prussic acid. And a slice of lemon.”

“Hilarious. You never did that one before,” Jo muttered.

“Once the hoopla dies down,” Dean said, voice low out of knee-jerk caution, “you better have a barrel of beer ready. I’m going to drown myself in it.” Coincidentally that was method number One on his list.

Jo’s eyes darted around. New Jerusalem, humanity’s perfect home among the angels and the Divine. It sure taught you to look over your shoulder.

“Deal,” she said, since the Roadhouse Saloon was virtually deserted other than regulars who’d heard this and worse. “But only because we got another barrel for me.”

“Awesome, I like company.”

“We’ll share our beer-flavored repose for all eternity.”

“R.I.B.”

“You two are strange,” Sam pronounced without looking up from his book. “And Jo, you are now going to tell me that by beer, you meant sassafras beer.”

“Of course, Sam,” Jo said sweetly. “Prime quality sassafras beer. All the sassafras we could stuff in there and nary a drop of utterly illegal liquor. Is that plausible enough for your deniability?”

“Thank you.” Sam flipped his page. Dean could almost feel the legalese wafting off of it. The New Talmud was two thousand pages of laws and loopholes to get around Heavenly Decrees, and yet
not a single paragraph in there allowed for the partaking of some quality suds. Dean had asked Sam
to check. Repeatedly. But nooooo. Not Allowed. Like 99% of anything fun in life - and that was
only if you thought lawn bowling was anything more than ‘barely okay’, otherwise it batted a cool
100. Thank you, Heavenly Host.

As if summoned by Dean’s thoughts, an angel walked into the saloon. Excellent. The day had
really been too nauseatingly perfect up to now, it was good to have an irritation to rail against.

Dean took a second look at the diffident figure in the doorway and changed his mind. Even though
Samandriel was the epitome of everything wrong in Paradise 342, Dean just couldn’t stay mad at
him. It’d be like kicking a puppy.

“Hi, Alfie,” Sam said over his shoulder. “Look, I’m busy, please don’t make us go out there. Just
this once.”

Samandriel seemed to collapse in on himself a bit. His city slicker black frock looked two sizes too
big on him all of a sudden, and he looked ready to sink his head behind his cravat. “I- I’m sorry,
Sam. Um. But it could be your lucky day!”

Dean slowly let his head sink until it clunked against the crudely varnished table. He’d gotten to
the sixth means of suicide on his list still available to them in this earthly Paradise which had
otherwise done away with weapons, poisons and such. But where there’s a rope, there’s a way.

“Please?” Samandriel asked, even though gathering outside at this time was mandatory for
bachelors.

The Roadhouse regulars were a sordid lot, the crust left at the bottom of the heavenly barrel once
all the odious happiness had been drained out. Uriel would have had to threaten to raze the joint
before they complied. Balthazar and Eliezer wouldn’t have bothered coming in. Melod and Zuriel?
They’d have been laughed right out of the place. As for Zach and Jonah, they pretended the
Roadhouse didn’t exist. But Samandriel… even Rufus struggled to his feet with a sigh, because
when Alfie got that faintly panicked look on his face, it reminded the humans that he might be an
angel, but the poor bugger was at the very bottom of the holy heap, same as the rest of ‘em.

Sam’s expression was bleak, but he fitted on his cap, handed Dean the latter’s cavalry hat, and got
up with a finger marking his page. Dean moodily kicked back his chair and got a reproving ‘Oi!’
from the kitchen at the scrape of wood on wood. Ellen had ears like a cat when it came to the
mistreatment of anything in her saloon, and she did not abide it, even though Dean could bust every
article of furniture in the place and the Machine would rewrite them as pristine in a day or so.

Perched on his habitual bar stool, Bobby tipped the rim of his pork pie hat as they walked by, and
smirked like the complete and utter skunk he was. “Have fun, boys. Good luck, Rufus.”

Rufus’s response broke three separate decrees. By the door, Alfie’s face went rigid with panic.
Pretending to have been suddenly afflicted with celestial deafness, he spun around and trotted off to
round up the next set of unmarried stragglers.

“I put your drinks back down in the cellar,” Jo said, practical as always. “You can have them when
you get back. Let’s head to the park.”

“Aw, what’s wrong, Joanna Beth?” Dean prodded, because Visiting Days brought out the worst in
him and eroded his sense of risk. “Wanna hide out instead of meeting your match? Your soulmate
could be waiting for you right now. Bet he or she is a real ray of sunshine.”
The look he got could be bottled and used to clean the Roadhouse bar counter. Dean bared his teeth in a humorless grin and looped an arm around her shoulders.

“C’mon, Jo, cheer up. I hate this too, but it’s good cover, right?”

“Yeah.” Jo made a show of sighing, but her step lengthened and she perked up a bit. They just had to last the day without kicking an angel in the pants or breaking a decree, and tonight they’d be helping folk and pissing off the Host. It took the bite out of an afternoon of being put on display like débutantes waiting for a suitor to notice them at the fucking summer ball.

The day outside was perfectly sunny, of course. Dean was one of those rare humans who still noticed that. Which was odd, because Dean Winchester had never known anything other than a sunny day in his life. Neither had his father or his grandfather. A lot of people looked puzzled when Dean complained about the perpetual sunshine, like he was whining about the shape of air. But Dean just wanted it to rain. Just once. Just to see what it was like. Clouds sweeping in. Water falling from the sky. Lightning- what did that even look like? Cracks in the sky...? Just the thought of it made his heart beat faster. It was a pity he’d never get to see it.

Even Sam didn’t understand Dean’s fascination with the weather. Dean had learned not to bring it up, because Sam would immediately remind him that from 1846 to 1858, humanity not only had eternal sunshine, they’d had it twenty four hours a day. As the Book of Revelations said, ‘the City’s gates will never close on any Day, because there is no Night there’, and the angels, being a horribly literal bunch, had gotten rid of nighttime altogether. Then they’d wondered why humans weren’t doing quite as well as they should, not to mention the animals and plant life.

That’d been the first victory of the Advocacy League, as Sam was keen to remind anybody who’d stay within earshot to listen instead of hoofing it towards the hills when he started getting into his advocate stride. The first time humans had finally managed to wrest a concession from the Host.

The angels had not understood the point of the request, predictably, but after protests and petitions, debates and downright begging, they had capitulated on that one issue. They’d regretted it since, Dean was sure. It was amazing what crap humans could get up to under the cover of a little darkness. But when the animals of the New Garden of Eden stopped wandering around in a constant daze, and exhibited somewhat normal behavior (other than past carnivores now being vegetarians), even that supreme asshole Michael had been forced to concede that humans had had a good idea of sorts. Night stayed on the menu.

The three of them made their way down Maple towards the park, treading the dusty road wide enough for horse drawn carriages, before they were banned due to the decree against animal cruelty. Now one could only ride a horse if it let you, and since nobody had ever managed to argue an untamed bronco into doing anything other than kick a potential rider in the nuts, well, everybody now walked. Not that it mattered, as there was nowhere to go. The few people authorized to visit another Paradise, or the bachelors shanghaied away on Visiting Days, were flown there by angels. Traveling through the Garden was prohibited for almost everybody. Traveling into the Wilds beyond was suicide (or so said the Word.)

Dean settled on the park bench, Jo at his side, and Sam sitting down at the corner with his book on his lap, the cheater. Rufus was also skirting the spirit of the law; he was propped up against a tree and drifting off in its shade.

He wasn’t the only one, three other people were lying around in the eternal sunshine of the park. They’d been there since this morning. Dean called them the loafers. In this perfect Paradise they lived in, where all manners of fruit, vegetables and enriched bread appeared on plates after saying Grace for every meal, where there was no aging, natural death or disease, where even the concept
of paying for anything had become a strange myth, some long-past memory of fairy tales where it seemed you could ‘buy’ a beer for magic beans... in this human zoo the world had become, a lot of people just gave up. They wandered from bed to breakfast, from dozing to dinner, then back to bed again. As long as they were in temple on Sunday and broke no decree, who cared?

Folks like Ellen set up shop - where everything was generated by the God Machine and thus free - in a sheer attempt to not lose their minds. People found all kind of make do tasks, more or less useful. Unless they were Dean - and Bobby, Jo, Rufus and countless others. They found something useful to do. It wasn't anywhere near legal.

“Where’s this herd from?” Jo asked disinterestedly as they spotted the first visitors trickle down main street.

“How the hell should I know?”

“Dean!” Sam said sharply. “Blasphemy.”

Dean mumbled something truly foul under his breath that had Jo hoot with laughter.

“It’s Paradise 414,” Sam informed him with a face made of sour lemon squeezings.

“Which tells us zilch. No, wait, it tells us these hillbillies were even more backwards than we were when the Apocalypse rolled around. Christ-“

“Dean.”

”-I didn’t think they even went any higher than the 390s.”

“Where are they from really, Sam?” Jo asked, leaning forward on her elbows to look past Dean.

“Halifax.”

“Where the-...where’s Halifax?” Dean had to ask, since Sam snootily refused to add anything pertinent.

“Nova Scotia. Way up north, where they used to have the British Colonies.” Sam’s big brain stored all kinds of useless information as well as all the pages of the New Talmud, the Bible and a bunch of other stuff. For instance, he knew that their Paradise’s region had once been called the Missouri Territory. As if that mattered... The name of their town did matter, however, but nobody spoke it out loud where an angel might overhear. Officially they were Paradise 342.

“Good grief, people actually live up there?” Jo craned her neck to see past the small crowd that Samandriel and Melod had shooed out to meet the visitors.

“If you wanna go see if your soulmate is there, ready to whisk you away to the land of eternal snow, feel free, Jo, don’t mind us.”

“I’d rather be dead in a ditch here at home. Wait, they actually have snow up there?”

“No,” said Sam. “It’s the same as here.”


Jo looked set to ask another question when the miracle occurred, as was mostly expected. Miracles had been a quasi daily occurrence since 1836.
The God Machine, a glowing ball the size of a small shed, floated in the air high above their town, same as every other settlement; like the plum in a plum puddin’, sending sparkles over their houses all the way to the walls protecting them in a nice and cozy dome. As Dean glanced up, the miraculous manifestation of God’s Will, the form of his Presence on Earth, stirred. A hint of glowing clockwork made of sunshine and sparkles glinted within the spun-glass sphere. It whirred with a melodious mechanized purr, like a music box with only two tones, and then puked out a rainbow that fell to the ground like a well-aimed water jet. A few seconds later, the Lanterns around the park crackled to life, each reflecting the same scene from different angles and tiny delays, the visual version of an echo. Two people stood in the rainbow light, staring at each other. The Lanterns’ view tightened onto their expressions, which in a world as perfect as it should be, would be doe-eyed with love and wonder, but instead was an interesting blend of the faintly intrigued and the utterly mortified.

Right on cue, Samandriel appeared right next to them and tooted into the Annunciation Trumpet. Poor guy got all the worse jobs, but for some reason he really liked this one. He was certainly belting it out.

“Oh my- Rufus! It’s Leah!” Jo gasped.

Rufus snorted, pried open an eyelid and glanced up at the nearest Magic Lantern where they could all see Leah, currently scowling at Alfie. “Oh. Good for her.” Then he apparently went back to sleep. Leah was a niece or grandniece of his, if Dean remembered right. It was hard to keep track of family trees when people stopped dying, and age became the result of mind over matter. Rufus, for example, seemed to have settled at a hardy fifty, but according to local rumor he was over a hundred, and Bobby - who was a healthy nonagenarian himself - said Rufus was even older.

Sam was still staring down at his book, but it’d been five minutes since he last turned a page. Dean had the sudden wish he’d punched Alfie in the nuts rather than let the angel drag his brother out here. Dean didn’t say anything though. It was the Winchester code. Punching an angel in the nuts was an easier thing to offer than the words sorry, this must be painful for you, is there anything I can do...?

Dean said nothing. John Winchester would be proud.

“Who are we moving around tonight?” Jo asked very softly, so Sam would not hear. Advocates had to keep their noses extra clean. “Rabbits or blackbirds?”

“Blackbirds,” Dean said, hand covering his mouth.

Jo gave him a hopeful look - hopeful that he’d involve her and her cell, not ‘hopefully this crazy guy will leave me out of his ridiculously dangerous plans this time’, because that was not how Jo thought. Clandestinely moving around runaways and criminals, the ‘rabbits’, was already dangerous and against the laws of Heaven. Moving blackbirds - resistance fighters - past angels was a whole other level of risk. And if she could swing it, Jo would take every one of those missions for herself. But that wasn’t wise. The strength of the underground railroad was its fluidity, its unpredictability, its myriad of tracks and operators. Dean had already earmarked Ash’s cell for tonight’s transport. Sorry, Jo.

Dean was the only one who knew every in and out of all the cells - even Bobby, the leader of this area, didn’t know everything for safety reasons. Dean did, he was the linchpin, the one keeping it all together, all the codes, all the faces, all the operatives. He’d also be the one to die if caught, to protect the operation. He’d volunteered for the job, so he probably shouldn’t throw stones at Jo’s over-eager attitude towards danger when his own house was definitely made of glass.
The coded message he’d gotten yesterday was running through his mind. It had come straight from
the Joker himself this time, the head of one of the branches of the resistance, the ‘four and twenty
blackbirds’. That meant enough danger to go around. The Joker was a rebel who’d been around
since the Big A, a master of mojo, an inspiration to all who opposed the Host. Also a guy with a
seriously strange sense of humor. He’d set that trap that doused Naomi in Paradise 102 with an
entire tank of warm honey ten years back; honey mixed with holy oil so she couldn’t wish it away.
Rumor had it she had to shower for two days straight before her vessel would stop sticking to stuff.
How the hell the Joker had managed that was a mystery. Why he hadn’t used some of the few
things that could kill an angel of her stature was another. Fear of reprisals on the scale of Paradise
45, perhaps? Weird to think the guy with the quirky wit had been John Winchester’s cell leader out
in the Wilds - and even a friend, if Bobby were to be believed. War made for strange alliances.

The visitors trickled by. The men from the frozen north wore cotton, flannel shirts, and canvas
greatcoats, much like Dean and his neighbors, and the dames were in gingham or cotton summer
dresses and bonnets. These were definitely not the most exotic set of visitors their town had ever
known. Dean gave that prize to visitors who’d come from Paradise 203, somewhere in a country
that used to be called ‘Burma’ according to Sam.

Dean amused himself by dividing the arrivals into just regular joes, loafers and the true believers.
The latter were prancing around bare-headed, shining eyes wide, firmly believing their own
miracle was out there in New Jerusalem, of which Paradise 342 was just one of the dingier suburbs.
Dean carefully avoided looking them in the eye. No need to give them an opening to come over,
introduce themselves and start spreading the Word.

A couple of the regular joes impinged on his awareness. Dean let his eyes slide over them without
marking them out in particular. The tall guy was the passer, Tom Pictou; his face matched one of
the daguerreotypes in the files Dean had memorized years ago, and then burned. So the stressed-
looking kid at his side must be Kevin Tran, the package. Dean looked away and made a show of
admiring the happy couple in the nearest Lantern. The guy now holding hands with Leah looked
equally uncomfortable with the situation, which at least made them a perfect match on that front.

...Leah was part of the library squad, maintaining the few Old World books humanity had been
allowed to keep, and cataloging the new ones. She was good people. Dean hoped it worked out for
her. Oh, the Machine did get it right on the soulmate shtick. When that rainbow poured out, its
targets were certainly compatible. Eerily so.

Compatible didn’t mean they’d necessarily live together in perfect harmony, or see their sons grow
up happy. Or if it did, then it didn’t follow through that they’d get to live long lives together and
die side by side in bliss. No. Look at Helen and Bobby, who’d buried their other halves and half
their hearts decades ago. Look at Susan and Bela, not a day without a fight.

Look at John Winchester and Mary Campbell.

Dean silently saluted Leah and Whatshisname in the Lantern. Paradise on Earth sucked. But he
wished them luck.

”-as we celebrate the joy of a new union!” Samandriel was saying, as excited as a puppy (Dean had
been filtering him out for the sake of his sanity.) “Hallelujah! Hail to the God Machine!”

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Next Chapter: Angels Square Dancing On the Head of a Pin

In a world without laudanum or alcohol, the angels had organized a mandatory barn dance, because they were a bunch of dicks.

Chapter End Notes

World-building will creep in gradually, we’ll discover more about this oddly cheerful, clean and peaceful post-apocalyptic world - but also its darker sides (assuming you think rampant boredom, lack of basic freedoms and arranged marriages isn’t already dark enough). Trust me, there’s a reason there’s a human resistance. Also, Castiel finally shows up, albeit briefly, in the next chapter.
Angels Square Dancing On the Head of a Pin

Chapter Notes

Note on language: The story unfolds in 2017, but since calendars no longer exist and days are hard to count in this unchanging climate, nobody is actually aware of this. The lifestyle has not changed since 1836, bar the whole ‘Paradise’ makeover, which means that language should be pre-Civil war era English. I’ve avoided using anachronisms whenever possible, but I have not tried to make them talk like people back in 1836 talked, because that would make the fic difficult to read ^^; Either imagine that language has managed to evolve parallel to ours, or that they’re talkin’ ol’ style and you’re getting an immediate translation courtesy of the God Machine.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

10. Then the assembly of Isadvastar will meet, that is, all men of this earth will stand. 11. In that assembly, every person will see his own good deeds and evil deeds. The righteous will be as conspicuous amongst the wicked as a white sheep amongst the black.
-- Greater Bundahishn, CHAPTER XXXIV (Zoroastrianism Eschatology)

In a world without laudanum or alcohol, the angels had organized a mandatory barn dance because they were a bunch of dicks.

Humans gamely finished the picnic lunch celebrating their visitors, and stepped out into the town square to go through the motions as ol’ Pete sawed his fiddle. Off to one side, a Magic Lantern was running a show for the five kids currently growing up in their part of Paradise. The story was as sweet as sugar syrup by the looks of it. The angels had no creativity, so they asked humans to come up with entertainment, theater pieces that the Machine could watch, remember and run through the Lanterns. Human writers and actors would comply, come up with something tolerable, and then the angel in charge of surgically removing all fun from life went through the stage plays with a large pair of scissors and excised anything that came close to breaking a decree or implying that Paradise was not perfect. Thus the same pap over and over again: happy children obediently listening to their parents before playing in the eternal sunshine and having very, very tiny non-threatening adventures. To say that this was all lost on its intended audience was an understatement. One of the kids was flicking stones at the Lantern, the others were talking together and shoving each other. Dean was proud. They ate this stuff up with a spoon in some places, but in Paradise 342, the kids were raised right.

Dean wove around a bunch of visitors (Nova Scotites? Halifaxians?), accepting that most of them, girls and guys alike, immediately spun around to look him in the eye, hoping he might be The One. Dean was used to it. He’d been beating visitors off with a stick since he was sixteen, well, bar those times when he wasn’t, ah, available, thank you Heavenly Host. Though Visiting Days made him nostalgic for the front line - or damn, even solitary Penance, forced to live in a shadowy splinter of the city with nobody else around for a week or two until the angels deemed he’d learned his lesson. There were more severe punishments, but Dean was careful to avoid them all now. He had better ways of fighting back than the minor peccadilloes of his youth, and he could do his job best if he remained free of all notice, good or bad.
He stayed and chatted with a few of the visitors for the form - and bookmarked a good lookin’ guy whose lingering gaze suggested he might be up for a lil’ Machine-unsanctioned one-on-one if the northerners were still in this quarter of the city by tomorrow. Finally he ended up talking with Tom Pictou.

The man had strong, bronzed features from an indigenous tribe, either local to Halifax or a transplant. And then there was Kevin Tran; presumably one of his forebears had been a far-flung relocation to Paradise 414. The kid was all eyes, but fortunately when it came to recognizing a scared and guilty expression, angels were pretty crap, and it was Dean’s business to know who the human moles were in their lil’ Paradise. Bobby’s operators were all out and about, running interference. As for their celestial overseers, Balthazar had snuck away three seconds into his chaperoning, as per usual; he’d be up to his usual shenanigans, maybe getting laid with some of the few humans around who had both the guts and the lack of good taste to dally with an angel despite all the decrees on the matter. Melod was looking bored, watching the dancing, Samandriel was doing the same but bouncing a little in time with the music, and Uriel would not be caught dead within a mile of all this human cheer. All clear.

“Hi, I’m Dean Winchester,” Dean announced, putting out a hand.


“How’d you like our station so far? Treating you right?”

Tom’s eyes flickered left-right and then centered on Dean. “Seems like a smooth operation.”

“Yup, we keep those trains moving.”

Tom’s mask of neutral civility slipped, replaced by an appraising look and a much warmer demeanor. “Glad to meet you, Dean. This here’s... who’s that?”

Dean took a swig of his lemonade and looked out of a corner of his eye as he brought the glass down, directing his gaze towards whatever had made Tom tense up. “That’s Bobby Singer, our station master.”

“No, the guy who just walked away. He was heading towards us, then Singer turned him back. Big fella, white shirt, brown coat, cloth cap.” Tom’s eyes were glittering black and suspicious, nailed to a tall figure disappearing into the crowd. An easy-to-spot tall figure.

“Relax. That’s my brother. He must have wanted a word with me. Bobby let him understand it was not a good time. Sam’s not a part of the station.” And because he just hated the look he got from out-of-town operators when he said that - the look that suggested Sam’s avoidance of underground railroad activity was due to lack of loyalty or lack of courage, when Sam lacked neither by any means and Dean was prouder of him than he could ever say, he added: “He’s an advocate. He’s gotta stay out of all this.”

Fortunately Tom wasn’t one of those who thought an advocate was little better than a collaborator. He merely nodded in understanding. “I see, plausible-”

His next word was interrupted by Kevin suddenly coming to life with “Advocate?!”

“Kevin,” Tom hissed, hand twitching as if to reach out and grab the kid who was now twanging like the fiddle’s strings. “Shh.”

“But-but can he- maybe if I talk to him, he could get this sorted out! I never did what they said I did, I never-“
“Now ain’t you just the cutest thing!”

Kevin made a vague *meep* sound when Dean put an arm around his shoulders and dragged him to his chest. “Lemme have a good long look at you. Damn, Machine’s quiet. Pity! I would have gladly gone back north with ya.”

“Urgle,” said Kevin, or something to that effect. Tom took a philosophical swig of tea (herbal, because the angels were assholes and one of them had decided that real tea and coffee contained something bad back when Bobby was a kid.)

Once he was sure Kevin wasn’t going to blurt out anything suspicious in the middle of a crowd, Dean turned towards Tom casually. “Say, would you guys like to join me and my friends for a game of cribbage later? Maybe tonight, after-” Dean stopped when Tom shook his head.

“That sounds great, Dean, but can I get back to you on that? Got a friend of a friend visiting these parts. He’ll be joining us at some point. He’d love to play. A real fiend at the game.”

Ahhh, so Kevin was just an add-on, the real package was still on his way. That made sense. If Kevin was a resistance fighter, then Dean was an archangel. Kevin was just a rabbit, escaping some crime from the way he’d lit up when an advocate was mentioned. The kid looked too wet behind the ears to have done anything worse than curse on a Sunday, however Dean had been that age when he’d punched out an angel trying to bully Sam around. That bastard Afiel, telling Sam their father was a sinner and his soul was lost. John had only been dead a year. Dean had seen that dangerous light flash in Sam’s eyes... If Dean hadn’t decked Afiel, then Sam would have. Back then, a good long while ago, Dean hadn’t mattered; he’d been a callow loser with too much time on his hands and anger in his heart, who would never amount to much, unlike his clever advocate-in-training brother. Plus, Dean could already punch like a mule could kick. Sammy would have broken his knuckles on Afiel’s face, while Dean had broken half the whoreson’s teeth; a very temporary inconvenience for an angel, but ah, the look on the sour bastard’s bloodied face...

“More friends coming? Awesome,” Dean said jovially. “The more the merrier. Say, Kevin... Hey, Jo!”

“Yes, Dean?” Jo materialized at his side. Smart as a whip, she’d started edging nearer as soon as she saw him grab Kevin, in case he needed to pawn the kid off.

“Meet Kevin, he’s a sweetie. What, no rainbow? You dang Machine, are you blind? These two are obviously soulmates. Why don’t you show him a good time, Jo, maybe the wheels need a bit of a kick today.”

“Sure thing.” Jo looped her arm through the kid’s. “Come this way, Kevin. My ma whips up a mean lemonade.”

“No, take him dancing. They’re about to start up the Scotty.”

“Great idea.” If looks could kill, Dean would be dead, buried and settling into Heaven for his Eternal Reward right about now, but Jo dutifully dragged Kevin off towards the dancers without a peep. Dean would catch her on the flip side, before she could actually inflict bodily harm on him, to explain why he’d wanted the music and cheers to cover any attempts of Kevin’s to talk about Sam.

Dean and Tom settled at the picnic table, facing the town square and watching the dance.

“You may have heard of my buddy,” Tom said. “He’s called Shakespeare. Will to his friends.”
“Never heard of him.” Dean’s heart began to thump. If the guy was codenamed after a playwright, that meant a propagandist, writing subversive comedies and inventing anarchic songs and dirty limericks, printing them illicitly and spreading them, making people laugh and think. They usually tied in directly with the Joker and the nerve center of the resistance. Dean and Bobby hadn’t had a package that size come through in well over a year, for all P342 was one of the main outlets into the Wild and one of the best stations on the American continent. “What’s Bill doing around these parts? Just visiting?”

“He’s a naturalist. He loves to watch the animals in the Garden.”

Fuck, the guy was such dynamite he was hiking here?

“He might get distracted by all the pretty critters on the way over,” Dean said slowly. “Sure we should hold back on our cribbage? He might not make it on time.”

“He’ll want to play, he’s ace at that game. Way better than Kevin, I’m sorry to say.”

Well that was harsh. Kevin couldn’t be more than twenty. Dean hated that kind of rationale, that it was okay to sacrifice some people for others who were deemed more important to the resistance. Even though Dean, as a linchpin, had voluntarily placed himself in the position where his death might be necessary. But that’d been his choice. No way was he comfortable with the thought of leaving Kevin to the mercy of the chicken hawks.

“Hmf. And I guess your pal Will has got birdies following him for breadcrumbs?”

“Of course.”

Great, angels were sniffing around this Shakespeare’s trail. Dean couldn’t believe he’d been complaining about the day being perfect earlier.

Tom was looking at him out of the corner of his eye. Dean was the linchpin. That meant it was his duty to evaluate the risk, his right to make the call, though god only knew what Tom would do if Dean decided to call off the transport.

“I gotta go mingle, or Sheriff Uriel will cite me for being a stick in the mud.” Dean got up from the picnic table. “Welcome to Lawrence, Tom.”

”...Lawrence?”

“S’what they called the place back when this stretch of dirt was still the Missouri Territory instead of a number. Town’s named after some dude you may have heard of. Had some crazy ideas about freedom and human rights after the Big A. We like to keep the name alive. For reasons.”

Tom gave him a faint smile. “I see.”

“Tell your buddy he’s welcome to come play at the station as soon as he arrives.”

Now to go tell Bobby how exciting the rest of the hootenanny was going to be.

---

Lounging in a chair he’d wished into being in the heart of their small garrison, Balthazar yawned. It
was a human gesture he was practicing, and he was getting awfully good at it.

“Will you stop doing that?” Zuriel asked coldly from a nearby desk.

Balthazar yawned again (of course) then glanced around. The garrison was a humdrum square building dead center of Paradise 342. A central area of writing desks, chairs and tables for the peons like him, and three offices up a short flight of stairs for the big cheeses. Not a single decoration or plant or anything. It was an angel’s nest, all right, and at four on a Thursday afternoon of the paradisaical New Millennium, it had to be the most boring place on earth.

Balthazar sighed internally, wishing he was just about anywhere else in general, and at the Dead Mule Dive, his favorite haunt, in particular. It had posters there of ol’ time theater productions from Chicago. It had a picture of a saloon gal showing an ankle that dangerously skirted a couple of decrees. It had a dartboard. It was, to misappropriate a term, heaven. Compared to this shack at any rate. Better yet, nobody there cared he was an angel, which made their welcome nicer than the Roadhouse. He only went there when he wanted to get amusingly insulted in an underhand way, or annoy Bobby by flirting with Ellen. The only other places in 342 where people could hang out were communal craft tables and knitting circles (ugh), prayer meetings (double ugh) or else served food, which Balthazar had never gotten the hang of despite a lot of attempts, so he didn’t bother with them.

“It’s sure dead in here this afternoon. Where is everyone?”

“I don’t know,” was the predictably factual response from Zuriel, who didn’t shrug, or frown, or look up, because he was one of the boring ones who didn’t get it. It was more than just ignorance of human mores and mannerisms shared by many in the Host. Zuriel expended huge effort at not getting it. He was a pro at not getting it. He was so good that even Balthazar inevitably referred to him as a ‘he’, even though on a superficial level Zuriel had been a ‘she’ for quite a few decades. But that didn’t signify. Zuriel insisted they were all Brothers and so it didn’t matter he was sporting a pair of tatas that many a human would die for. Fucking angels, Balthazar thought cheerfully.

“Alfie? You know why it’s so quiet?”

“Don’t call him that,” Zuriel said in his usual flat tone, which made it so much funnier when Samandriel came over anyway.

“Eliezer’s on altar duty, Melod is with the visitors still, they should be wrapping up the dance soon. Not sure where the others are- oh, but I saw Uriel out with an angel I didn’t recognize.”

Zuriel’s Communion with the Machine became somehow louder, which, considering it consisted of a manipulation of light and celestial waves, took some doing. Balthazar was almost impressed, though he didn’t take the unspoken ‘don’t gossip like humans!’ seriously.

“We have new faces?” Balthazar glanced over at Zachariah’s office door, pointedly closed. Zachariah spent most of his time in there, either brooding over the horrible bureaucratic mishap that had demoted him to this ghetto of a Paradise, or devising schemes to extract himself from same. They were all rejects here. Zachariah, Uriel, Balthazar, Melod, Eliezer and Samandriel - even Zuriel had managed to annoy someone high up, probably by being overly officious. The only exception was Jonah. Having someone from the Word in town was normal, but Balthazar knew the ins and outs of the hierarchy; Jonah was not one of the regulars from Nathaniel’s department, he was one of Naomi’s lot. The Word and also Special Intervention. Balthazar wasn’t sure what Jonah was doing here, and that rather intrigued him, especially since he’d bet his left wing that it was not for some fault. Jonah was way too oily for that.
That was the whole garrison. Eight of them. For a town of over twelve thousand saved souls. No wonder the humans here got away with murder (well not literally, or at least not that had been proven to date.)

Balthazar yawned again and stretched, his tidy dark blue vest and sack coat shifting comfortably over his shoulders. Alfie looked at him with something like admiration for the exquisite imitation of a very human gesture. Zuriel ignored him so pointedly that it was like being psychically slapped. Owie.

“I should go back and help Melod herd visitors, if he’s by himself—“

Balthazar’s attempt to worm out of a boring watch detail was abruptly derailed when four angels dropped into the large central room. There were a couple of humans with them. Ooh, Sam Winchester. This was going to be fun—

...Or not.

Balthazar’s blood ran cold, so to speak. Normally Uriel dragging in a human with Sam Winchester in tow meant hours of entertainment, as Uriel tried to do that job he loved so much - ie, harry and hurt humans until he somehow single-handedly dismantled the resistance - while Sam found a million reasons why it went against the decrees. Granted, it wasn’t high theater, or even a burlesque, but Balthazar had learned to take his amusement where he could.

But this time it was Sam’s arm that Uriel had in a vice-like grip. Sam? He was bringing in Sam Winchester? Uriel was dragging in an advocate for interrogation?

“Get Jonah,” Balthazar snapped at Zuriel, momentarily forgetting that he wasn’t one who gave orders anymore. But Zuriel leaped to his feet and hared off to the second office in a flash.

“Uriel, did you decide to bring the advocate yourself this time? How considerate.” Balthazar sauntered over, pretending not to notice the look of pain and the bruises on Sam’s face.

Uriel just gave Balthazar the look he’d give a particularly boring type of bug. Same as usual then.

Melod was also giving him a look, a warning one. Apparently something big was going down - figured that much out, mate - and he was warning Balthazar to stay out of it. The other two angels were trackers, Asmodel’s lot. Oh boy. The second human was a local, one of the tenders of the gardens. She looked scared. Balthazar didn’t blame her. He had a feeling she’d been picked up by accident. Sam now... that was different.

At a gesture from Uriel, Melod hooked the woman by the arm and lead her away. So the worst that could happen to her was nodding off while Melod asked her the same questions a few times, before giving up and letting her go. She’d be fine, but Sam... Uriel was giving him a look like the lion used to give the gazelle back when the former still ate meat.

“Sam Winchester. This has been a long time coming.”

“I’m still waiting,” Sam ground out. “You haven’t told me what I did to break the—” he gasped and winced around the grip on his arm.

“Brother,” said one of the trackers. “I don’t think this human can help. We are going to return to our quarry.”

“You do that,” Uriel said softly, eyes still on Sam. “If he does tell us who’s behind the local ne’er-do-wells, that will give you a door to kick down.”
The tracker nodded as if this made perfect sense and flew off. Yeah, in their job, they did not have to be hampered by red tape. Uriel was another matter.

“What’s going on here?” Jonah asked sharply. A momentous day, Balthazar was actually happy to see that sour mien. In truth, Balthazar had no real stake in any of this, but he rather liked the Winchesters, for all he knew pretty damn well they were part of the entertaining network of human whiners around here. Sam would occasionally play-spar with him over decrees and politics, and Balthazar had had some spectacular underhanded put-down matches with Dean - all in fun, of course, all in fun. It was obvious in a thousand little ways that the brothers liked and respected him better than any other angel in the garrison, so it was all good.

“This is my province,” Uriel said. And he seemed very, very sure of that. Jonah’s step faltered and he looked worriedly at Sam, then at Zachariah’s door, as if he’d get any help from there. Uriel wouldn’t have to give Zachariah much of an excuse, the latter would have no problem stringing up the local advocate. Hell, Zach would hand him the rope.

“What did he do?” Balthazar asked, trying to get the parameters of the problem outlined, and hoping Jonah would not let his inherent political caution get the better of him. Jonah was the only one who had the chops to pull rank on Uriel - and only if Uriel was wrong about it being ‘his province’.

“Sam here aided and abetted the escape of a wanted fugitive,” Uriel purred. Ouch, that would do it.

“I only stepped forward to ask why you had thrown someone through a plate glass window,” Sam said tightly. “As an advocate, I have the right-“

“Not when it was a stranger to this Paradise - and not one of the visitors.”

“I couldn’t know that,” Sam countered. “I haven’t met them all.”

“Where’s that person now?” Jonah asked pointedly.

“She got away. Because Winchester here interfered.”

“Did she get away because Sam interfered or because you threw her through a window?” Balthazar couldn’t help but ask.

“The fact that she disappeared before we could get to her proves that the human had arcane means of escape. You know what that signifies.” Yeah, only the resistance knew that kind of trick...

“It doesn’t follow that Samuel Winchester was part of that,” Jonah pointed out slowly. “He’s an advocate. We need to tread carefully.”

“I will,” said Uriel. “When he tells me who that woman was, and how she disappeared, we will have ample proof of Sam’s involvement. Until he tells me, I’ll just keep on asking.”

There was a faint silence as the angels present digested that.

“You can’t do that!” Sam shouted. “You can’t torture a confess-” he made a hollow choked noise as Uriel sent a shockwave down his nervous system.

“I can when an illegal is involved,” said Uriel with obscene satisfaction.
"...didn’t... know... you can’t... prove-"

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

Balthazar stared at Jonah, willing him to nut up and say something. Unfortunately Jonah was the kind of angel who didn’t think ‘is this right?’ or ‘is this within the decrees?’ but ‘can we get away with it if we’re called upon it?’ and unfortunately in this instance, he seemed to believe they could. And Jonah, like all of Naomi’s lot, considered the human resistance to be a serious threat to their spread of the Word and their grip on Paradise. He really wanted to know what Sam probably knew. If it turned out that Sam knew nothing and this interrogation broke his body or mind, well, at least he’d have proven his innocence. A witch trial, pure and simple.

“Jonah, come on,” Balthazar said tightly, “this is going to bite us all in the rear, you know-”

“Silence!” Uriel’s glare finally escalated from ‘you are beneath my contempt’ to ‘changed my mind, you and your human mannerisms are fully worth my contempt after all’, which was what happened when Balthazar truly got under his skin and was cruising towards another reprimand and Penance. “Go do your work. For once.”

Uriel shouldn’t have said that. And he shouldn’t have been shoving around a decent guy like Sam, who wasn’t actually a criminal, unlike his brother. And Uriel shouldn’t have done the other million things that he’d done in the past decade which had slowly eroded Balthazar’s apathy and caused it to suddenly and unexpectedly snap.

“Is that an order?” Balthazar asked breezily.

“Yes,” Uriel snarled, because he was a shortsighted angel. There were reasons for that, and for his posting here. Sad reasons, if looked at from a certain angle, and if Uriel wasn’t such a contemptible cockhead, Balthazar would have felt almost sorry for him.

But since he’d been ordered to do his job... Balthazar left, hoping Sam wasn’t going to get too damaged in the next couple of hours.

Uriel had forgotten that a part of Balthazar’s job was internal reports. Of course his reports all went to Zachariah and to someone in Naomi’s office. They didn’t really matter, ordinarily.

Balthazar was going to write a beauty of a report. And then he was going to use the back channels he’d once cultivated in Intelligence to make sure it got to someone who was going to pause, think a bit, and then call in a big gun. Somebody with the heft to put a muzzle on Uriel.

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On the far side of the Milky Way, a light shone as it hung in the void, observing a binary sun system.

As if subject to a sudden implosion, it abruptly coalesced into something microscopic at the cosmic level, but very powerful. Two blue eyes opened. They didn’t need to, but the vessel was coming back online and this was part of the process, even if human sight was useless out here.

*What is it?* queried the entity.
A burst of information reached him across the Ether. Along with an apology for disturbing his rare moment of R&R.

The being dismissed that concern out of hand. Duty was all, and there were few left to do it. The eyes narrowed (once more, completely uselessly) while his intent spiraled in. In. In.


The two stars, eternally swirling into each other’s gravity as if in battle or in dance, did not witness the out-sweep of wings unfurling in a ripple of wavelengths. They beat once in the higher planes, ripping through Ether and sending an angel hurtling back towards New Jerusalem.

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Next Chapter: Law & Order in Paradise

_Uriel was a maniac. It was quite possible he was going to kill Sam._

Chapter End Notes

Updates should be weekly, either on Wednesday, Thursday or Saturday depending on how crazy RL is at the time.
This version of Cas hasn't had much contact with people so far, so he's still very much, well, an angel through and through. Think 'Lazarus Rising' Castiel. This will change when he starts to rub shoulders with humans in general and Winchesters in particular.

"When honesty is lost, then wait for the Day of Judgment." It was asked, "How will honesty be lost, O Messenger of God?" He said, "When authority is given to those who do not deserve it, then wait for the Day of Judgment."
--- Islamic eschatology

Sam just had to hold out.

There were checks and balances. The humans had had to create them in order to simply spiritually survive this- this killing kindness the angels had imposed on them, this perfect world. Even more so to survive the occasional snakes still left in the Garden, snakes like Uriel.

Of course Sam, as an advocate, was himself the initial check and balance. He’d tangled with Uriel many times and stopped the garrison’s enforcer from doing to others pretty much was he was doing right now to Sam.

“I’m sorry, you seem to be in pain.” Uriel spoke in a steady, steely purr.

“Me? No, I’m fine,” Sam said through gritted teeth.

That earned him a faint and unruffled smile. Uriel was looking forward to breaking him.

There was no title of ‘enforcer’ among the ranks of the Host, Uriel was officially known as the commander of the garrison’s forces and the Protector of Paradise 342. It was his duty to defend their city and otherwise ensure the citizens felt safe. Sam had never figured out, after all these years, if Uriel was simply a sadist or if he really had taken the whole Protector thing a little too much to heart, but it was a fact that the angel had made it his crusade to protect Paradise from the resistance and criminals in general. Since Sam regularly opposed his holy war, it meant that the advocate was just as guilty as the humans he protected. As far as Uriel was concerned, this was a reckoning long past due.

“If you want to know I’m innocent, just examine my thoughts,” Sam said for the record.

Uriel’s expression turned venomous for a split second and a wild flare of pain in his abdomen made Sam abruptly vomit over his own lap. Yeah, that’d been a kick in the jewels for Uriel. The angel was no longer capable of performing subtle scans anymore, from what Sam had reliably heard, which was why he was the enforcer in this backwater. All Uriel would be able to see if he looked in Sam’s thoughts was a perfectly innocent man and no decrees broken.

Which was why Uriel was not looking.
“We’re just talking as of now.” Uriel was walking slow circles around him again. “I’m sorry the blow you took earlier hurts.” A sudden renewal of the ache in his gut made Sam quiver. “Once we’re done here, I’ll let you go to the medical wing.”

“We’re done now, Uriel,” Sam forced out. “I knew nothing about the person you assaulted, I- ah! You can verify this by-”

“Come now, Sam. You know as well as I do that a voluntary confession alleviates many a sin. I am thinking of your wellbeing, here, your future. So much better if you tell me everything you know about the resistance of your own free will, rather than have it retrieved from your mind. It’s a distressing process, as you advocates are always so keen to remind us.”

Distressing was one word for it, which was why the second victory of the League, after the ‘eternal day’ nonsense, was to fight the angels’ casual abrogation of a man’s rights to the sanctity of his own thoughts. Even a mild scan could leave the more fragile humans fit only for an alienist to take charge. In 1879, after a lot of arguing, it was decreed angels could no longer randomly ransack people’s thoughts anymore without just cause. The justice system of the angels was ridiculously codified and pedantic, but it had at least adopted the ‘innocent until proven guilty’ maxim, and also gave a clever advocate ammunition to stop abusers like Uriel from deciding that ‘just cause’ was ‘just because I want to’.

Like all other advocates, Sam was always studiously careful to never break a decree. It gave their League a moral high-ground that even some angels respected, it was crucial. In Sam’s case, it was also so that the angels never had just cause to do a deep scan on him. A superficial look at his thoughts would show that he was as innocent as a lamb, but Sam wasn’t stupid. He knew full well what Dean, Bobby and the others were up to, he’d just been careful to never find any proof of it, to never find anything actionable.

But what a superficial scan might miss, a ‘voluntary confession’ might deliver. Of course Uriel was not allowed to torture confessions out of people ordinarily. But right now there was no-one around to stop him. Jonah and Zach were quite content with letting the sheriff do his job, it seemed, since Sam was technically in sin for interfering with a tracker and his quarry - even though he really hadn’t known who the woman getting tossed around was and had only stepped forward out of professional reflex. And they had absolutely no interest in knowing what kind of method, legal or otherwise, Uriel was using to extract a confession. Once he had the confession, the angel would be quietly absolved of the means.

Zach would be taking it one step further, Sam was ready to bet. He’d be blocking all attempts by Sam’s friends to contact the League to tell them what was going on. That wouldn’t stop Dean for long, though, the railroad and the resistance had means. The League would soon be advised that the angels were bullying one of their own. They would activate the next advocate in line. But then they would need an angel, one of those sympathetic to their cause, to fly that responder over from another Paradise, which would require authorization, which Zach could also block for awhile. All in all, it could take a few hours. Maybe a day.

However long it took, Sam would hold out. There was no way in hell they’d get to Dean through him. Sam would die first. But he didn’t want to, he didn’t want his brother to bear that on his conscience, he didn’t want Dean to have to fight on alone...

“How is your brother these days?” Uriel asked casually. “Is he happy? Does he feel safe in Paradise?”

“He’s peachy. Nghg!”
“That’s good. I’m surprised he’s not here, banging on the table asking for your release.”

“Dean knows—.... aaah... Dean knows I’ve done nothing wrong and so you’ll release—” Sam choked on bile.

“Probably a good thing he’s not here. Quite the temper, if I recall. What is he getting up to these days?”

“Nnn... Enjoying the sunshine—...”

“What would he say if he knew you were tangled up in the resistance? That you’d aided the escape of a fugitive?” Uriel tsked.

The pain in his gut felt like an animal trying to claw its way out. Sam’s eyes, blurred with tears, flinched to and from his abdomen, half expecting to see it squirming and bloodied.

He just had to hold on. Not much else he could do. Well, as an advocate, he had one move he could pull - a move Uriel could pull too. But neither one of them wanted to chance that gambit.

“Have you seen that woman before?” Uriel asked, still casually. He didn’t even care for the answer yet. He was going to break Sam first before he started asking the real questions.

“N-no. One of the visitors- I assumed—“

“Oh no. All our visitors are chosen by the Machine. They are well brought up. Obedient to the Word and the decrees.”

“Yeah,” Sam choked. “I’m sure they’re—...” he gasped and curled up on the chair he’d been tied to. It was an out-and-out interrogation chair in Uriel’s office, the chair the Protector would summon from the Machine when he had a serious criminal on his hands, the bastard. It had a padded headrest with a belt attachment, but Uriel hadn’t bothered with anything other than the cuffs chaining Sam to the wooden armrests. He didn’t care if the advocate hurt himself by thrashing around.

Sam could end this right now, at least for a time. If he pressed for it, he could get Uriel to back off and call in a proper interrogator. Someone from the department of Decrees, or Naomi’s special squad. Somebody better at mind sweeps than anyone in the garrison, including that weasel Jonah and the hobbled Uriel. It could take awhile for an angel of that specialization to get here; they could fly instantaneously, but they were busy bees, they all had a lot to do. It’d give Sam a reprieve and maybe that advocate would arrive in the meantime and get him out of this.

That was the problem. Of the advocate or the interrogator, who would get here first? And which interrogator would it be? Uriel, for his part, would need one who’d have the balls, so to speak, to risk the politically dangerous task of digging around an advocate’s brain - Sam’s mouth twisted as he remembered Jonah virtually fleeing the scene earlier rather than get dragged into this. Besides, Uriel had to suspect that Sam was trained to hide some of his thoughts from scans. He was John Winchester’s son, after all. Sam was as different from his father as chalk was to cheese (whatever Dean had to sarcastically say on the matter), but that was one thing he’d let his John teach him. If the interrogator didn’t dig dare to deep enough, didn’t dare to break past his resistance, didn’t find anything to sustain Uriel’s accusations, they’d have to let Sam go, and then where would the poor sheriff of P342 be? All alone with no-one to torture...

But then again, the interrogator could be deft enough to find evidence in Sam’s mind to compromise Dean and Bobby and the others. Sam couldn’t risk calling in an interrogator any more
than Uriel could. So they were going to do this dance until Sam caved or until outside circumstances intervened.

And Sam wasn’t going to cave.

Uriel had stopped talking, small mercy, but now he had a hand on Sam’s shoulder as he stood behind him and the pain... just... drilled... away...

Sam had bitten through his lip. Blood was splattering his cotton shirt.

Jesus-... Uriel was a maniac. It was quite possible he was going to kill him by accident, even though that’d get him in a mess of trouble with both the League and the Host. Sam would die before he talked, but goddamn, he couldn’t afford to- Dean-

His vision was wobbling, darkening-

No, wait, it wasn’t his vision. The- the room was shaking.

“Who called him?!?” Uriel’s shout was rippled through with absolute fury; that and a high keening sound threatened to cave Sam’s aching head in.

...Sam was fading in and out. His vision throbbed in time with his heartbeat... An angel was standing in front of him, one Sam did not recognize. He tried to focus on the details. A tan duster of some kind... blue eyes... dark hair- ah! God, the pain! Who...? Had Uriel sent for an interrogator after all...?

The angel reached for him. Sam flinched away and then gasped raggedly at the spasms in his abdomen. In the background, he heard Uriel bite out a name, a name Sam should recognize but his head was aching too much. Uriel was saying- saying Sam was guilty of-

A hand lifted Sam’s chin gently, and a palm pressed warm against his forehead.

Sam yelped and jerked against his restraints. The pain was gone, he was cleaned of vomit, sweat and blood, even his shirt had been repaired. He blinked and looked up.

His gaze stayed mired in two blue eyes. The palm was still pressed above his brow, holding his head firmly against the padded headrest.

Sam’s world turned inside out.

- a meteor streaked across the sky at my birth. Born under a bad star, they all say. Bobby will never forgive me, none of them will ever forgive me. Mama - where’s mama? Why is dad angry with us, Dean?

Memories streamed by like sand through an hourglass.

- Dean, it’s just the two of us now. No! Leave him alone! He didn’t mean to - don’t take him away from me! This is all my fault. Dean said he’d have decked Afiel anyway but I know it’s my fault and now he’s gone - you angels and your Machine you didn’t have the right to take him! You have no right!

It was like a presence. Like the hand was not on his forehead but inside it, scooping out his thoughts, sifting through.

- Dean don’t, they could send you away again. Forever this time. I know you’re angry but you’ll
get in trouble. Bobby please don’t let him take chances. He’s all I have left, him and Jess.

It did not hurt, but Sam felt a growing strain on his mind, especially when he tried to divert his thoughts away from - from - but even as he tried to evade it, the touch followed threads of memory; slowly, gently, patiently, inexorably.

- I know what they’re doing, but I need to stay clear of it. I’ll help in my own way. No. No! Don’t take her! Not her too! No no no no not Jess no- it’s a mistake it can’t be - no! You didn’t leave her a choice! Why do we never have a choice?! I can’t do this anymore!

Sam screamed in helpless fury and strain, but it didn’t stop.

-- more men. The railroad I’m not supposed to know about. Dean, be careful --

And then the hand was gone. Sam reeled as some strange pressure on his thoughts, his very soul, was suddenly conspicuous by its absence.

From seemingly far away, he heard a gravely voice say: “This man has broken no decree. It’s the brother you’re looking for. Uriel. Go put out a search warrant for Dean Winchester. Then come talk to me in private. I have words for you.”

“Yes, brother,” Uriel ground out.

The angel turned back to Sam and lifted a hand once more. Sam jerked back so hard his head slammed into the chair’s padded backrest, but he couldn’t avoid the touch.

“I am sending you back to your home. If you see your brother, tell him to surrender. He will get a fair hearing and we will be merciful.”

The room around him blinked-

Sam was sitting at his dinner table back home, twanging with panic and his entire world cut adrift.

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Everything had gone tits up.

Shakespeare, it turned out, was not one but two guys, two scruffy looking specimens who couldn’t possibly deserve such a fuss. They said their names were Ed and Harry before Dean could stop them. Fortunately Dean and Bobby had been the only ones present, the linchpin and the station master, could have been worse. Dean renamed the two weary, terrified and out-of-their-depth disasters Shake and Spear, and their escort was codenamed Will for the occasion, even though it was Charlie Bradbury, an operator and passer Dean knew extremely well. Not that Charlie Bradbury was her real name either. She was high up enough in the resistance where Dean had to reevaluate Shake and Spear’s value to the four-and-twenty blackbirds, though he noted that Charlie had looked immensely relieved to hear Kevin was also waiting for her. Kevin seemed even less useful to the resistance than Shake and Spear, but to have sent Charlie of all people, well, the Joker must really be serious about these guys.

It was Charlie who got hurled through the plate glass window when it turned out the trackers were closer on their trail than initially thought, and she’d run into Uriel while getting her charges out of
immediate danger.

Charlie looked like a red-headed waif, but she was an experienced operator and a tough customer beneath that sparkly smile and heaps of nervous caution. She was also one of the best magic casters Dean had ever met; she’d have been hacking the raw material of reality apart and rebuilding it while she was still sailing through the air, banishing her traces, her image and her very existence from the angels’ perceptions. Then all she’d needed was a distraction to vanish completely, a feat only Ash might be able to replicate in Dean’s entourage. Happily a couple of civilians interfered and gave her an opening, was what she said when she made it to the basement beneath the Roadhouse, cut and bleeding but still on her feet.

Then Dean learned who it was who’d interfered.

Even this had been planned for, because the perfect days of New Jerusalem had to be filled somehow or other, and contingency planning was a lot more interesting and useful than lawn bowling or checkers. Dean got word to the Advocacy network, planned how to get the nearest sympathetic responder to Lawrence, what his fall-back plans were and how to get his packages out in the meantime, and every minute of that god-awful hour, the underside of his thoughts and strategies was one long scream of anxiety.

...If Uriel-... if Uriel did anything to Sammy-...

“Uuuuh, Dean? Bobby?” That was Ash’s voice. “Ya might wanna come up for a bit.”

Down in the warded Roadhouse cellar, Bobby had been putting the last touch to the stitches and dressings on Charlie’s back and left arm by the light of a flickering kerosene lamp. He blinked at Dean. Dean unsheathed his angel blade and put himself between his charges and the trapdoor.

“Stay here;” he said. There was no way Ash would call him up from the protected basement, somehow this was a trap.

“Dean, I got Sam here.”

Dean was out of the trapdoor like a jack in the box. If it was a trap, it’d been baited with the one thing he could not resist. Neither could Bobby, fast on his heels.

But there was Ash, holding up a pale and shaking Sam- oh god he was alive and- and not horribly injured.

“Sammy!” Air rushed into Dean’s lungs, like it was the first time he’d breathed in over an hour.

“Dean! You have to run away!” Sam came to life spectacularly, shaking Ash off and stumbling towards Dean. “He knows!”

Dean caught his taller brother and maneuvered him into a chair. Bobby went over to the trapdoor to give the others the all clear. They couldn’t take Sam down to the basement, every single line and sigil of warding down there broke decrees all over the place and would get all of them locked away for centuries if anyone found out about them.

“Who knows? Uriel?” Dean asked, speaking calmly. Sam was shuddering beneath his hands. His eyes were wide, pupils blown, signs of saccade - shock and stress and angel mind tampering, Dean knew the symptoms. It was a minor miracle Sam had managed to get to the Roadhouse without running straight into a wall.

“N-no. He- Dean, I’m so sorry-“
“It’s okay, it’s okay, we know how that bastards operate,” Dean said gruffly, gripping Sam’s shoulders.

“He doesn’t look hurt,” Margot snapped from behind him. She’d come up through the trapdoor, while Tom, Kevin and the whole Will Shakespeare mess stayed downstairs ‘playing cribbage’.

“Shut up!” Dean snapped at her. “You know how Uriel works.”

“He didn’t- it wasn’t Uriel. It wasn’t- he got it all out of my mind- they-” Sam seemed to realize he wasn’t coherent. He took in a deep breath and then said succinctly: “They brought in someone new. A Seraph, Dean. They brought in a Seraph. Uriel called him Castiel.”

Gasps echoed around the room. Over Sam’s shoulder, Bobby looked grim and Ash let out a long whistle.

“One of the Seraphim, huh? Well, fuck me sideways,” Dean said jauntily. So Zach had finally had the balls to admit the situation in his fucked-up little Paradise had gotten beyond his control, and called in one of the remaining big guns.

A murmur of panic went through the troops, and through the trapdoor someone had left open.

“A Seraph? Here? In this backwater?!”

“Castiel? That’s the one who took out that free colony - Libertad! Thousands of dead!’

”- thought those hawks were all off fighting Levis, what-“

”- wiped out like Paradise 45!”

“Shut up!” Dean shouted. He stood up and turned towards the operators of cell Five in the Roadhouse. “He’s just another dick with wings.”

“He’s a Seraph.”

“Still goes down when you knife him.” Dean spun his angel blade through his fingers in illustration.

Sam struggled to his feet and pulled at Dean’s arm. “He knows who you are! They’re looking for you!”

“Yeah, like that’s never happened before.”

“Ash, make sure they can’t find us,” said Bobby, taking control of the situation. Ash, looking half asleep as usual, sauntered over to the wall and got a piece of chalk out of his pocket. “Sam, sit down. Have a drink. You look like you need it. Rufus, grab the kid some booze.” Yeah, if a Seraph had traipsed through Sam’s mind, there was not much point in keeping a clean profile on details like that.

“But-...”

“Why did he let Sam go?!” Margot demanded to know, three feet closer to the door than before.

“He wanted me to tell Dean to surrender.”

“Yeah, he can wait a hell of a long time for that,” Dean said, and went towards the trapdoor to instigate the rest of the afternoon’s fun and games.
Castiel opened the office door and found Balthazar standing right outside in the hallway, trying to get a glimpse of Uriel over Castiel's shoulder. From the way Balthazar smiled, what he'd seen of the Protector had been very enjoyable.

“Can I help you?” Castiel asked, closing the door firmly behind him.

“Oh, Cassie, you already have.” Balthazar beamed at him. “I’m glad they sent you. Don’t get me wrong, I’d have settled for anyone competent, but it’s good to see you again to boot.”

Ah, that explained a lot. “This is your doing,” Castiel concluded, a flash of wings in the higher spheres indicating the garrison and by extension Castiel’s presence here.

“Let’s just say I misfiled a report into the best of hands.” Balthazar gave his famously charming smile. “Though I never expected my yelps of alarm to reach the military arm of the Host. I wonder who boosted that report up the ladder in your direction...? I was aiming for Elijah, or someone from the Decrees department, it seems more their bailiwick. Strange... but a pleasant surprise. Ah, as long as I didn’t drag you away from anything important.”

“No, fortunately.” Castiel hesitated, glancing back at the office door. The situation had justified interference, but saying that out loud might encourage Balthazar in his dangerous habit of running roughshod over the chain of command. “What’s the situation? Have they found the brother?”

“No, he’s not at his home, and-...” Balthazar’s attention slowly centered in on Castiel. “What on earth are you wearing?”

”...My clothes? Oh, you mean my vessel. My previous one was destroyed in the war last year. This is her grandson. He accepted and was removed.”

The Apocalypse had changed a lot of the rules. Since angels were on earth pretty much permanently, they needed vessels for the duration. But saved souls could no longer be carried around for possibly eons, not when the Plan said they should be at peace on earth or in Heaven. So a decree changed that. The souls of the lucky chosen were escorted straight to their Eternal Reward, as the Word so euphemistically termed it. Castiel hadn’t always liked the responsibility of caring for a mortal soul riding in his metaphorical coat pocket before the Apocalypse, but he found that he liked the idea of killing a mortal for their body even less (Castiel did not do euphemisms). He’d taken great care of his previous vessel as a result. But the last battle that had finally pushed back the Leviathans had been fierce. Ethel Smith’s shell had perished, over a century after she had first relinquished it to him and peacefully ascended to Heaven. A new one had been called forth.

“James Novak.”

“Who? Oh, you mean the-” Balthazar made a vague gesture towards Castiel’s chest before dismissing the matter, like most angels would. Castiel did not like this attitude. James had voluntarily given up his place on Earth and his body with a courage and devotion that deserved to be commended. Heaven was the ultimate reward, of course, but this did not mean that time spent on Earth was not important, or else why would it have been part of the Plan? It must all have a purpose. They all had a purpose, though it seemed to have gone awry in this... pit.

“Balthazar, what is going on here? Why was Uriel torturing an innocent man, an advocate? He told
me there’s a ‘railroad’ operation here. That wasn’t in my orders. I read reports on this Paradise on my way down, they don’t mention dissidence anywhere. I’m not sure even Asmodel or Hester have heard about this.”

“Ah, I wouldn’t know about that.” Balthazar’s feelings in the higher spheres were bitter, a match for the ragged grimace on his face, and Castiel remembered with regret that his one-time squad-mate and liaison to Intelligence had been punished, demoted and was now out here to rot.

“Well, as you can tell from my presence here, Cassie—“

“Must you call me that?”

”-yes - this is a dumping ground. And though you will never find me criticizing my superiors - Heaven forbid, who knows what they’ll do to me next time - you’ll have to admire the, shall we say, ingenuity of the plan that has a small number of demotivated underachievers watching over a large town that’s also a terminus for human malcontents, stuck right at the very edge of the Garden. If you see what I mean.”

...That did sound like a recipe for disaster. “Who organized this?”

“No idea. I might be doing our hierarchy a disservice. I suspect nobody actually sat down and thought, ‘what a great idea to put both gunpowder and matches in the same basket’. I suspect it just happened. And for the most part, I’d say, so what? So a few unhappy humans make it out past the Garden and get eaten by all manners of-“

“We are their guardians, Balthazar.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” said Balthazar - not in agreement, more as if he’d heard that before and expected it to hear it again from Castiel. “Fine. Guardians. Remind me how many of our collective charges you killed in that dump south of here a few years back?”

”...As many as I had to. And not one more.” Castiel shot a hard glance at Uriel’s office door.

“I’m sure the dead ones appreciated your restraint.”

“So it all ‘just happened’,,” Castiel echoed, frowning. “But why it is not known?”

“A mixture of everybody being too busy, not caring enough, and, ah...” Balthazar glanced sideways at the first office door, the one Castiel was going to have to enter next. “Can I be overly frank and forthcoming?”

“No, but that’s never stopped you.”

“Let’s just say, the management here may have under-reported some issues that could have made our lovely garrison look bad.”

Celestial politics. Of course. That did not bode well for the next meeting he had to attend. Castiel did not head towards Zachariah’s office, though, he scrutinized Balthazar closely instead. “Is that all?”

“What do you mean?”

“Why did you call this in, Balthazar? I suspect you don’t care much about the railroad or the incompetency around here. It probably suits you.”
“You wound me, Cassie.”

Castiel pinned him with a long hard stare.

Balthazar looked away first. There was nothing evasive in his expression or the set of his wings, he merely seemed puzzled.

“I... seriously, Castiel, I don’t know. It’s... there’s odd stuff going on here sometimes, and I don’t mean the humans digging in their heels. Little stuff, barely noticeable, but sometimes I wonder if it doesn’t all add up. I... can’t really put my finger on it though. Before I burned out, I could have probably been able to tell you more,” he added with a vacant look in his eyes that hurt something deep inside his brother. “I would have at least cared. Now... I dunno. Guess I just didn’t like to see Uriel kick Sam around. Sam’s a decent chap.”

“Sam Winchester is innocent. His brother is not. I think you knew this,” Castiel said without much condemnation.

“Moi?”

Balthazar withstood his stare for a commendable number of seconds before glancing down with a sigh. “Did you mind-ream Sam to get that?”

“Yes.”

“Well, under the circumstances it was your prerogative to do so, though you probably realize now how tenuous Uriel’s accusation was. You caught on to Dean?”

“Enough to bring him in. I didn’t see much, though. Sam Winchester has a well disciplined mind, and he fought me hard to protect his brother.”

“Good thing he wasn’t rigged with a mind bomb.”

“A what? Oh, one of those mental wards against scans.”

Castiel did not know what was more troubling. That there was a human resistance - against *Paradise* - or that the mortals had somehow obtained and refined old spells, Enochian sigils and other arcane devices to further their movement.

“Heard of those, hm? We garrison staff are more likely to fall foul of them than you soldiers. They’re awfully clever little things, if utterly ruthless. Any invasion of the mind triggers a sigil that releases a portion of the soul’s power right into the face of whichever angel has his mental fingers in the pie. I heard Uriel tripped one of those and it clipped his wings - at least when it comes to reading minds now,” said Balthazar, who might no longer be part of Intelligence but was still a determined gossip by the looks of it. “I take it you’ve not had the pleasure.”

“I have.”

Balthazar gave him a startled look. “You- are you alright?”

“It was painful. And the human was lost. It didn’t impede me, though.”

“Oh. Maybe Uriel’s hobbling is psychological... What would you have done if Sam had been booby trapped?”

Castiel thought the answer to that was pretty self-evident. “The trap would have detonated. I would
have been injured. He would be dead. But since he wasn’t, I was able to determine—"

“But what if he was?!?” Balthazar snapped.

“He wasn’t.”

“But... C’mon Cassie, I don’t want to lose you too.”

“Sentimentality, Balthazar?” But his voice was soft. He knew what Balthazar meant. There were too many empty gaps in the firmament where brothers had once stood.

That did not mean they could stop. They had a duty.

“This Dean is probably trapped,” Castiel said slowly, analyzing the little he’d gleaned from Sam Winchester’s mind. Not a lot, Sam had kept out of railroad business, and he also knew how to cover his thoughts well; Castiel had only been able to dig so far without damaging him. But Sam was too intelligent a man to not have deduced a lot of what his brother was up to, and enough had slipped out for Castiel to latch onto. This Dean Winchester was a high level operative. The resistance did not allow them to run around with an untrapped mind that could be examined.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“That is unfortunate.”

“I’d say.” Balthazar gave him an odd look.

“For him. Our new orders are to send the ones we catch alive to Naomi. She is trying to learn how to disarm them.”

He caught a flinch of Balthazar’s wing. Sympathy? For a human resisting the order of Heaven? Odd.

“Poor Dean,” Balthazar sighed. “Well, that’s the way the wind blows.”

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Next chapter: Doin’ it Old Testament Style

A voice Dean did not recognize echoed out from the Lantern. It was a deep gravelly voice, with a nice timbre but less emotion than a cuckoo clock.
Doin' it Old Testament Style

Chapter Notes

As is hopefully clear in the story, all progress stopped back in 1836. I love that my writing hobby forces me to do research on such things as the date of creation of the trenchcoat ^___^ (In case you were wondering why Castiel is wearing a duster here, not his usual garb.) There's some historical inaccuracies here and there, particularly about the history of gun research and development in a much later chapter, but I tried to keep on target. This way I get to dress Dean up like a pre-civil-war cowboy, which I'm sure he appreciates and makes up for the fact that I otherwise have him stuck in a vegan booze-free caffeine-free angel-ridden hellhole. And I have another hammer to drop on the poor guy's head next chapter. Sorry Dean!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

For ten days and nights the sun will stand at the zenith of the sky, and all of the wolf species will perish.
--- Zoroastrian eschatology (Greater Bundahishn)

Tom Pictou had left to rejoin the rest of the visitors. Dean had offered him a train ticket out of Dodge, if he wanted to be on the safe side of any celestial wrath. Considering the mess with Shakespeare, the angels were going to pay attention to the visitors this time. Normally they didn’t. The belief in their system, their Machine, their superior celestial senses was so great, they usually didn’t bother with anything as mundane as a headcount. So ordinarily Tom would swap Kevin for a spelled wooden figurine with a bit of the kid’s essence hexed into it, and carry that around in his pocket until he was back home, the chicken hawks none the wiser. Now though... it depended how on-the-ball the Seraph and the trackers were, if they’d think to double check the visitors, if they’d notice Kevin was missing, if they asked around and realized Tom was the only one Kevin had clung to during the trip. There was a chance... However, from what Sam had said, and to give the Seraph the slimmest of dues, Dean did not think the new sheriff in town would let Uriel go all mighty smite-y on someone just because the human had been seen hanging around with the missing Kevin. The Seraph had a fairly deft touch at scanning; if he connected the dots and reamed Tom’s brain, he wouldn’t cause any damage. Especially since Tom would promptly reveal all he knew - because all he knew about for a fact was Dean, really, who was already a target. Tom would do penance for a good long while for his sin of assisting the railroad, but that was the worst they could do to him now that P342 had an advocate again who would not allow any heavy-handed or illegal nonsense.

Weighing the odds, Tom had calmly elected to stay within the system and take his chances. As a railroad operator and a bachelor, Tom was a precious resource; he could get packages like Kevin moving via the Visitor route. So he was going to stay at his post, which meant he now needed to be back at the visitors’ lodgings, working hard on his innocent expression.

This left Dean in the Roadhouse with the three packages and Charlie hidden in the warded cellar. The latter had an unconcerned look on her bandaged face. She wasn’t railroad, she was a resistance passer, she worked for the Joker and the four-and-twenty blackbirds. Her specialty was breaking
prisoners slated for severe penance or execution out of jail, stuff like that. That was even crazier than helping runners head for the hills. Charlie was a ghost, she didn’t exist in the system, and it’d been decades since she had someone she couldn’t leave behind at a moment’s notice.

Cell 5 - Ash, Margot, Clyde and Rufus - were the only ones left in the Roadhouse at this point. Ellen was in the kitchen, staying out of the way of this part of the railroad so that she could not be compromised. Down in the basement, Charlie was painting sigils on everyone’s backs. Bela was behind the bar, mixing up the hex bags, muttering about this, that and the other cause for complaint. If she wasn’t such a good procurer of arcana, Dean would have begged Bela to go back to whatever British Paradise had originally spawned her. She was good, though. And expensive. Dean and his connections in the Wild had to do all kinds of crazy shit to get her the weird objects and bits and pieces of monsters she said she needed for her hexes. They were also her payment, she exchanged the surplus in the thriving occult black market which, surprise surprise, was probably the one last bastion of commerce left on the planet. If the angels caught that lot, the fact that they used Money, the Cause of All Greed and Venality, was not going to be the biggest issue. The brisk sale of angel blades from their fallen brethren would only be the first of many points of contention.

Everyone stilled as they heard a familiar crackle in the street. The Magic Lantern outside the Roadhouse sparkled to life; a black box three feet by three in which the Machine could conjure images. A few people scoffed when they recognized Jonah. They were handed the Word three times a day every day and five times on Sundays, Jonah was as familiar and boring a part of the landscape as the wall around the town. But Dean, Bobby and Rufus stared out the window, waiting. This was not an ordinary day, and Dean had the feeling this was not going to be the usual Word that Jonah was going to spread.

It started off standard, of course: you are the saved, you live in raptured bliss, all hail the God Machine blah blah blah. Then a few announcements about the visitors, which quarter of the city they’d visit next and what was planned as a bachelor mixer there.

Dean came closer to the window, eyes narrowed, to get a better look at the picture on the lantern outside. Jonah was standing on the top of the garrison roof so that he could be seen bathed in the sparkles falling gently from the God Machine a hundred yards overhead. There were other angels in the background. That tall guy was Balthazar, and talking to him, his back turned to Jonah, was another angel, dark haired, dressed in a light tan duster looking rather rumpled. Dean could recognize every one of the garrison angels at a glance, and he’d seen the two trackers. This was not one of them. Must be the Seraph then. Dean wondered why he was surprised to see the guy looking so... ordinary. Dammit, he’d fallen under the sway of the Seraphim’s reputation after all. He’s just another dick, he reminded himself, just another dick.

“One of our dear visitors was a little boisterous today, as you may have seen from a broken window down on Adelaide street. Have no fears, we do not believe anyone was injured. However, just to be sure, could the following beloved soul, Dean Winchester, please present himself to the garrison? Or you can pray for salvation if aid is required.”

“Pray for your own salvation, lick-spittle,” Dean muttered. Behind him, Sam had made an injured sound which he’d tried to bury in the hands over his face.

“Nobody else,” said Margot, half surprised, half relieved.

“Just because they’re only looking for Dean doesn’t mean they don’t have the rest of us in their sights,” Bela snapped, thumping down her mortar. “You! Winchester! Did you think of me or Susan at all?! How much did the bastard dig out of that pea brain of yours?!”

“Bela,” Dean said warningly.
But Sam had already let his hands drop to his lap, eyes dull as he stared down at the table. “Bobby might have made it onto their map as a person of interest. Other than that, I kept all the Seraph’s attention on Dean.”

“As you should,” said Dean, overriding the shocked gasps from some of the younger operators. The angels would have picked up on him anyway, no way could Sam, his brother, not know what Dean was up to when they lived in the same house and spent most of their time together. But that very closeness, that knowledge, had allowed Sam to focus on him and drown everybody else out, as long as Sam had stuck to his training and the Seraph hadn’t gone digging so deep it would have turned Sam into a vegetable. Sam had protected all the people he knew or guessed were in the resistance by concentrating on Dean, who was going to go down anyway. Made perfect sense as far as Dean was concerned. He was the linchpin after all.

“That keeps the rest of the operation safe. Somewhat safe,” Rufus said with a shrug that reminded one and all that they were railroad operators, they knew the risks. “We’ll manage.”

“He’s right.” Dean gestured towards the bar. “C’mon, Bela, get those hex bags finished and then run home to fight with Susan some more.”

“I will make yours in the form of a suppository, it will be more efficient,” said Bela sweetly.

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A half hour later, the ‘train’ was ready to depart, bar a few last minute details. There was a strange absence of celestial activity outside. Were they really waiting for Dean to surrender? That’d be unexpectedly dumb and awesome.

Dean tightened the strap on his pack. He hadn’t expected the day to end like this, to put it mildly, but he kept an emergency kit at the Roadhouse just in case. In the wallet he always carried in the interior pocket of his canvas caballero jacket, he had a daguerreotype of their family from forty years ago when they were last all together, and a more recent one of him and Sam. If he had that, he really had all he needed. He checked the hex bag in his pocket, the gear secreted about his person, the bandoleer beneath the jacket, the angel blade in the hidden sheathe in the back. He fitted the black cavalry hat on his head, adjusted the angle. All ready to sin.

His steps drew him towards the table where Sam was sitting, staring into his glass. Dean propped his arms on a chair’s back but didn’t look at his brother. There was one last thing he needed to do, but goddamn he did he not want to say goodbye...

“What is it?” Bobby asked behind him. He was talking to Rufus, standing at the window and frowning outside.

“I’m not,” Rufus said. “It’s getting late.”

“Isn’t it?” Rufus asked without turning around.

“Yeah, that’s the point.” They were waiting for night to fall before they moved. Day, night, it was all the same to angels, but it was not all the same to their human devotees who just loved working for the garrison. All bystanders, innocent or otherwise, would be at home or in bed once night fell. Besides, many spells and signals worked better in the dark.

Bobby drew up near Rufus and dug his watch out of his vest’s pocket. “This goldurned contraption must be running early, because it can’t possibly be eight.”
“No,” said Rufus slowly, “it’s not dark enough.”

A brief squeal and crackle from the Lantern focused their attention on that instead of the sky.

A voice Dean did not recognize echoed out from the box. It was a deep gravelly voice, with a nice timbre but less emotion than a cuckoo clock. There was no picture to go with it, Dean saw as he craned his neck to see out the window.

“Dean Winchester is advised to surrender to the garrison. Until he does, I ask that the saved souls of this Paradise remain inside their locked homes. Keep an eye on the streets outside. Pray if you see any suspicious activity. To assist you,” added the voice with a complete lack of emphasis whatsoever, “I am keeping the sun from setting for the next few hours.” Crackle, whine, click, silence.

“Fuck me.”

“Dean, blasphemy,” Sam croaked automatically.

Dean shook himself and then he laughed. Long and hard. It got all the shocked faces turned his way.

“So he’s pulled an old testament Joshuah on us. He’s kind of dumb. All he’s done is announce loud and clear that some shit is going down hard. The nutjobs of the Word will be on the lookout, but we know where they live, and they’ll stay nice and tight indoors as ordered. The others? They’ll be hiding under their beds.”

Dean was talking completely off the top of his head, but he had to counter the sheer awesome effect of that bloody Castiel dropping that down like a hammer. How much had that been deliberate, Dean wondered. Fuck. He’d assumed this guy was just another Uriel with a slightly longer dong. He could still be, but Dean’s gut, which he knew to listen to, told him this was a chicken hawk of quite a different feather. That had been deliberate, it had been a shot fired across the bow, intimidation of an enemy Castiel didn’t even need to see.

“There’s eleven angels currently in Lawrence,” Dean said, putting the new big cheese in town in the same bag as the others, and using their rallying cry, Amos Adams Lawrence, the founder of their town and their railroad. Castiel wasn’t the only guy who could use words like weapons (though Dean couldn’t return the favor of grabbing the sun and sticking it up the bastard’s ass, unfortunately). “For over twelve thousand humans. We’ll all have grandchildren if they kick the doors down one by one to find us... and figure out that our doors and pathways are warded.”

“We’ve practiced for this, people,” said Bobby, sounding almost bored. “We know how they work, and we work around them. We’re the operators here. They’re just the obstacles. Let’s get the train started.”

Yeah, no point waiting now, was there. Dean slid a chair around to sit right next to his brother. Sam looked up slowly. He was on his second home-brewed whiskey. The big greenhorn was going to regret that later, he’d never had anything stronger than lemonade before.

“You have to leave…”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sorry,” Sam said brokenly. “If only I hadn’t stepped forward-“

He stopped abruptly when Dean gripped him by the shoulder hard and shook him, their faces close.
“You stepped forward because that’s who you are, and I’m so proud that you’re my brother,” Dean said, gruff and low.

Sam made a wobbly sound on his inhale. “But-“

“Yeah, the rest of it blows, but we’ll figure something out.”

It went without saying that Dean had to leave if he wanted to live. It went equally without saying that an advocate like Sam couldn’t leave with him without putting a black mark against the whole League. But this was not forever. After all the crap, after all the- the work and the heartbreak and losing their parents and surviving together, Dean was not going to let this be the end. They’d talked about this before. Dean would have to stay out in the Wilds for awhile, then rebuild a new identity for himself. Which meant working for the resistance outright, as the Joker was the only one who could pull that off in Paradise. And that was fine, Dean felt a whole lotta urge to resist right now. Hey, he could join Charlie’s cell, become a ghost like her, help break people out of jail or Penance. That’d be validating. And when he’d eventually set himself up somewhere, in a distant Paradise other than his beloved Lawrence, then Sam would start working his way up the ladder of merits, penances and charities that would see him get permission to move to wherever Dean had settled, and they would start again. It would take time. Five years. Ten, even. But as long as Dean was careful and neither of them gave up, heh, they were un-ageing and undying. Dean had recently celebrated his fiftieth birthday (pretty sure that’d been his fiftieth, though he might have lost count) and Sam was even younger, they were far from giving up yet. One day... they’d be a family again.

“I need to go soon. Are you... Sam, are you alright?”

“Me?” The question seemed to startle him. “Yeah. Uriel did his usual number, but Castiel healed me up.”

“I meant... you know...” Dean’s eyes centered on Sam’s forehead

“Oh. The mind scan. Yeah, that was rather awful.”

“I’ll kill him,” Dean ground out, voice tight and shaking with the fury that’d been building up all afternoon and evening.

“Oh, no, Dean, it’s fine.” Sam suddenly straightened as he figured out what Dean had been thinking. “I just meant it was stressful. But I don’t feel, er, violated or anything. The bastard was so goddamn clinical -” Dean blinked. “- it was like a trip to the fucking medical center.”

“Whoa, Sammy.” Dean couldn’t help but laugh. “What’s that you’re drinking?”

“Something perfectly illegal, so the blasphemy is small potatoes.” Sam’s eyes slid shut. “Man, now I see why you do it. Feels awesome. Fucking angels, fucking angels, fucking-“

“Yeah yeah, you’re gonna need to go to bed soon. How are you going to manage with all this illegality going on?”

Sam shrugged. “A Seraph just pronounced me innocent of all crimes, and I got a mass of leverage against Uriel now. They won’t be pulling me in for years unless they want the League to jump down their throats like Jehoshaphat. Besides.” Sam hoisted up the bottle. “I’m going to get so drunk after you make it out of this- this fucking hellhole they call Paradise, that I will be guaranteed to not correctly remember anything. I can do penance on that if they call me on it, nothing else.”

“That’s the spirit.” Dean stole the rest of his glass and shot it back. “Don’t get blotted until you’re
back home though.”
“I won’t until you get out,” Sam corrected him in a tone that had Dean focused on him again.
“Sam-”
“Don’t say it.”
“Sam, you need to stay low even if—...”
Sam stared at the glass, brain and heart fighting.

Dean patted him on the shoulder- Sam pulled him into a gruff hug and then held for a few seconds, but it was time to go.

Dean gave Bobby a rough slap on the shoulder next, because he wasn’t sure they’d have time for it later. “Hey, if things go down the wrong way,” he whispered, glancing back in his brother’s direction, “make sure you sit on him.” If Dean fell, having Sam get caught in the crossfire trying to help was not the last thing he wanted to see before he died.

“Yeah?” Bobby’s face was strained. “And who’s gonna sit on me, huh?”
“Bobby...”
“I will, Bobby Singer.” Ellen was there - despite this being against railroad protocol - pulling Dean into a sharp hug that nearly wrenched his spine. “Go, Dean. You’ll be fine and so will they.”

“Now woman-” Bobby started, pulling his pork pie down to cover his face as much as the short brim would allow.

“Be quiet, Bobby Singer. This is what we accept. This is also our way of fighting.” She should know. Fifty years or more holding down the Roadhouse, before, during and after Bill had died in the Wild, killed by Asmodel’s trackers while helping runners escape. She knew the cost to the ones who stayed behind.

He was going to leave them behind, Sam, Bobby, Ellen, Jo, his family, his friends. He’d left them before, to go the front lines, when he’d had to do Penance, or when he’d escorted particularly important blackbirds out into the Wilds, and he might not have come back any of those other times either, but it wasn’t the same thing. This truly was final.

Fucking angels.

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Next Chapter: Chicken Hawk vs. Rabbit.

A map of every nook and cranny flashed through Dean’s mind. This was his city. The angel could go fuck himself.

Chapter End Notes

I should be posting two chapters this week, today and Thursday, as this chapter is
short, and next chapter is where Dean and Cas finally run into each other and sparks, predictably, fly :)  
(plus I’ll be away next week for while, so might as well get these puppies out now)
“As I watched, I heard an eagle that was flying in midair call out in a loud voice: “Woe! Woe! Woe to the inhabitants of the earth, because of the trumpet blasts about to be sounded by the other three angels!”
Revelations 8:13

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

The operators moved forward in standard formation, ghosting through the streets. All of them had angel wards painted on their persons, making them invisible except to the naked eye of the vessels, and there were only eleven of those around. Less than that in practice; most of the garrison would be at their regular duties, or sitting in the barracks communing with the God Machine without realizing it was equally blinded. Really, the only ones to worry about here were the two trackers, Uriel and Castiel. And maybe Balthazar, who was considerably more clever than most people gave him credit for, and whose laissez-faire attitude would probably not cover this level of balls-up.

Dean glanced behind him as he crossed Maple Street and Severn. Shake and Spear, with Charlie shadowing them, were ten feet behind him, Kevin was further back with Bobby and Margot, Rufus and Clyde were next to Dean. Ash had looked thoroughly unimpressed with Dean’s order to stay back, but had eventually agreed to remain at the Roadhouse with Sam, to ward the place up in case the Seraph did the smart thing and tried getting at him again. Normally, the angels didn’t do the smart thing. They did crazy stuff like stopping the sun, now pinned to the sky like it’d been knifed there, but they didn’t do the obvious stuff like take family members hostage. Still, no need to take chances. Maybe this one was an innovator.

As he approached Dixie street, Dean heard someone singing from the second story of the house right at the corner. Sarah Mackie lived there, Dean’s exquisite map of Lawrence informed him. The words floated down to him in, brought by what should have been an evening breeze.

“Michael row the boat ashore, Hallelujah,” Sarah sang in her husky voice.”Then you'll hear the trumpet blow, Hallelujah...”

Shit!

“That used to be a song of hope n’ deliverance once,” Rufus breathed at his side, leaning his back against Sarah’s house to look up at the unnaturally blue sunlit sky.

Sarah wouldn’t know Dean and his friends were there, specifically. She was sending out a warning just in case. There were people singing this and other songs up and down Dixie right now. Out loud or under their breath, half heartedly or deliberately, cautiously or defiantly. The risks were minor; it broke no decree to sing a hymn or a song when spotting an angel. Sarah was smart, though, and he suspected she’d used the Michael one deliberately. It wasn’t Alfie she’d seen, wandering around like a lost lamb, or Melod staring blankly at a wall until the wall decided to break a decree. It was one of the higher ups out there. Sarah wouldn’t know the trackers by sight - and Uriel wouldn’t be up the road, he’d be kicking down doors and throwing his weight around. It wouldn’t be Zachariah. It could be Jonah, might conceivably be Balthazar who had chosen this key point of a
wide road leading right through the southwest portion of town not far from Adelaide Street, which would give an angel a one-mile clear line of sight.

It could be Balthazar, but Dean was ready to bet it wasn’t.

Dean didn’t look around the corner. Angels had extremely keen eyesight. Their hearing was very good too in theory, but being in a town full of movement, people talking and singing, kids playing loudly, creaking wood, clattering footsteps and heartbeats made that no more useful than an average human’s senses. The crucial thing with angels was to stay out of sight, but Dean needed to know where the chicken hawk was. If it’d been one of his railroad operators up at the window above, Dean could have gotten the bastard’s exact location through code, but Sarah wasn’t up to that, and he wouldn’t put her at risk anyway. He had other means.

He slipped the pendulum from his breast pocket and got one knee on the ground. This would be easier with one of the regular garrison angels. Familiarity and connection helped a lot, and Dean had only glimpsed this goon’s back on a Lantern’s picture for all of a few seconds. Despite this, the pendulum started swaying before he’d even had a chance to fully focus on it. Odd, it normally didn’t react that strongly right off the bat. Must be because the guy was a truly big swinging dick.

The angel was on the north side of Dixie, a hundred yards away and getting slowly closer if Dean was any judge. Dousing was more an art than a science, but Dean’s life had depended on it time and again, it certainly sharpened the skillset.

When he relayed the information over his shoulder, Rufus leaned in close.

“My jink. Get them out.”

“What?! Wait, he’s gonna-“

“This ain’t sheriff Uriel,” Rufus said softly, already three steps away towards the nearby alley between houses.

It wasn’t Uriel, but that didn’t mean this guy was not going to drag Rufus into some crazy serious penance later if he realized- shit. But Rufus was an operator, it was his decision. It was not for Dean to call him back, only the station master had that authority, and Bobby let his oldest friend walk right on by without saying anything.

“Get ready to run on my signal as quietly as you can,” Dean half whispered, half mouthed back at Charlie - trusting her to get her charges moving, and also keep them safe. Charlie had never been in a line dance with any of the Seraphim before, so he’d rather not put her mastery of mojo to the test, but if push truly came to shove, his money was not on this Castiel asshole. Charlie would hand him his feathery rear. Behind Charlie, Margot had a hand on Kevin’s shoulder already.

A thundering five minutes passed as Rufus got into position. According to the pendulum’s swing and Dean’s gut, Castiel was walking up the street slowly. The guy hadn’t been in town more than two hours and he’d already realized that Dixie was the best position to spot a runner in this quarter of the city - and yeah, now that Dean had him situated on the mental map, he was ready to bet this hawk was walking between Main Street and Travers, which were the other two long streets of Lawrence giving good line of sight. This guy was good. Maybe even better than Asmodel’s pair of lapdogs; those notables were probably circling around town in case the fugitives made it out. They’d be looking for the ‘engine driver’ who’d get the packages moving away from P342 and into the Wilds. Dean wasn’t worried, though, no way in hell would those mooks catch Benny even on a bad day.
“Ah, sir? Mister angel, sir? Ah, thank ye!”

A thanks was the signal that the angel had obliged, which was to say, had turned his back towards Maple.

Dean made a harsh gesture and sprinted across the street without a glance. He made it across Dixie in three seconds.

“You should be at home,” said a gravelly voice in the distance - the voice of the bastard who’d stopped the sun.

Charlie, Shake and Spear were there shortly afterwards. Charlie’s hands glinted strangely and their collective footsteps were completely inaudible. Neat trick. Once they were out of town and deep in the Wilds, Dean would get her to share it.

“Jus’ wanted to say, I thought I heard someone cross the yard back over there-“

Margot and Kevin followed two seconds afterwards, Bobby right behind. Clyde hung back in case a further jink were needed

Dean made the Go! signal to Bobby, but he pressed back against the house and risked a look around the corner.

A figure with messy dark hair and wearing a tan duster had his back to him fifty yards away, Rufus gesticulating before him. The breeze carried their voices.

’-could have sworn, sir, that-“

“Go home.”

That hadn’t been an order. As he said it, Castiel reached up and touched Rufus on the shoulder and blink, no more crotchety lyin’ son of a gun.

Dean’s teeth clenched, but the fact that Castiel had said ‘go home’ hopefully meant that Rufus was alive and back in his digs.

“Dean,” said the angel loudly.

Dean’s heart went Ba-bump! right on cue.

Castiel started to turn around. Dean pulled back to get the side of the house between himself and the angel. Shit. Shit!

“You’re around here somewhere.” The voice was steady and grave... and coming nearer quickly. Bastard had figured out that Rufus was a distraction and was heading in the direction he’d been momentarily distracted from. “You should surrender.”

Bobby and the troops had already moved on, and were a block away. Charlie took one resolute step towards Dean- but stopped when he gestured her abruptly to stay with the others. Her gaze flickered back - to land on Kevin, oddly enough, not Shake and Spear. She reluctantly fell back a step. Bobby also looked back, wide-eyed and worried, but Dean made a fierce ‘Go!’ . Bobby was the station master. His duty came first. He shoved Kevin’s shoulder and gestured the others to move.

Dean was the linchpin. When push came to shove, dealing with this bastard was his duty.
A map of Lawrence flashed through Dean’s mind, every path highlighted, every street known, every house with a set of hostile eyes, every rabbit hole, every nook and cranny. This was his city. The angel could go fuck himself.

Bobby and the others had ducked down an alley. Dean spun and ran along Maple at full speed, making as much noise as he could as he aimed towards one of the houses-

- a flap somewhere behind him -

Dean dove, going head first through the old coal scuttle and into the warded basement.

He rolled and got to his feet, now moving silently. He felt more than heard a rush of wind outside. Seraphs and higher order angels could do that, fly so fast it was like they were everywhere at once. It wouldn’t be efficient over a large area, but Castiel would have heard his footsteps, so he was concentrating on that section of street. He’d have inspected every molecule of air there within seconds, but wouldn’t find a hint of a well warded and hexed up human. Probably biting his feathers out of frustration.

This was rabbit hole number 17 in the cellar of Elbert Morrison; not an operator, just someone who looked the other way. A box moved to reveal a hole, going down a short heavily warded tunnel into the foundations of the local schoolhouse.

Dean ghosted his way through silent school desks, past a chalkboard lazily scrawled with today’s Word. Creeping by a window at a crouch, Dean spotted a figure perched on the roof opposite. Tan duster, messy dark hair. Fortunately looking the other way. Dean tiptoed on.

He grabbed a glass bottle of juice from the cold room of the school, took a long swig, dumped the rest in an empty inkwell with a silent apology to Mr Tidderman, the teacher. He set up the rocket in the bottle near an open window and lit the slow fuse, wincing at the scratch and fizzly hiss of the lucifer. Then he ran silently towards the far exit. The angel would still be combing the streets, because he’d ordered everyone to lock their doors and he expected to be obeyed. Indeed, most citizens would have obeyed him, Dean suspected. Even if he found an unlocked door, Dean was not going to hide out there and potentially paint the occupants as rebels. And maybe the angel had figured on that. The railroad depended largely on the goodwill and complicit silence of the populace after all.

But any minute now, what with his ability to search an entire four block radius multiple times with barely more than a thought, Castiel was going to realize that Dean was hidden from his senses and somewhere under cover. Then he would start searching the houses, starting with public institutions like this one. Or maybe he would give up on Dean and try looking for Bobby, Charlie and the others instead.

The firecracker went off, the rocket shooting up into the air and exploding ten feet above the highest rooftop in a puff of blue sparkles.

Dean was out the door as soon as he heard the hiss-bang behind him, knowing that would catch the Seraph’s attention for a few precious seconds.

Twenty quick steps took him out of the schoolhouse. He jumped a fence, rounded a wall and dived into the Ellison’s barn, another warded area.

“A distraction?”

The angel was right outside. Dean’s heart froze - but then he heard a flap, and the next few words
were from a distance away. “You know I will find you. This area is too small to hide.”

Great, he hadn’t caught onto the warding. If he had, he’d just blow all the buildings away. The guy had stopped the sun after all. So if he wanted to, he could make all the houses transparent as glass. He could propel every human up in the air, like back in 1836, to sort them out. He could do any number of big moves. Dean was warded against a lot of that, but the bastard didn’t know that, and even if he guessed Dean was gussied up, any or all of that would make his job easier at least.

But he didn’t, and Dean ghosted on. Oh, and chicken hawk? That hadn’t only been a distraction...

From five blocks over, two rockets, white and a blue, shot up into the air.

There was a sudden movement from somewhere up the street. The angel was right there, Dean caught a glimpse of him as Castiel spun to stare up at the sky. Then he was gone in a blink of an eye. Dean smirked and ran on. He’d have to light another rocket soon, or leave a trace of his passage, because he needed the angel on his trail. It was his duty to be chased right now, distract him and the others from Bobby and the runners.

A sound like a sudden hurricane wind. Dean hurled himself down behind a wall. He heard footsteps cross an alleyway one street over. It was either a different angel, or it was Castiel with a bit of a grump on, because those footsteps sounded a bit more thumpy than previously. Dean grinned wolfishly. Though he was now in a spot. He didn’t have any warded walls here, if the angel got line of sight - or did a fast search- shit. Had to give the chicken hawk his due, he’d realized a lot faster than Dean liked that the second rockets had been a distraction and that this meant Dean was still in the original area.

As if an echo of his thought, two more rockets went up. White and blue again. Dean already had his pendulum out, since he couldn’t hear footsteps anymore. The pendulum indicated that the angel hadn’t gone to investigate this time. Shit, shit, shit, they just had to send a clever one, didn’t they.

But clever alone didn’t cut it, not when Castiel, like the others, couldn’t think small enough. Naomi, Asmodel and their lackeys were so desperate to break the resistance, but they just couldn’t think small. Couldn’t think human. Now if it was Dean out there trying to squash a railroad - and he had Naomi’s well-documented ‘all means to an end’ attitude - he’d have kept Sam and held a knife to his throat until Dean surrendered. He’d have threatened to execute hostages, he’d have sent indoctrinated human moles to try to infiltrate the railroad. At the very least he’d have figured out why everybody sang hymns when they saw him, or what the color of rockets meant once he’d observed enough of them. If nothing else, he would have thrown his weight around a whole lot more.

It wasn’t mercy. Uriel for one didn’t know the meaning of the word, that was for sure. But the angels had their wings clipped by two constraints. One, they couldn’t think down to a human level. They had this massive blindness, this lack of ability to understand how a railroad like this could work. The angels were an organized army with Michael and the God Machine at the top; they didn’t understand a fluid movement where only the linchpin and the station master even knew where all the pieces were in any one group.

Also hamstringing them was the angels’ inability to admit, to humans and to themselves, that there even was a resistance in the first place. This was the happy happy promised land where everyone was content; having people try to tunnel their way out was pretty much a sign they’d failed, and angels did not do failure very well. That was the real reason they were only searching for Dean. He was a sinner, he’d crossed the line, and it didn’t matter that a third of Lawrence was helping in tiny incremental ways, all they saw was Dean. But Dean wasn’t the railroad. All those others singing hymns, looking the other way, each operator doing what Dean ordered without asking why, or
doing what they thought best in a pinch, each a little cog in their human machine... They were the railroad. Their cells were independent and didn’t know who might belong and who did not; the linchpin holding all of this organization together knew each and every one of them, so his mind was trapped. If the angels caught him, the sigils burned into his mind and soul would trigger, destroying both as soon as they tried to whammy him. But another linchpin would volunteer and he or she would learn the cogs and get the gears running again, and the chicken hawks would flap around some more, unable to understand how mere humans could be so effectual. They would blame magic, which certainly gave humans an edge. But Dean had never had to use half the tricks in his bag, he didn’t need to when he could out-think the enemy. Better not to show their hand anyway.

He didn’t need high level mojo like Charlie’s. He had this guy dangling on a hook like that trout he had illegally caught, killed, cooked and eaten back out in the Wilds one day (great memory, even if it’d made him a little sick.) He had the Seraph right where he wanted him.

Under cover of a warded shed, Dean slipped a small ampoule from the bandoleer beneath his greatcoat where his great-grand-pappy had once stored shotgun shells. Now it held all kinds of goodies, such as five little ampoules with his blood and some secret ingredient from the ever-expensive Bela. He drew a quick circle in the dust right outside the shed’s door, with the right cabala markings like chicken scratches all around it. He placed the vial in the center, put a slow fuse under it and lit it. Then he ran. It was a bit of a gamble, the angel might spot him. Hopefully not.

“Dean Winchester, this is futile. How long can you keep running?”

Dean snickered, because the growly voice was two blocks away and starting to sound just a little bit irritated.

A rapid series of flutters- shit! Doing a fast search again! Dean felt a massive bulls-eye on his back, felt like any second now he’d get grabbed-

One of the whooshes sounded like it was right at his shoulder- but then the minute was up. Suddenly the streets were completely silent and devoid of wing flaps. The fuse, burning down, had heated the blood in the vial and caused it to pop, releasing a sudden whiff of Dean’s essence. The angel had responded like a bloodhound (though without baying, more the pity; that would have been entertaining.)

Another rocket peppered the sunlit sky ten blocks away, white and blue still. Fuck fuck fuck, Bobby, c’mon! Dean felt at his pockets, he still had a few blue rockets - ‘linchpin on the run’ was what those meant. Once spotted, a bunch of other operators, the small time ones safely in their locked homes right now, had started the very safe and decree-approved task of lighting rockets as distraction and to echo the message. The signals worked better at night, though, thank you mister ‘I decided to stop the sun’ for making things just a bit harder.

Dean ran, but every five minutes he’d stop, leave a rocket on a fuse or an ampoule of blood in a circle.

It worked for almost half an hour - then Dean slammed into the wall of a house and thought small thoughts as he saw a flash of that bloody tan duster just ten yards ahead. Shit! Castiel had figured out that the flashes of essences in the circle were distractions. He’d jumped ahead of the last one Dean had lit. Dean’s trail was erratic, but he was sort of aiming towards Adirondack Street and the wall around town, and the angel had figured out roughly where he was headed. Just not quite well enough, fortunately.
Dean breathed out very quietly and ghosted down the street in the opposite direction. The angel was not doing a fast search, he must not have a good enough idea of where Dean was. Still, this was getting tight. Dean ran a hand under the band of his cavalry hat, absently wiping away sweat. If only-

As if in answer to his prayer - but not really, only collaborators prayed these days - a hiss brought his attention to the far west side of town. A rocket went up and exploded green.

Green - packages away. Yes! Thank you, Bobby! Now please get your grouchy rear end back to the Roadhouse and act innocent.

Dean was still going to leave breadcrumbs; he didn’t want this clever rat-bastard going after Benny, not right away. But now he had more latitude in his escape.

He hit another rabbit hole. Staying out in the streets was too dangerous with this asshole. Plans and maps unfolded in Dean’s mind. The small warded alleyway went through a hole in a fence, lead to old Smith’s kennels, then out and down a ditch and a storm drain - that would take him all the way to Halpern and Union. Then two blocks over, he’d be home free.

Someone up ahead singing ‘Swing Low Sweet Chariots’ had him instantly on the alert. He spotted Melod clumping around on Halpern, looking industrious and pretty useless. Dean dodged him easily. A small part of him would miss that rum cull; a harmless angel, the kind it was easy to get around. Doubt he’d find them that congenial at the next town he’d stop at.

There. Dean looked carefully up and down Adirondack street. No angel in sight. He ran to the old well. It led down to the aquifer that the railroad had dug out and made into an underground warded passage out of town, here and on the north side. Dean quickly took off the well cover. It was kept oiled and rust-free. The walls of the well itself were warded, once he got down there, he’d be gone. He got up on the lip of the well and reached up to the rope on the winch-

A rustle behind him.

Dean did not hesitate. He jumped.

For a glorious second of free-fall, he thought he’d made it - maybe with a broken ankle, but he’d made it-

Pain exploded from his shoulder and his whole body jerked.

His vision blurred momentarily. His neck and head had snapped down when he’d stopped falling. What- god, his shoulder! It hurt!

He turned his wobbling gaze to the fingers that had fastened there, an improbable one-handed grip holding him up as if he were a rag doll someone had caught as it tumbled by. Above the hand, a tan coat sleeve covering a white cotton shirt.

In one move, the angel lifted him up out of the well and hurled him across the street. Dean rolled into the fall - his breath caught in shock as his injured shoulder impacted on cobblestone.

Dean knew he was going to die, but he was going to go down swinging. John Winchester would expect nothing less.

The angel strode up to him - and leaped back as Dean pulled the angel blade from its hidden scabbard and scythed out to hamstring the fucker.
No shocked comment on the matter of Dean Winchester being armed and dangerous. Just a boot kicking at his hand, trying to disarm him. Dean pirouetted away, still on his knees, corkscrewed to his feet and swung the blade again.

This time a huff of surprise as the angel had to dodge sharply. Dean felt a vicious satisfaction. His next blow was instinctive, straight at Castiel’s chest-

*The fucker could move!* Like he’d expected the thrust, like he’d dodged Dean a thousand times before - he parried with his forearm, twisted his elbow at just the right angle, plucked Dean’s wrist out of the air like a fucking daisy. A grip like a steel clamp wrung the blade out of Dean’s numb fingers, and now he really was going to die.

Despite the rabid pain in his shoulder, Dean’s left hand shot up, palm flat to intercept. He knew before he even saw it that there was a fist coming at his face, because that would have been his own follow-through.

The blow crashed into his palm- and most of the energy dissipated into the sigils stitched into the insides of the black leather fingerless gloves he wore. Air washed around him, but the blow failed to break every bone from his phalanges to his wrist. Score one for the good guy - thank you, Joker, for those hex tricks that gave humans a chance in hand-to-hand with bastards who were as strong as ten horses.

Dean gasped as the impact still rippled through his bruised body, but he had the satisfaction of seeing blue eyes widen with surprise. They were face to face finally, the angel’s fist planted in his palm, Dean’s wrist caught in a grip like a vice. Dean finally got a good look at the guy: regular features, hooded eyes, hell of a nice mouth - the halo had whammied a real looker. Dean grinned, because even if it was just going to give him concussion, he was going to nut this bastard if it was the last thing he did.

He already had concussion, probably from that brutal hangman’s stop a minute ago. His vision was going weird, he was seeing colors and - ugh, tinnitus or somethin’.

...Castiel was staring at him. Motionless, looking right at Dean with eyes wide, in the most- most *eviscerated* way imaginable. Dean looked down hopefully, but there was no silver blade piercing the asshole’s chest. Why was he giving Dean that look? And what was that noise? Sounded like the God Machine-

...uh...

Dean stared at Castiel in the showery rainbow that enveloped them, and the angel stared back, shocked and appalled in equal measure.

A Lantern at the corner of Adirondack and Union squealed to life, and Dean saw himself and the angel appear in it, saw his own expression. This...

...This was a nightmare. He was going to wake up any minute now, swearing off Helen’s homemade hooch for good, and trying to forget the walloped look on his face when- when the Machine declared he’d just found his fucking soulmate and it was a-... was an ange-

With an enthusiastic *poof*, Samandriel appeared, Annunciation Trumpet already blowing out the first jaunty “Da-da-DAH!” of the proclamation of Union. The fourth note was a dying duck sound followed by silence.

“So,” said Dean eventually, because his mouth was on its own independent track, “Paradise on
Earth just got a whole lot more interesting. Isn’t that right? *Darling.*”

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*Next chapter: Mazel Tov!*

*For the past hour of hunting Dean Winchester through the streets of Paradise 342, Castiel had wondered how one human could be so infuriatingly quiet and elusive. The Seraph had not known how good he had it back then.*

Chapter End Notes

I’m off on a 10 day business trip, I’ll be tired, jet-lagged and stressed. Next chapter is written but needs polish, so probably won’t post until I get back, unless I have time in the evenings and a modicum of energy (comments and kudos have a wonderfully energizing effect, however ^_^ )
Thanks for all the encouragements! The week (which is not done yet by any means) was as insane as I thought it'd be, but I was able to rest my head a bit in the evenings by finishing this off. Making angels miserable seems to have a relaxing effect on me.

“No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and His servants will serve Him. They will see His face, and His name will be on their foreheads.”
-- Revelations 22: 3-4

Castiel’s shove nearly ripped the garrison’s doors off their hinges. The human he was dragging by the arm laughed again. He’d been doing that off and on for the past two minutes. Castiel almost regretted his impulse to heal the man, but the shoulder muscles had been badly wrenched and the acromion cracked by the force the angel had exerted on it earlier. The human would have been in pain, which was not necessary to sort out this predicament. Though it would have stopped him from inappropriately snickering whenever he caught sight of Castiel’s expression.

The reception committee was what he expected. Zachariah had finally emerged from his office and was standing in the main room, as stunned as a snail dragged out of its shell. Uriel and Jonah stood at his side, Balthazar was lurking near the far doorway, and everybody else had wisely decided to continue looking for the fugitives or pursue any other duty that would get them as far away as possible from this mess.

“Hah! The gang’s all here! Congratulate us, guys!”

For the past hour of hunting Dean Winchester through the streets of Paradise 342, Castiel had wondered how one human could be so infuriatingly quiet and elusive. The Seraph had not known how good he had it back then.

“Be quiet,” he advised.

“What is the meaning of this?” Zachariah asked accusingly. Not an auspicious start.

Castiel did not waste his time in small words that meant nothing. “Could the humans here have somehow mimicked the effect of the Machine?” he asked tightly, looking over everyone’s heads to address Balthazar.

The brother who’d fought for eons at his side had an honestly consternated look on his face as he shook his head quickly.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Dean Winchester laughed again, harsh and jeering. “If we had the ability to mess with the Machine, you think this is what we’d do with it? Set up some major magical working just to get me harnessed to you? Think highly of yourself, there, angel.”

“Quiet,” Zachariah advised him with one nasty look. “This- this is unprecedented- this-“
“Say...” Balthazar had taken a few steps forward. Everybody was too shocked to chase him away. “Cass- Castiel told me his vessel is almost brand new. Just throwing this out, but could Dean and the- er, this Novak guy maybe have been meant for each other? That’d explain-... this.”

That silenced even the human. Everybody present looked at everybody else... except for Jonah, who looked down at the floor with a wince. Right, he was with the Word. They knew the mechanics of unions as well as any angel, since they liked to advertise the most successful ones as an example of God’s Benevolence.

“Jonah?” Castiel prompted him. He had a feeling he already knew the answer.

"I would have to check with Naomi."

“Tell me.”

"...No, brother, I don’t think that’s possible. The Machine does not react with vessels- I mean bodies. It’s the sou- um, essence, the mind that it- but this is not really my province. We could commune and await Revelations.”

“Yes, we need to verify this-”

Zachariah was interrupted in his attempt to squirm out from under this situation and make it someone else’s responsibility. On the desk closest to the door was a tray of teacups for humans who came in to consult with the garrison. Dean Winchester hooked one up with his free hand and hurled it with great precision at Uriel’s head.

“For my brother, asshole!”

Uriel’s jaw dropped as he stared for a split second. Balthazar, with considerable foresight, threw himself at the Protector, but not before the infuriated angel conjured a blast of force straight at Dean.

Dean staggered, but most of the energy expended into the wing Castiel had thrown up in his defense in the higher spheres. Dean shouldn’t have done that, but harming the human wasn’t going to sort out this situation.

“Uriel-” Castiel had to break away and grab another cup from Dean’s hand. He’d been aiming at Zachariah this time. There was a smile on his face that even Castiel, not all that in touch with humanity, judged a trifle manic.

“You dare- Castiel- this monkey-” Zachariah gathered himself up and threw a venomous look at Dean. “You will show some respect, human, or your penance will make this whole filthy city weep. You are already due for punishment for your infractions tonight, you-“

“Penance? Dude, where you gonna fit that, huh?!”

"...What?” Zachariah looked from Dean to Castiel as if he expected the Seraph to be miraculously fluent in Dean’s meaning now.

“I said- let go!” Dean wrenched his arm away. Castiel quickly moved the teacups out of reach, the situation being already more ridiculous than any entity could be expected to bear. But instead of looking for ammunition, the human had ripped off his jacket and bandoleer, and was tugging off his shirt.

“What are you doing- Castiel, what is he doing?” Zachariah asked, making Castiel’s feathers of
Grace went rigid with irritation. How was he supposed to know?!

“Here! You find a spot, you tell me!”

Dean had ripped off his undershirt and turned around, showing his back to the angels. Castiel stared. He’d had Dean’s life history downloaded from the Machine, he knew this in theory, but seeing it laid out like that...

The name of God was on Dean’s forehead of course, same as any other citizen of New Jerusalem. It shone in Castiel’s senses like a tiny star, flickering in harmony with the soul contained within the flesh. Down Dean’s back was written a history which angels could read, luminescent markings that only their eyes could perceive. Over both shoulder blades were the rank and merits of a soldier; a match for the anti-possession tattoo in ink over his heart, necessary for one who might run into the remaining demons in this world. Cumulatively, Dean had spent a staggering fifteen years on the front lines, Castiel remembered. He’d been sent there for a year for assaulting an angel back when he was twenty, but instead of letting the punishment teach him a lesson and then accepting to return to a new Paradise with his tail between his legs, he’d become one of the professional soldiers in the ancillary human brigades, the scouts, sappers and combatants known as the ‘Hunters’. He’d been promoted specialist within months of arriving on the front and had finished sergeant. Castiel had known as soon as he saw that information in Dean’s record that Jonah’s polite request to surrender earlier this afternoon was not going to work. A man did not choose to face down monsters, Croatoans, demons and even Leviathan, and then go running to the garrison because he’d been told to. No less than fourteen shining marks down his vertebra showed his tally in Leviathan, better than many an angel, and obviously a source of pride as they’d been detailed in ink on the skin as well for humans to see, crude fanged circles like tiny teeth mark marching down his spine.

Below the marks of bravery and merit, a different story unfolded. Sanction marks, penance marks. Both on and off the front line, Dean Winchester had accumulated a lot of time in solitary or in tasks of redemption. There was, Castiel had to admit, very little space left on that storied back to add more, certainly nothing that could cover everything Dean had done tonight. Off the top of his head, Castiel couldn’t even remember what the penalty was for trying to stab him earlier.

“See a space? Try right here.” Dean slapped his rear end. Castiel figured out from the sudden amused look on Balthazar’s face that the gesture had significance and probably quite a rude one. Fortunately it went over the head of all other angels present. They were more irritated on principle.

“Dean–” Balthazar’s hand was on his mouth, trying to keep from laughing. “You, uh, didn’t need to strip, angels can see the markings through clothes.” He coughed and turned away, shoulders shaking. What he said was true, but Castiel thought Dean’s gesture had been significant nonetheless, a voluntary removal of masks and barriers to show the angels just what they were really dealing with here.

“We all know you like to wield that stick, Zach.” Dean pulled on his undershirt as if he had all the time in the world, body moving with easy grace. He was in remarkably good shape for a human of the New Millennium who should not have to work or fight that hard; surely a sign to the entities who were nominally in charge of his wellbeing and protection that he’d been up to something not decreed. “But if you want me to do penance, you gonna have to take that up with your bloody Machine–“

“Silence!” bellowed Uriel, tensing.

“Or what?! C’mon, Sheriff.” Dean crooked a finger at him. “Take another shot at me, if you have the balls to–“
Castiel lifted a finger. Dean continued to speak for a couple of seconds before realizing that he could no longer make a sound. He grabbed at his throat, tried to cough, swallowed... then turned a deadly glare at Castiel.

“Thank you, brother,” said Zachariah, visibly ruffled. Then he gestured abruptly. Dean staggered as he found himself fully dressed. “I suggest we keep him like this - decent and silent - until we decide what to do with him. Jonah, if you think you can find anything out about his fellow reprobates, you can have at him first. If he’s not too badly damaged, we can lose him for several centuries of penance on the other side of the planet. I think we’ll all feel better when he's out of our feathers.” He directed a coldly complicit smile at Castiel.

Which crashed and burned when he caught sight of the latter’s expression of disbelief and growing anger.

“That’s what you think, is it?”

“Um-”

“You don't see the position we're in? No wonder the resistance runs rings around this garrison. The human figured it out before you did.”

Even now they hadn’t caught on, only Jonah’s glum look said he’d also seen the writing on the wall.

“If we interrogate him - harm him - send him away - if we do anything to him, that means-” the blasphemy strangled itself in his throat. He wasn’t actually going to have to say it, was he?

A weight leaned against his shoulder. Dean Winchester had propped an elbow there and was staring at him with a grin that seemed too wide for his face, eyes a blazing dare. Castiel internally growled, but flicked a finger in his direction.

“If you boobs tar me a sinner,” Dean said immediately, lunatic smile still in place, “it means Cas here either married a rebel, or your fucking Machine matched us by mistake!”

Uriel threw out a hand- Castiel, patience well and truly worn thin, was not gentle in reining him in. Uriel gasped and staggered back, wings flinching.

“That is not a viable solution either, brother,” Castiel ground out. “Restrain yourself.” This Dean Winchester was voluntarily trying to bait them; he’d have no problem being a martyr if it allowed him to score one last blow against the Host, that much was self-evident to any celestial being who’d seen him fight by that well earlier tonight. Even interrogating him, however gently and carefully, was off the cards since his mind would be trapped.

“You guys can’t do anything.” Dean’s smirk was triumphant. “It’s not just me, everyone in town saw what happened, or will have heard of it by now. Hell, maybe you could wipe everyone’s memory of us gettin’ hitched, but then you’d be admitting to yourselves that your Machine messed up, and you’re the ones that always say it’s infallible, right? Or are you saying your precious Seraph here is soulmate to a - how’d you call it? A reprobate? Oh! Hey! Hey! I just remembered - soulmates share their penance! Feel like locking him up for a few centuries? That’ll look good in the Lanterns. Face it. Tails I win, heads you lose. You’re screwed! And by the way, hubby,” Dean added, taking a step back and contemptuously smacking Castiel’s shoulder with the back of his hand, “fair warning. Gag me again and I will stab you in the throat.”

Without looking at him, Castiel clicked his fingers.
Dean stared. “You did not-” he started to say and discovered his voice was now a tenth the volume and also helium squeaky (Castiel was not normally a petty entity, but he was having a bad day.)

“Brother.” Jonah finally looked up, and his grim expression matched Castiel’s. “I am afraid that-“

“I know.” Castiel did not need the Word to tell him how the situation stood, and he’d rather Jonah keep it between his teeth-

No. No, he was not thinking straight.

Castiel centered himself with the discipline he’d cultivated for billions of years. Jonah was right, of course. There was but one law, one rule, and one God. Castiel had a duty.

“Very well.”

The angels other than Jonah seemed perplexed at the sudden shift in Castiel’s being, at the way his wings had settled, tidy and straight.

“So it is said, so it shall be. It appears this... human and I are attached. In some cosmic way.” Castiel was glad to have had that sudden inspiration; ‘cosmic’ attachment would not imply that he would actually have to spend every single moment for the rest of eternity with the creature. A few centuries of close surveillance at most, to train the mortal out of his worst sins, and then Castiel could go back to his regular duties while still being ‘cosmically attached’ to his spouse. No time at all in the grand scheme of things. “This can only mean that somewhere in this,” he gestured at a glaring Dean, “is a life worth redeeming. He has certainly proven himself an effective soldier in our war against the Enemy. He’s also been very good at showing me where this Paradise has flaws.”

Zachariah’s expression stayed controlled, but his wings jerked in restrained anger and alarm. He’d just realized that he was going to have Castiel - and half of Naomi’s department - going over his shoddy garrison with a fine-toothed comb trying to figure out what had happened. To his left, Uriel was smirking at what he must think of as Castiel’s humiliation. Castiel did not care. It was not humiliating to serve God. This must have been decreed, this must have a reason.

He reached out and put an arm around Dean’s shoulders, ignoring the way the man stiffened. “If this must be accepted, it might as well be embraced. Some good can come of it. This will remind the saved souls of Paradise that the God Machine is benevolent. He can have mercy on His most lost lambs and send them an angel to redeem them.”

The squeaky swearing that followed was rather inspired, even if it broke several decrees.

“Yes, indeed.” Jonah’s eyes had lit up. “This has validity - we shall have to spread the Word about immediately.”

“Yeah, you do that,” Dean squeaked. “You sure your Lantern shows can handle me?”

“Not right away,” Castiel cautioned. “There is a lot about this situation that we do not yet understand. Can you-“

“Yes, yes, I will commune immediately. Will you participate? Naomi will wish to speak with you directly, I am sure.”

Castiel had been on the fence about staying, but that made up his mind. “I shouldn’t keep this saved soul at the garrison any longer, we need to show his fellow citizens that nothing untoward is going on beyond this unexpected event. I will take him home, it is time for humans to sleep.” He’d let the delayed night fall ten minutes ago already. “If Naomi says anything relevant, please send
me the information.”

“Of course, brother.”

Dean had gone stiff under his arm again, and looked ready to say something, but remained silent. Castiel, with some regret, undid the effect on his vocal cords, as that would not be the best way of showing the populace of Paradise that everything was fine and under control. Behind the other angel’s backs, Balthazar gave Castiel a sympathetic look and mouthed ‘We’ll talk later’. Castiel gave him a weary nod, ignored the others and flew to Dean Winchester’s home.

According to the information from the Machine, the man lived on the upper floor of a small house in the southwest part of the city, a two room suite above a parlor, kitchen and his brother’s room downstairs. Castiel landed them next to the bed, and looked around the mortal habitation morosely.

“Cas.”

“Castiel,” Castiel corrected, looking back at his brand new burden and duty.

Dean was staring straight ahead, his shoulders as rigid as scripture beneath Castiel’s arm. “Cas. You ever touch me again without permission and this thing will be over before either of us has a chance to drag the other down.”

Castiel examined the hard profile. “What thing?”

The lips twitched back showing teeth in an expression that was anything but a smile. ‘I’m just sayin’ you’re spending our honeymoon on the couch.”

The angel looked at the couch, a wooden bench with padding nailed to it, pulled up near the window for reading in the light of day presumably. He did not see why he would have to spend any time on it. Honeymoon. Phrase in the local language that meant-

Castiel tore his arm away like he’d been burned.

Dean snorted archly, putting his hands in his pockets. “From the look on your face, I’ll be seeing even less action than Sammy.”

“The unions- the machine is not- I am an angel!” The tone in his voice made the window panes rattle.

“Yeah, that’s what’s so funny about all this.”

“The unions are not meant to- to encourage carnality,” Castiel said stiffly. “They are sacred and can be non-sexual for those who do not have the inclination towards-”

“Oh, get your wings unbent. The unions are there to get us to crank out babies or to give us someone you can use as leverage against us. Or both.” Dean turned away, rubbing his neck, and headed towards the door.

That was so... vastly incorrect that it left Castiel to fall back on a more easy conclusion. “Babies are not an option.”

That started the human laughing again.

Castiel was wondering if he should express solicitude anyway (humans often felt strongly about not being among those chosen to have descendants) when a thud of running footsteps from the
The front door was thrown open hard. As the human and the angel turned towards the bedroom entrance, someone ran up the stairs. Sam Winchester burst into the room. He gasped and backed up hard against the door jamb when he saw Castiel.

“Hey, Sammy! Meet your new brother in law!”

Sam Winchester bit off a swear word and then just stood there, gaping.

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*Next Chapter: Honesty is the Foundation of Any Good Marriage*

*That answered that century-long question the philosophers and thinkers had been asking themselves. The God Machine did indeed have a sense of humour.*
Honesty is the Foundation of Any Good Marriage

Chapter Notes

This chapter required a lot of research. Forget antibiotics, societal mores and clothing, what really changed from 1836 to the present day is the kitchen. In the end I decided not to go full hog on descriptions, since this is the norm as far as Dean’s POV is concerned so there’s no real reason for him to note and elaborate on every detail, but yeah, this scene got rewritten a ridiculous number of times as I realized that this, that and the other domestic object I’d initially inserted was anachronistic. Errors probably remain, but I did not have time to fit in a PhD on historical research of domestic life in the 1800s into my busy schedule, fancy that ^_^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.”
Revelations 21:9

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Dean woke with a start, heart hammering.

He was lying in bed on his stomach, face mushed into the pillow. Dawn light teased pale colors into the room, but that was so far as ‘same as usual’ went before falling off a cliff.

His room at the top of the house being pretty cold even in the perpetual summer of Paradise, Dean normally slept under a couple of blankets in his long johns… but today he was fully dressed and sleeping on top of his covers. Other abnormality: he wasn’t alone. Sam was snoring faintly next to him, also fully dressed with his hand resting on the New Talmud at his side, like a knight’s sword to protect Dean’s chastity from the other occupant in the room, to whit - Dean turned his head on the pillow to face the other way - the angel sitting on the couch, staring straight at Dean with a moody expression.

Dean moved his head again so it bored into the pillow, absently trying to smother himself. Yeah. Well. That answered that century-long question the philosophers and thinkers had been asking themselves. The God Machine did indeed have a sense of humor.

Pillow-induced asphyxiation breaking several decrees, and not serving much purpose in the immediate, Dean shoved himself up off the mattress and got to his feet. He leaned back and whacked Sam in the shoulder, getting a snuffly “Whuu?” that was priceless. Then he went to splash water from the basin onto his face.

Sam sat up in the bed, staring blearily at the angel who had now transferred that unblinking drill of a scrutiny to his brand new brother in law. Sam got off the bed with slow cautious movements as if Castiel were a predator who hadn’t gotten the vegetarian Word yet. The angel’s eyes followed him without a change in expression, then finally settled back on Dean, who’d slipped on his boots and was clomping towards the stairs.
There was an unarticulated noise from Sam as his brother trailed after him, an unasked query about the uninvited guest they were leaving stranded in the bedroom. Dean ignored him, ignored the angel, and made his way downstairs. He detoured by Sam’s room. Dean could have used his own chamberpot, but the thought of whippin’ it out in front of those blue eyes would scar even someone who’d whacked off the heads of over a dozen Levis. He managed his morning business, then turned and clomped out of the room before the Machine even cleaned up behind him (unlike regular damage and mop-ups, chamberpots were cleaned immediately for reasons of sanity. San... San-something, some angel had told him once in a particularly fastidious tone of voice, but the word slipped his mind. Dean normally did as much as he could with his own two hands out of stubborn human pride, but having dealt with latrine digging out in the Wilds, he let that small convenience abide).

Sam was still coming down the stairs, looking back up towards the bedroom with uncertainty scrawled all over his face. Dean didn’t pause. Nor was he surprised, when he opened the kitchen door, to find Castiel now sitting at their small table with the same unreadable look on his face.

Dean didn’t break stride as he headed towards the larder, ducking beneath the festoons of herb and onion garlands hanging from nails in the ceiling. He kicked aside a few empty canvas bags, moved a crate of potatoes and opened the second disused flour bin at the back. Sam hissed a warning, but Dean ignored him. He took out the packet of perfectly illegal coffee and the small grinder from their hiding place, and carried his prizes to the paraffin burner. Then he went to the kitchen pump, hauling at the handle with a bit more force than necessary until water thundered out into the large stone sink and drenched his hand, his sleeve and the percolator’s kettle.

Nobody said anything. Both the advocate and the angel must have figured that if a more serious commandment was to stay intact - thou shalt not kill, for instance - it’d be best for Dean to have a shot of decree-breaking stimulant before he was expected to examine this dog of a situation in any detail. They hadn’t discussed anything last night, beyond making sure that Castiel wasn’t going to cross that foot of space around Dean without explicit permission. From the look of disgust on the angel’s face, it was the furthest thing from his mind anyway. Then Sam had barged in. Dean had started making introductions, Sam had given the Seraph a nasty look and an even nastier ‘We’ve met’. Reminding Dean that Castiel was the one who'd poked his brother in the brain and thus knew more about Sam than Dean ever would, at which point Dean had decided to go to bed, it had been the longest day - literally - since 1858.

The percolator on the burner started to rumble and burp. As if that’d been a signal, Sam got up to throw wood in the cast-iron oven and get a fire started. The thump of logs, the rustle of wood shavings and the scrrrrich-hiss! of the lucifer match sounded absurdly loud in the ringing silence. At some point they were gonna need to eat lunch and other stuff that seemed so freakishly mundane right this instant, it almost made Dean laugh.

Dark liquid splashed into the cup. The white of its enamel looked too sharp in the morning light streaming through the kitchen window, the contrast with the coffee too stark, too real.

Dean took one long burning sip and finally allowed himself to think.

He didn’t linger on the basics. He’d already mapped out the strange stalemate this union placed them all in. Hell, he’d had that part pegged while Castiel was still dragging him through the hallways of the garrison last night, looking for someone to yell at. Dean had a minimum of protection, the railroad wasn’t in immediate danger, he’d concentrated on that. But now… standing at the kneading board with a steaming mug in his hand, Dean stared at the wall in front of him and
finally let himself think about this on a personal level.

Break it down here. Dean Winchester, the guy who chased every skirt and tail that’d let him, was married. Humans liked to officialize their weddings in temple before their congregation, but it didn’t matter that there was less than a snowball’s chance in hell he’d get the angel in a white dress standing before Pastor Jim anytime soon. At the end of the day, if the Machine said he was married, then goddamn, Dean was married. That was already pretty crazy; only one human in five ended up finding a soulmate and Dean had comfortably assumed he was too ornery to ever meet someone who could put up with him. And who did the Machine decide was Dean’s perfect match made in Heaven? Hmm? Oh yeah. An angel - something that had never happened before ever as far as Dean knew. Not just any angel. A particularly dangerous and ball-breaking specimen, all up in the decrees and without a sense of humor. Dean might have understood it if it’d been the relatively more relatable Balthazar who’d gotten hitched - with a human who wasn’t Dean - but no. And bring it on home now: the angel that got roped into a union with a bloody railroad operative was a Seraph, the bastard who’d blown up the free colony of Libertad, who- who- okay, mostly he’d kicked Levis and demons around and Dean didn’t disapprove of that. So at least the machine hadn’t gone to the absolute end of this madness; if it had really wanted to fuck with him, it’d have hooked him up with Uriel. Or Zach. Or Naomi. Dean snorted into his coffee.

...Three second after the rainbow faded last night, Dean had wondered if the Machine was breaking down. It seemed insane, but an angel getting matched had never happened before. Or else it’d been so well concealed that even a high level resistance operator like Dean hadn’t heard of it. So yeah. Maybe the machine had developed a fault. Sprung a cog. This had real world implications that would shake the planet. But it just-... the morning just seemed so normal out there. Yesterday had been a day like any other. Food had appeared on the table. He’d heard that the Anderson kid had sprained his knee falling off a stile, and the Machine had sent Eliezer to fix it before the kid had even stopped bawling. The visitors had arrived right on schedule, Leah had been hooked up with a perfectly normal guy... if the Machine was breaking down, wouldn’t the small stuff go first? Wouldn’t the angels themselves know anyway? They talked to the damned thing in their weird fashion. If it had ordered them to go to Halifax and bring back forty visitors and twelve bananas to stick in their ears while they danced around naked, surely the halo brigade would have been aware that there was a problem. But the whole upper cadre of their garrison and Castiel himself had been utterly gobsmacked last night, this was lightning out of a clear sky for them as well.

But if the Machine wasn’t broken... then the implications... the mess he was in... it was so big he couldn’t wrap his head around each and every consequence right this minute, but he had to do something, there were important steps he had to take- and he had to think about- urgh.

Dean stared at the wall straight ahead, coffee cup in hand. On the far side of the kitchen, the clock grandpa Henry had made went tick and tock, tick and tock.

A weaker man would have buried himself in denial. A wiser man would have analyzed the situation carefully until he understood all the angles. A cautious man would have said nothing, kept his head down and done as he was told.

Dean Winchester being none of the above, he made up his mind. He could bang his head against this for days and not get to grips with it. And he wasn’t going to wait around. There were ways to work through this, to get some matters straightened out right away. And - the crux of just about everything that’d happened since last night - he and the angel were now in the very same boat, so seemed reasonable to start there.

The angel looked neither startled nor intrigued when Dean pulled out the chair opposite. Cup before him, one leg hitched up over his knee and lounging back, Dean tilted his head in the
direction of his brother, wandering back from the oven.

“Sam? Why don’t you breakfast with Ellen and Bobby this morning, or somewhere else.”

Sam stared at him as if judging whether Dean had made that suggestion under his own steam or from some pernicious mind influence. “You’re joking,” he stated.

“No, see, my jokes are funny, and right now nobody’s laughing. Go and-“

“You are not staying here alone with- with- you need an advocate present, Dean!”

That was exactly what Dean did not need or want. If he had his way, this discussion was not going to make it past the plausible deniability test. Hell, he’d tried to stab the bastard last night, Castiel had more on him than some technicality like blasphemy, coffee or accidentally opening his trap without Sammy present to add advocacy waffling on his behalf. “We’re okay. Go on.”

“Absolutely not, I am not leaving you alone.” Sam turned a burning glare on the angel as if blaming him for this suggestion. The latter had been staring at Dean, and maybe he’d followed Dean’s conclusion or came to his own because he lifted his head, met Sam’s gaze and said, “Go.”

Number one thing Dean learned about Cas that morning: people skills were not his forte.

Sam drew himself up to a truly impressive height and snarled, “This is my house, you do not get-“

“Yeah, but s’also mine and Cas’s too now, by extension, and we outvote you,” Dean said - mildly and with true sympathy, really. “Bye, Sam.”

The angel just maintained the look.

Sam did a great fish-on-a-line impression, glare going from one to the other. Then he threw up his hands. “Fine! Great! Welcome to the family! You fit right in! Hallelujah, hosanna and praise the Machine.” The kitchen door slammed behind him two seconds later.

“We never did get around to introductions. That was Sam, my kid brother. He likes his theatrics,” Dean said with a smirk in his coffee cup.

A log settled in the cast-iron oven range. Hot air started huffing up the stovepipe, highlighting the silence. Water dripped from the pump, echoing around the large sink. It was cheek by jowl with the waist-high well-scrubbed kneading board Dean had built himself, larger than was wont; it dominated the cozy space, leaving little more than the small corner cupboard with cookware and their few dishes, and the tidy pile of pail, jug, bottles and broom next to it. The door to the garden and the shed out back stayed open most days just to make the place feel a bit bigger and to let in the breeze.

Dean nodded at the familiar surroundings. “Hope you don’t mind being here? In the kitchen? Proper folk now, they eat in the dining room or the parlor. But it’s just me and my brother, so we leave that as Sam’s study, and we eat in here like savages. Table’s a bit small for three, now that I think about it.” They didn’t even put down a tablecloth most days, this was the frontier, not bloody P1.

Castiel was silent for a few seconds, then said, “I don’t eat.”

“Well that simplifies one single solitary chicken-pluckin’ thing in my life right now. Fine.” Dean put his coffee cup on the table firmly, tipped his head back, looked at the ceiling for inspiration
and then leaned forward, elbows on the table to return that goddamn stare.

“Cas, we could play this several ways. We can do cloak and dagger shit, lie, pretend to play nice then stab each other in the back- we can make our lives absolute hell, but I don’t think that’d really change the bottom line all that much. Can I be honest instead?”

“Yes,” Castiel answered without any inflection or even a faint nod. Dean had yet to see him make any extraneous gesture, it was kind of chilling after being used to dealing with Balthazar, Melod, Alfie and other more urbane angels. “I will not treat anything you say as incriminating, since you asked your brother to leave.”

Dean rubbed his eyes. “Right, you’re a clever birdie. So, here’s the thing. I don’t have a bloody clue what happened, but the way I see it, you and your lot are invested in making this union look like it’s working. I’m... not sure where I stand right this minute, because I am with the human resistance, as you’ll have guessed last night.”

Castiel didn’t fall out of his chair in surprise. Nary an expression crossed his face. He appeared to be waiting for Dean to get somewhere near a point that hadn’t already been implicitly made.

“Maybe it’d be in the resistance’s interest for me to pack this marriage with gunpowder and toss in a match. And I’m not saying that’s not where I’ll be told to go one day. But that’s... that’s turning my life into a bullet. Sure, I’ll be living proof that stuff has gone wrong and the Machine is not infallible when it set this all up, but I’ll lose whatever flimsy protection this marriage gives me. I’ll end up dead, or just as good.”

Castiel shifted in his chair, but forbore to say anything, apparently sensing that Dean had more to add.

“Now, if I don’t have to go to that extreme... well, I guess I have to comply with what you want me to do. Up to a point. I may not like it, but as long as I’m alive, you’ve got leverage, as I’m damn sure you know if you’re even half as smart as I think you are.”

Castiel looked at him blankly for a few seconds, but then those hard blue eyes flickered towards the kitchen door. A part of Dean hated admitting this weakness, and putting Sam implicitly in the line of fire, but the angel had been in Sam’s mind. He would know exactly how much the two brothers cared for each other, despite falling out over politics regularly, and being all grumpy and non-communicative and up in the Winchester code.

Dean gestured with his mug. “This is the part where you tell me what I need to do to in order to keep Sam safe. But I warn you—”

“Your brother has committed no crime,” Cas interrupted severely, eyes narrowed.

Dean snorted. “Right. Innocent as the lamb. Didn’t make much difference to Uriel. I’m sure he’d do much worse to me right now if he could, to get information on the resistance or just for the fun of it, but with the bind you and I are presently in, he can’t harm a hair on my head. Sam now, he doesn’t have that protection, and if Uriel isn’t smart enough to figure that out, there are plenty other angels out there that are.”

“That would be wrong.”

“Yeah, as if that would stop—”

“That would be wrong, Dean.”
Dean stopped talking and actually measured the severe look and the hard words.

Once he was sure Dean was listening, Castiel folded his arms over his chest and turned that strict gaze towards the window. “I am not sure... I am awaiting Revelation same as you on this, but there is one thing that I can guarantee you right now. There will be no harm done to you or your family. Sam Winchester will not be threatened or harmed, not unless he breaks a serious decree. You have my word on that.”

Dean stared at him. “Just like that?” he finally asked.

Castiel looked back at him and tilted his head as if he didn’t understand what Dean was asking.

“You could have bargained for that.”

“That would imply I’d harm an innocent man as a consequence of not getting what I want,” was the crisp answer.

“What if you’re ordered to?”

Castiel looked honestly shocked. “My superiors would never order me to do something as abhorrent as harm one of our saved souls without just cause. Would yours?” he added with a sharp stare.

Dean half shrugged. “They can. I can tell them to take a leap. It’s something we humans have called free will. But Uriel-“

“That was a mistake, and he has been informed of this. Thoroughly. It will not happen again.”

Dean examined him. That seemed almost too easy; not just Castiel’s promise, the rest of it too. Cas made it sound obvious that the thing with Uriel shouldn’t have happened. But the thing was, it had, and loads of other shady shit that Sam had stopped in his day, or that the brothers had heard about out in other frontier Paradises. This Seraph, he was like those human toffs from New Jerusalem proper, the kind who lived right in the lap of the Divine, who had no problem obeying the rules and were so satisfied with this situation that they no longer saw what was wrong with the picture. They didn’t see what went on in the shadows.

On the other hand, the Seraph was not just another of the garrison losers. He might even outrank Zach. Heaven’s hierarchy was a mystery to humans, seemingly very flat at times yet full of these little twists and turns. The only thing being certain was that Michael was at the top (and Alfie was on the bottom, poor bastard). Whoever outranked who, if there was even rank involved, from the way the Seraph had in essence called Zach an incompetent moron last night and gotten away with it, it seemed he had the chops to keep the promise he’d just made. That was something. That was a hell of a lot, actually.

“Hm. Okay. Well, in turn you got my word I’m not gonna... I dunno, stab any angel in the back. Family’s off limit.” Made sense when said out loud, really. “I’ll extend that to you as well, as long as we have this kind of truce going. I’m sure we’ll both feel better knowing we can go about our daily business without the risk of suddenly getting shanked. Maybe our two sides are at war, but we can have proper rules of engagement.”

“We’re not at war.”

“Oh? Was that what you said to those thousands of guys you smoked when you blew away Libertad?”
Castiel’s face went rigid and his eyes widened.

“That... was—“

“Save it.” When all was said and done, Dean also had blood on his hands, some justified, some he knew he’d never make up for. But damned if he’d let the angel take the moral high ground for all that.

The angel stared at him and Dean couldn’t begin to guess what thoughts were going through that head of his.

“Three hundred and seven,” the critter eventually said. “Not thousands.”

“What? Oh. So you didn’t kill quite as many as the rumor mill says you did. Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“I am saying your facts are inaccurate, those people—“

“I’ve been told those caballeros were no saints, but ‘sinner’ is what Uriel called my brother while he was torturing him. Knowing that, you sure you want to finish that there sentence you just started?”

Castiel looked away and stared at the oven range as if contemplating a smite on top of the blackleading.

“I said I was aiming to be honest. Pretty sure I didn’t say nice.” Dean leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. “Or were you hoping I’d pretend I was hunky dory with this? That I’m not who I am? That I’m one of your flock of sheep?”

The angel was silent awhile. “No,” he finally said, still staring at the oven. “I would rather we be open and honest about our... disagreements.”

“Really? How’s this for open and honest. Sooner or later, Cas, my side is going to figure out what to do with this. We got smart humans on our end.” Like the Joker. That was why Dean was holding up and holding out. This was fucking unique leverage he had here, potentially, and somebody like the Joker could surely find something smarter to do with it than order Dean to commit suicide just to make a point and show up the Machine as fallible. “I won’t go against my word to not physically attack you or another angel even on their say-so, but trust me, we will find a way to make this work for us.”

Castiel looked back at him, eyebrows arching up. Was he surprised at Dean’s forthrightness? Dean was sort of surprised too, really. It was as if his gut was saying, yeah, don’t bother lying. And really, what was the point? Both he and Cas knew the score. If he had to choose to pointlessly dick around with the truth like a snake-oil salesman who didn’t have a hope in hell of rooking this particular customer, or just putting it out on the table, Dean was going to go with the latter.

The angel didn’t comment on that. All he said was, “I see.” Perhaps he did. It was certain he was playing a long game here too.

“While we’re on the subject, don’t count on me to be part of the bloody Word. I’ll play along a little bit: I won’t wear my pants on my head or set myself on fire or brazenly flirt with half the city. It’ll blow up in my face too if I put your back to the wall. On your end, don’t make me the bloody monkey for your organ grinder, Jonah.”

That got him a firm and immediate, "Agreed." Dean remembered his new hubby had not seemed
Okay. Wow. That had been easier than expected. Despite the difficult beginnings, the blood on both their hands and the enmity, they’d come to some form of agreement less than twelve hours after they’d tried to kill each other. Hallelujah?

Dean picked up his coffee and gave it a sip. Then he stared at the significant other that the Machine in its inscrutability had inflicted upon him.

“Cas, just between you and me.... What do you really think happened? This... this never happened before, right? An angel getting...” He gestured back and forth between them with his mug.

Castiel shook his head once.

“That’s what I thought. So... I mean, what do you think is going on?” Dean’s curiosity was multi-layered. He wanted to know how the angel interpreted all this insanity, he wanted to know what Cas actually felt about it, and he also wanted to see if Castiel would give him a straight up answer.

“The Machine is the manifestation of my Father, His presence here on earth, living among you,” Cas answered levelly after a moment’s reflection. “He knows us as well as the day He made us, He has judged that we are a match. He knows of your transgressions and your past and your current beliefs, and He has still made the decision to bring us together and bless this union with His intent. There is a reason for this. Maybe I truly am here for your redemption.”

That earned the angel a snort.

Cas gave him a searching look. “You don’t seem to believe this is possible.”

“I know it ain’t. So when this weird situation inevitably blows up, what’s that going to tell you? That your dad got it wrong?”

“No. If this ends badly, the failure will be entirely mine,” Cas said simply.

...He’d take it onto himself. Damn. That... that limited what Dean and even the Joker might do to screw this up in a truly spectacular way that would make people question the Machine itself. If Cas was going to take the blame, put his head on the block in order to protect the system-

And there it was. That was when Dean knew. The knowledge had been creeping up on him since last night, it’d prodded him to have this talk now, to lay it out straight instead of dodging and weaving, and it’d been waiting for Cas’s words to confirm it. Unlike Sam, who thought deep and wonderful thoughts about humanity, fate, the law and his own feelings, Dean lived in a blurry haze of action and gut reaction. It was just how he was built. He didn’t have to think very deeply about what had been said at this table to know.

The machine hadn’t made a mistake. There were still a lot of questions and incongruities, but at the core... Dean had felt it during their game of cat and mouse last night. He’d never had an opponent like this before. Castiel used power like a surgical instrument, sure and sharp. He showed none of Uriel’s sadism, Zach’s pettishness or Balthazar’s apathy. He was dedicated and driven, but did not let that be an excuse for crossing lines or being a dick needlessly - while still being 100% behind being a dick when duty dictated he needed to be a dick. Yeah, no point sticking his head in the sand; Dean knew, on a gut level, that he had more in common with that angel sitting at his table than he had with anybody else in this Paradise, even his own brother. What did that mean...?

Like almost everybody left on earth, Dean had never thought that much about all the functions of the Machine, particularly the soulmate stuff. It worked, it was almost uncanny how well it worked,
it was... it was just a thing, like the eternal sunshine. Most people no longer questioned it and in this instance, neither had Dean. Now he and a lot of people - and angels too - were going to wonder exactly how the machine made its unions.

Everybody knew that the God Machine matched soulmates together. Well, soulmates was a nebulous term and didn’t quite fit in the instance when one guy involved was packing Grace rather than a soul. What it really meant was that the Machine brought together two people who were a perfect match. A couple who could build strong connections. Similar where they needed to be, different in other areas, enough to fit like puzzle pieces. Sure, this didn’t always look good on the outside: Susan and Bela fought like rabid weasels - and undoubtedly rutted the same way too - but that was because fundamentally they were two flawed people who didn’t like themselves very much, and the Machine, in its wisdom, had created this-stable every-exploding relationship that ran like a steam engine, boiling and burning and erupting and yet forging forward. But Bela and Susan both believed much the same thing - that it was every woman out for herself and fuck humans and angels alike if they got in their way. But had two people whose beliefs completely opposed each other ever been matched? That was the heart of the matter. Hmm, was it really that impossible? Or was it just very, very improbable. Two people who could match up perfectly but still, by circumstances, be on opposite sides of a conflict. Highly unlikely, but not a downright contradiction of what the Machine was supposed to do. Maybe this was a million to one chance, two pieces from separate puzzles on opposite ends of the spheres just happened to meet and match perfectly, forming a mishmash picture that meant nothing.

Dean went to get some more coffee, mainly to hide the fact that his hands were shaking slightly. He felt a painful and prickly sensation in his gut, like he’d just been knifed and something he’d never known was there had been carved out. Even Bela and Susan were in love in their fucked-up way. Even John and Mary had been happy amidst the anger and before the pain. Dean and Castiel? Nope. Not gonna happen. The very idea was ridiculous.

The rebel and the angel were never going to hold hands and skip along salvation’s path to a future full of love and happiness. On the contrary, this was going to be painful and quite possibly a danger to everything Dean ever believed in if he let his guard down. Which was not going to happen. On either side, actually; they were both too stubborn and dedicated for that. Fair enough, then. Once that was out of the equation, then this match did give them one leg up on the situation, an important asset for their immediate survival and sanity: a certain level of mutual understanding. Dean had found a tenuous link here, a small bridge between them that had at least let them set some ground rules for a truce. He still didn’t trust the dick very far, maybe an inch if that, but that inch hadn’t been there last night... How about that. Miracles truly were common nowadays.

He sat back down, drank half his coffee in one long swallow, then sighed. “This is a bitch of a situation, isn’t it.”

“It’s not how I thought my mission here would go,” Castiel admitted after a moment of reflection.

“Yeah, if you’d known, you’d have stayed on the front line.”

“I wasn’t on the front line anymore, I was being reassigned.” Castiel’s gaze dropped to a knot in the wood’s table. “I was waiting for my new orders while taking a short rest.”

“Oh, ow.” Dean’s sympathy was scant but unfeigned, and the faint twitch in the angel’s features acknowledged that. Yeah, they were soldiers from enemy armies, but they were also two grunts currently stuck in the same foxhole and discovering that some things were indeed universal.

Silence fell in the kitchen while Dean finished his second cup, and the grandfather clock ticked and tocked away the minutes. The angel seemed to be content to sit and stare at the table. He wasn’t a
chatterbox, and small talk must be some kind of major iniquity in his books. Yeah, this situation was insane and an all around headache, but there would have been ways for this to be worse, when all was said and done. Wow, thought Dean, I’ve lived fifty years on this god-damned earth and only just figured out now that I’m the silver-lining guy.

“So, Cas.”

“Castiel,” said Castiel without any inflection whatsoever, as if he’d already given up on Dean using his name and was just putting in a permanent note on the record that he wasn’t going to let it get to him.

“Cas. What do you want to do?”

The angel cocked his head at Dean in an inquisitive gesture the latter had a feeling he was going to become awfully familiar with.

“We got the day ahead of us. You want to make this marriage seem like it’s working, right? Were we going to spend our time sitting at the kitchen table staring at each other like a couple of tom cats on either side of a fence?”

That crazed laughter he’d been unable to shake last night almost came bubbling up to the surface again as the angel gave him the most gutted look imaginable. Dean huffed and said, “I take it you hadn’t thought it through that far.”

Castiel’s response was to glare at the table.

“Huh-uh.”

“I...” the angel drew himself up like a soldier facing the enemy's charge without flinching. “I am not familiar with human customs. Much. I have not been part of a garrison stationed in a Paradise before. But since this union is decreed, I... suppose I need to ask you. What can I do to make you happy?”

A riot of suggestions burst into Dean’s mind, every single one of them exceedingly unhelpful. He covered his mouth with his hand and coughed away the beginning of a snicker.

Though it wasn’t his job to make the dick’s life easier - almost the exact opposite - the straight-up clueless question disarmed him a bit. Fine, Dean could help the poor greenhorn out. A semblance of cooperation would take pressure off himself and Sam; Cas might have promised to protect them, but no use leaving any excuse for Zach and his crew to do their usual number. Whereas if he helped Cas, well, the angel would be grateful, maybe start trusting Dean a bit. Let his guard down a tad. At the end of the day - and Dean was not about to forget this - they were from opposite sides. Gaining the enemy’s trust might further whatever ends the Joker and his lot eventually came up with.

Besides… there had to be some entertainment value here.

“So what do you think about lawn bowling?”

That got him this wild-eyed stare that made him grin inside. Yeah, Dean’s life was going to be awfully dull now that he was out of the railroad, might as well find fun where he could.

“Let’s start by grabbing something a bit less illegal for breakfast and see where the morning takes us.”
Next Chapter: Angel vs. in-laws

“For humans and members of this so called resistance, you are both very direct.”

“It’s about my only quality. That and a muscular, well-toned ass.”

Chapter End Notes

That's set down the ground rules, now let's see how Dean and Cas (and the rest of Paradise) negotiate them. Comments/questions adored ^__^ Hopefully next chapter out next week, life's gone completely crazy but writing relaxes me.
Angel vs. In Laws

Chapter Notes

Fun thought that occurred to me while polishing this chapter: Paradise 342 is the anti-Freeport (for those who followed that fic). Wild West setting instead of Sci-fi, eternal leisure time rather than massively overworked citizens, and a gilded cage instead of ALL the freedoms. It also smells better. But in one point, they’re similar: everything’s free!

7 For the wedding of the Lamb has come, 
and his bride has made herself ready. 
8 Fine linen, bright and clean, 
was given her to wear. 
9 Then the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!”
Revelations 19:7-9

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The Winchester homestead was on the south of the city, near the communal gardens of their area and reasonably far from the Machine and its scintillating sparkles. Instead of heading north and west, as he usually did, Dean headed east towards Kiowa junction. It was still pretty early in the morning. The early birds would be out in the gardens or at their self-appointed tasks, the loafers would still be in bed, there were not many people in the streets.

Kiowa was set at the meeting of five roads, half an acre of open space. At the center was a large brick kiln which volunteers kept lit throughout the day to fire clay and ceramics. Two potter’s wheels stood nearby, alongside boxes of tools and cutters, moulds and pots of glazes. Over the years, other little craft stations had drifted into the junction so that people could whittle, knit, sew, glue and paint together, with benches and tables on which to share put-together meals while waiting for pots and dishes to fire. The gathering spot allowed folks to help each other out, share tips and recipes, food, materials… and an extremely high volume of chatter, gossip being the one sin and sport even the Host had never been able to regulate.

Jessup was there, as he usually was at this hour, throwing logs in the kiln as they arrived. He looked up vaguely, then did a double take, the log he’d been putting in clattering against the side of the firebox.

Dean passed by a few tables with a smattering of people sitting at the benches, breakfasting or starting little projects. Nobody he recognized, so he kept his gaze straight ahead, aiming himself at Maurice’s little chuckwagon. Maurice was absorbed in a book, sitting on his stool same as most days, dressed in well-pressed cream cotton shirt, bow tie, red floral brocade vest and trousers, his moustache neatly pomaded to clean points. Though he didn’t wear a hat or cap, Maurice was not one of the sheep, and certainly not one of the loafers either; he took pride in both his appearance and in preparing little snacks and treats for his neighbors who visited Kiowa.
“Hey, handsome-” Dean caught himself. Oops, damn, okay, surely the angel would not think that was flirting since Maurice was married and with a kid older than Dean, even if Maurice himself didn’t look it. “Uh, can we grab something to drink? Got any food to go with that?”

Maurice had looked up curiously from his page when he’d heard Dean’s greeting derail and end up in a ditch. He nearly dropped whatever it was he’d been reading when he saw Dean’s shadow.

“Uh... Dean. Hi.”

Yeah. Awkward. It wouldn’t be an issue if it was an angel from the garrison - no actually, in these circumstances it would still be bizarre, but at least those guys were familiar, most had been around for years, even decades. You knew how to talk to them, if they were the kind you talked to rather than dodge. To Dean’s recollection, P342 had never hosted a Seraph before. There weren’t many left, not much more than a baker’s dozen as far as the resistance could gage.

Maurice walked stiffly towards the little coal burner where he kept his water heated. The gunk in the teapot’s strainer was herbal tea, but his own blend concocted from secret ingredients he grew himself. It was still plant juice as far as Dean was concerned, but it was slightly less foul than other stuff like it. Dean very occasionally came out to Kiowa when he wanted a change of venue or to use the kiln, he and Maurice got along ordinarily.

Castiel refused - rather bluntly - the tea Maurice fumblingly offered; didn’t eat, didn’t drink either it seemed. Dean took his cup and a roasted tomato sandwich, thanked his fellow citizen and went to sit down on a three-legged stool at one of the long rectangular tables, at a distance from everyone. Without comment, Castiel fetched a nearby chair and sat opposite, an echo of the way they’d faced each other in the kitchen earlier. Dean looked down at the crudely varnished and much-scuffed surface, a fly meandering over a previous spill of tea. He shooed it away from his sandwich absentely, realizing how much he missed the Roadhouse already when it hadn’t been much more than twelve hours since he’d slipped out its back door. Forever now. Even without the ball and chain in tow, he could no longer afford to go there and risk bringing angelic attention their way.

They sat in silence. What had needed to be said, had been said in private. Dean didn’t have a clue how to start a conversation with the dude and no real desire either. He sipped his tea and ate as much of the sandwich as he could stomach, trying not to think about how long this state of affairs was going to last and how badly it was probably all going to end.

Dean would have gladly stayed in his dark study for the rest of the morning, but couldn’t help get distracted by the way the angel was examining their surroundings. Cas was looking around as if everything he saw was new and worthy of keen unblinking observation, from the kiln, to the stands, to the people finishing whatever they were doing at top speed to go elsewhere, to the stain on the table’s wood where some pigeon had taken aim. Right now he was examining the woman who’d come to chat with Jessup, a clay pot ready to fire when the kiln was hot enough in a few hours. The poor dame and Jessup were trying to carry on a normal conversation while visibly starting to shake under the unblinking scrutiny.

I’m married to an angel, Dean suddenly realized all over again. A freakin’ angel. Married to him. Jesus Christ.

For some reason it was here and now, with Maurice trying hard not to stare, and that poor dame hightailing out of the junction with her pot firmly clenched in her arms, that it was really sinking in. How much his life had just flipped over like a griddle cake last night, alienating him from everything and everyone he’d previously known.

It wasn’t just the Roadhouse, it was all of his friends he had to stay away from now. All of them,
pretty much, were railroad. At least he still had Sam... now in the line of fire because of him. And how would this affect his brother’s advocacy? Sam was supposed to be the thin paper line against angels and now he was family to one. Would this impact his work? Dean couldn’t bear to think of it, Sam’s vocation was everything to him. But at least he’d stand by Dean come what may, the big loyal lug. But his other family... He’d lost them. Jo. And Ellen. And above all, the person Dean was closest to right after Sam, the one who’d been there when John had not... what was the fucking angel staring at now? Was there a decree against blinking? What was so fascinating about Dean’s left shoulder?

A “Great morning, innit?” rang out behind Dean, clear as a bell, sending shock shooting up his spine like a spike.

Bobby put down a chair he’d hauled over and sat down like it was the most natural thing in the world. Then he stole the remains of Dean’s sandwich.

“Mmhyeah, Ellen’s are better,” he said after a bite and a thoughtful chew.

Dean licked his lips, eyes darting from Bobby to the angel. “Uhh...”

“Hi there. Thought I’d come over and say a few words. I’m Bobby Singer,” Bobby announced, tipping his pork pie a scant hair’s breadth in the direction of Dean’s brand new spouse.

“I know,” said the angel in a way Dean liked not one bit. Christ, he’d been in Sam’s thoughts.

“You okay, boy?” Bobby asked before taking a second bite from Dean’s sandwich. Though he was addressing Dean, his eyes were still fixed like two drills on Castiel.

“I’m fine, Bobby,” Dean said, fighting his voice to some semblance of normal. “Maybe you should, ah, be helping- you’re busy today, aren’t you?”

“Here in Paradise? I should be so lucky.” Bobby snorted. “Your brother came over this morning.”

“That’s right, Bobby’s a family friend,” Dean heard himself say, though what the hell was the point of obfuscation when the angel had to know-

“Don’t bother,” Bobby echoed Dean’s runaway train of thought. “Sam’s pretty sure this gent knows I’m head of the railroad in these here parts.”

Cas’s eyes widened a bit but nary any other expression crossed his face. Dean, speechless, stared at the angel, waiting for the hammer to drop, mind racing over anything he could say, do, promise to mitigate what was surely-

“Which means my head is trapped, same as Dean’s,” Bobby continued with the inevitable pace of a herd of buffalo moving across the Garden, getting to where they were going without hurry or concern for anything in their way. “And in case you were wonderin’? The both of us are out. I stepped down last night. The railroad cells outside our town have changed all the codes and pass-phrases and will no longer talk to us under any circumstances. The people I worked with have all been retired too. If you know anything about our operation, you’ll have guessed Dean and I are the only ones who have any real knowledge worth having anyway. The others don’t. I’m sure you guys can strongarm some names out of me if you try hard enough, but it won’t do you much good. Find a few of our ol’ operators, trawl through their minds n’ stick ’em in penance if you want to go the heavy handed route - though I’m thinkin’ your superiors told you to use a light touch right about now, what with the eyes of the world on you. Either way, it’s gone and done, Seraph. As of now, there’s nothing left to find that’ll lead you past our cell. The whole railroad in P342 is out to
pasture. For awhile. It’ll start again without us, and I hope it drives you all crazy, but you can’t use Dean or me to get back to them anymore, whatever you do. All you’ll get if you try to dig is jack with a great big kick up the rear end of squat.”

Bobby leaned back in his chair, tilted his chin up and gave the angel a long cool stare, as if the critter didn’t even deserve the effort of full-on antagonism.

There was a moment of silence in which Dean learned what it was like to have heart palpitations. It was not pleasant.

Then something amazing happened, the kind of amazing that’d almost require a puke of rainbow. Instead of smiting left, right, and center, those serious lines relaxed and good god, the angel smiled. It was a smile so faint a good stiff breeze would blow it away, but it was there.

“For humans and members of this so called resistance, you are both very direct.”

“It’s about my only quality,” said Dean, whose mouth hated letting in on how much the rest of him was still reeling. “That and a muscular, well-toned ass.”

That got him a Look from bobby.

“Was that what you had to say to me?” Castiel leaned back against the chair a little. Dean couldn’t tell how much this news inconvenienced him. He hadn’t really thought that Cas might use him - subtly, overtly or indeed any way - to track down the resistance or the railroad. He’d been relying on his trapped head, and on the protection of this marriage. He still wasn’t sure if Cas had been planning anything, he didn’t seem angry or disappointed, but Bobby had burned the bridge anyway.

“What I had to say?” Bobby was speaking almost to himself, his eyes turned inward. He was silent a spell, then he looked up

Bobby was kin, all up in the Winchester code same as the rest of them, gruff and reserved. Dean had never seen a look so raw, open and fierce on the man’s face.

“No, this is what I came to say. John Winchester died a passel of years ago and he wasn’t around much before that. I helped raise these boys. I never had any sons of my own, so if there are any I could be said to have, this knucklehead and his brother are it. You hurt them in any way and I will destroy you.”

“Bobby - Jesus fuck, don’t-”

“Language!” Bobby rapped out. “That I did not teach him, if you want to know,” he groused in the direction of the angel.

Language?! Bobby had just threatened a Seraph to his face!

Cas was still utterly unreadable. “I see,” he finally said as if he was actually taking that seriously, what the hell.

“Do you?” Bobby asked dryly

“You’re his family too.”

“Yeah, you could say that.”
“Which means you are also under my protection,” Castiel said slowly, as if this was code for something.

Bobby’s eyebrows shot up to the pork pie hat. “Don’t do me no favors,” he said sharply, then he shook his head. “If there’s someone you need to protect here, it’s the boys. This here mess is gonna get all kinds of bad attention from your side, and you know what’ll happen if they look at Dean too closely. You better be ready to stand up for him the way your Machine expects you to, the way it decreed when it tapped you for this. You do that and we can call ourselves square. Now.” He got to his feet and turned to Dean and said, as deliberately as one wrote a pledge of allegiance: “Me and Ellen will see you over for our usual Sunday do. All three of you. Don’t be late like the last two times, you know Ellen hates lettin’ her stuff overcook.”

What…?

Dean stared at him, trying to wrap his head around what that meant. Holy shit… Bobby would have had to quit being station master anyway, since the angel had snooped in Sam’s brain, that was acknowledged. But there was a difference between stepping back from the fight through no choice of his own, and accepting to break bread with an angel. A fucking ten miles of difference. Bobby wasn’t just inviting them to a Sunday sit-down and dinner. He was saying that he was damned to hell and back if he was going to cut Dean out of his life just because the idjit had gotten himself entangled with the enemy. The situation pitted principles against family, and Bobby and Ellen had chosen family.

Dean said, “Yeah, see you then,” in a voice he had to fight tooth and nail to keep casual, and from the way the angel stared at him, he wasn’t sure how successful he’d been. Then again the angel stared at him a lot - Dean was putting it down to a mild form of intimidation - so maybe it didn't signify.

Bobby tipped back his hat, slipped his hands in his waistcoat pockets and made his way out of the junction as if he didn’t have a care in the world. Dean wondered if he’d have balls of that consistency when he got to be ninety, assuming he made it that far.

Castiel didn’t watch Bobby leave, he was silent as he extended a finger and touched the picnic table almost absently. When Dean glanced down, the bird shit stain was gone.

“...What, you expected me to still go to the meetings n’all? Get runners out of dodge? ‘Here, this way, don’t mind that angel, ’s just the one I’m married to.’ Seriously? No, I’m no longer an operator. But they’ll find ways to send me instructions. And I’ll follow them. Have no doubt.” He said it firmly, but not brazenly. That would be too hypocritical. He could only be this open about it because Cas had promised not to threaten the family that he was now discovering rallying around Dean like the- the big-hearted dumbasses they all were.

Cas’s finger made another pass on the table. There seemed to be fewer scratches now. “It is my duty as your guardian and your spouse to stop you from doing something stupid,” he said very quietly.
Dean snorted. “Good luck with that.” Then he leaned to the left and looked over in the direction of the kiln. “Huh, now it’s your family’s turn.”

Cas glanced around, puzzled. Alfie was over there, looking like he had to talk to Cas and wishing he could be on the other side of the planet instead. He finally sidled up. A faint frown wrinkled Cas’s brow; Alfie’s presence did not seem to surprise him, but it was obviously not appreciated for all that.

“Hi, Alfie,” Dean said

“Hello, Dean,” Samandriel croaked.

Cas looked up at his fellow angel, then at Dean, then at Samandriel, then at Dean again as if he was just now figuring something out. “Alfie?” he finally asked.

“’s the name Rufus gave him when we first met him,” said Dean, because sometimes you had to be a dick to fight ‘em. “Poor Alfie here was getting all tangled up while giving us his name and his introduction, and Rufus walked away saying, ‘Tell the long piece of alfalfa grass over there to come get me when he’s figured out the Word.’ Alfie kinda stuck.”

There was not a hole big enough for Alfie to hide in right now, from the look on his face. He was making a good attempt to disappear into his dark frock coat and high collared shirt like a turtle Cas didn’t react with ridicule or reproach like many of the other chicken hawks would. He just seemed to absorb that information like a sponge. Then he looked up. “Do you like that name, Samandriel?” he asked gravely.

Alfie cleared his throat. “I- I don’t mind it, brother.”

“Hm,” was all that Cas said, though still without any hint of judgment. Dean felt surprised, and yet not surprised in that part of his gut which was starting to map out the edges of the strange foreign country that was Castiel. The guy was weird and upright, but he wasn’t an out and out puppy-kicking asshole. Which was probably not all that surprising if they were actually soulmates after all (this thought set up yet another chorus of “Jumping Jehoshaphat I am bloody married” through Dean’s skull.)

“Um, Castiel, I-“

“I know,” Cas said, face darkening as he interrupted Alfie mid-waffle. “Dean, I need to go. Zachariah wishes to talk to me.”

“Tell him I said hi,” Dean suggested pleasantly, and took a sip of his plant juice. Castiel ignored that. He must have been ignoring Zach too... Dean was well aware that angels could commune through the Machine or even directly across the ether, there’d been no need to send Alfie here unless Castiel was deliberately ignoring the local head honcho’s request to come see him. Dean filed that information away; it’d be the kind of thing the Joker would want to know.

“And there he goes,” Dean said, staring at the empty space where his spouse had been a second before. “The guy who stopped the sun...”

Alfie stiffened like a startled colt. “Oh no, he wouldn’t do that!”

Dean stared at him. “Pretty sure he did. I was there.”

“No! That’s- the Enemy did that! Put the entire west coast of this continent under water and- and...
slaughtered nine tenths of the population of Japan- it was horrible!"

“... What are we talking about?”

“Stopping the rotation of the earth has terrible consequences, Castiel would never do that. *He* did that. Not Castiel, I meant-“

“The devil, yeah, I know who you meant.”

The usual complex series of emotions unique to angels flitted across Alfie’s fair features, as it usually did when the subject came up. You’d think they’d be cock-a-hoop about their great victory over Satan, certainly better than anything they’d done ever since in Dean’s opinion, yet the subject seemed to make them sad. Then again, they’d lost a good half of the Host in a few short years of all-out war, including Rafael and Gabriel. Oh, and a ridiculously large number of humans, but *they* were okay, went on to their so-called Reward, so screw them. When the dust settled and Lucifer had been destroyed along with a good half of the planet, Mickey-boy was pretty much the only one left standing, though a persistent rumor in the resistance suggested he’d been badly injured in some way, and couldn’t leave Heaven anymore.

“So what happened last night?” Dean asked pointedly, moving on.

“Oh, that. Um.” Alfie spent fifteen seconds staring blankly at the table, making cupping motions with his hands and moving them around, muttering to himself.

“It’s complicated, but I suppose you could say that he unhooked us from time for awhile.”

“He... unhooked us...”

“Hmm-mm. As I said, the rotation of the earth didn’t stop, as that would be very bad, but for a while our Paradise was, um, stuck in a moment in time- but not the interior, right, and not the exterior either - it was - um - imagine we’re a bottle tied to a rope in a stream - and the stream is time and the earth turning - and just for awhile he let the rope get longer so we followed the stream- except that’s not quite right either. Its... complicated? I’m sorry.”

“Uh, that’s okay.”

...When Cas had ‘stopped the sun’, Dean had slapped ‘bible shit’ on that and walked away without thinking. This sounded more subtle and more complicated and a lot more *real*. Cas had casually stuck his finger in the celestial clockwork of the universe and dicked around just to give himself a better chance of nailing Dean’s ass to the wall.

“Neat party trick,” Dean said after clearing his throat to avoid any hint of tension showing up in his voice. “Could you do that?”

“Me?! No!” Alfie answered, wide eyed.

“Right.” Of course not. Still, that even a few angels could-

“I would never be given the authorization,” Alfie said and almost giggled at the ridiculousness of the notion before wandering off, leaving Dean feeling oddly chilled in the eternal sunshine.

Humans… were seriously fighting that?
Next Chapter: In Laws vs. Angels, Round two

“Don’t eat, don’t sleep, don’t screw. Yeah, you guys are just angels, aren’t you.”

“Yes.”
Angel vs In-laws, Round Two

Chapter Notes

The next few chapters are the honeymoon phase (as Dean would NOT call it) where Dean and Cas try to establish ground rules and a baseline domesticity. The chapters are series of vignettes voluntarily schizoid in tone, bouncing between the main protags’ POVs, and going from humorous to reflective to harsh and then back again. It’s deliberate, a reflection of the complicated situation both these guys are now stuck in together. Mazel tov, fellas :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They’ll work their gardens and eat fresh vegetables.
And I’ll plant them, plant them on their own land.
They’ll never again be uprooted from the land I’ve given them."
God, your God, says so.
Amos 9:13-15

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Castiel had lived some four and a half billion years to date. Most of those had been spent as a dematerialized collection of wavelengths and Grace, battling and patrolling along the edges of the higher spheres. He’d had several vessels as well, and spent a collective two or three centuries on earth at various epochs. He regretted some of the things he’d had to do, he would stand by others for as much eternity was allotted to him.

He’d never done this before.

He stared down at the ball in his hand and then up at the human- at Dean. The diameter of the latter’s toothy smile would give a Leviathan a run for its money right now. Castiel hesitated, but if this truly made the human happy... The parameters of his mission were hardly well defined, but keeping the partner of his union content was certainly a basic minimum.

“...I roll this ball towards that small one over there.”

“That’s the ticket!”

Humans were passionate about their sports. Castiel sighed internally and took aim.

“Shit! Uh, okay, maybe not so hard next time. You’re bowling, not shooting a cannon.” Dean watched the ball roll away, far away on the far side of the plaza where Castiel had tossed it.

“You said the ball was heavy.” Though to be honest, Castiel’s mind had been elsewhere.

“S’okay, we’ll get it later. At least you didn’t break a window. Or bean anybody. Not that there’s anybody around to bean,” Dean added dryly,
Yes, it was odd, he’d thought this Paradise dangerously overpopulated initially, but other than the man who’d made tea and a couple of humans sitting at the farthest table, pretending not to stare at him as they made a hash out of their knitting, there was no-one around. The kiln’s fire was burning out and nobody seemed keen to walk over and keep it fueled.

Dean aimed and let his shot roll across the turf that ornamented this side of Kiowa junction. “See, like that. You need to get it closer to the jack, the small ball. So, how’d it go with Zach? Have they figured out how the Machine went wrong and got us mixed up?”

“No. The Machine doesn’t make mistakes. Naomi and the others are still awaiting Revelation.”

“Oh. So what did Zach want?”

“Nothing.”

“...Right. Sorry I asked.”

Castiel looked at him searchingly.

The smile had hardened on Dean’s face, vanished from his eyes, but he seemed casual as he bent forward, picked up another ball nearby and tossed it from one hand to the other. “S’okay, I get it. I’m not about to tell you about last night’s railroad meeting either.”

Castiel frowned, rolling that around in his mind.

“If Zachariah had told me something I think a human should not know, I would say so,” he finally announced. “He had nothing to say.”

Dean stopped tossing the ball and examined Castiel’s expression. “...What, he just stared at you?”

Castiel rolled his shot towards the smaller ball - the jack. “His mouth moved. Words were said. The sum total was what I just told you. Nothing.”

Dean whistled loudly. Castiel hadn’t thought his barely adequate throw had warranted that kind of reaction. Reining in his inherent strength was making this harder than originally estimated.

“Guess that tells me who’s higher up the totem pole for sure.”

Castiel looked around. “What pole?”

Dean chuckled, he seemed to have relaxed again. He bent and took aim, but then stopped and straightened. Sam Winchester had come walking around a corner of one of the buildings surrounding the open area. When he saw them, he did a double take.

“Sammy! Come play! We’re having a blast!” Dean shouted. He threw his shot almost without looking (it nonetheless rolled over grass and nearly touched the jack.) “Yeah, you’re not going to beat that, angel. I win that round, so you get to pick up the balls.”

“Really?” Sam said as he came up to them. His voice was soft and his tone very flat.

The brothers stared at each other, Dean smiling in that wide way again and Sam glaring back.

“You are a sick and deranged individual,” Sam finally whispered.

Instead of getting offended, his brother snickered.
Castiel frowned as he went to pick up the balls. Dean wasn’t sick. Misguided, yes, but there was no signs of mental instability or illness at all, he would have noticed. Though this turnaround was odd, to say the least. After the words spoken this morning, the accusations Dean had thrown in his face, to suddenly decide to play games with him-

...A very faint thread of intuition stirred. Could Dean be somehow mocking him with this game? He didn’t see how, exactly, but it’d make more sense than the man having a sudden change of heart. If that was the case, fine. If this made Dean ever so slightly more comfortable with Castiel’s presence, let him have his fun and mockery, it wasn’t as if it would hurt anything.

Thirty feet behind him, he heard Dean say: “Sorry we kicked you out this morning. You land on your feet okay?”

“Me?” Sam sounded tired and tense. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine, why wouldn’t I be?”

“I can think of a few good reasons. Dean-...”

“Whoa, hey, it’s okay.”

Castiel looked back in time to see Sam’s face twist with stress. Dean gestured at Castiel to stay where he was.

“Hey, hey, it’s okay,” Dean repeated softly.

Oh, the brothers wanted privacy. Castiel turned around and walked away.

“Where’s he going?” Dean grumbled under his breath - still perfectly audible to celestial senses at this distance. “I swear, that bird is just plain weird. Says he’s never been in a Paradise garrison and I believe him. He’s like Zuriel concentrated, though a bit less sour. Look, he’s promised to keep you safe - real promise, not Word-shit promise-”

“Me?! Dean, what about you!”

“That’s the beauty of it, they can’t do anything to me without making a bull’s teat out of this union. Hell, Sam-“

“Dean, blasphemy!”

“Fuck blasphemy! I’m married to an angel! What can they do to me, huh? They toss me in penance, how’s that make their precious Seraph look?”

“That’s what you’re counting on?! Dean- what if- they could- there’s ways! For instance, what if they force you to reenlist! Did you think of that?!“

“It’d be hard not to think of that after what happened to mom,” said Dean in a voice as jagged and cutting as broken glass. Despite his best intentions to respect his spouse’s desire for privacy, Castiel’s steps slowed and his ears pricked. Their mother? He’d looked into Dean’s father, of course; it would be hard to miss the mark John Winchester had left in the records of this Paradise, or in Asmodel’s files. But since she’d been deceased for decades, he’d not checked the mother yet.

“But so what?” Dean added with a snort that denied the harshness of his previous words. “I survived back when it was a set of pig’s trotters with the chompers, you think the front will kill me now that it’s quiet?”
At the very far side of the plaza, their voices had now dropped to whispers that Castiel could force himself to ignore. Though occasionally the breeze shifted, and he caught a few words. Mainly reassurances, Dean explaining Castiel’s promise to keep Sam safe, and Dean as well by default.

Sam seemed very suspicious of that. How odd. Dean, the rebel, had believed him with little hesitation, while the advocate who was supposed to work with angels to help reconcile celestial law with human behavior seemed- oh, of course. That unfortunate episode with Uriel. Castiel’s hand tightened on one of the balls, absently scoring finger-shaped marks into the hard wood. Uriel’s error in judgment was costing them all. This was the time to gain the Winchesters’ trust, and Sam would have been the ideal mediator. It was his vocation. But now... Uriel had better show himself to be properly chastised.

Finally Dean clapped Sam on the shoulder, gave him a shake, then turned and waved Castiel forward.

“That’s enough excitement for now,” he announced when Castiel was a few feet away. “My brother’s hungry after we turned him out of the house like a dog this morning—”

“Dean,” Sam protested in a mutter, rolling his eyes.

“Drop the balls here, in this box, and let’s go rustle up some lunch.”

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The kitchen table had not gotten any bigger, but pulled out from the wall, it could sit three. Dean put down a pot of bean stew he’d reheated on the range and that’d been sitting in the larder for the past two days - 's what makes it good' Dean had informed him absently. Castiel had been aware that despite the munificence of the Machine, many humans still cooked. He was aware of this in the same way he was aware that ants built underground structures in their nests, knowing it without understanding a thing about their purpose.

Once the three of them were seated - Castiel on a stool that’d been taken from Sam’s study in the other room - there was a moment where the brothers looked at each other then at Castiel repeatedly, as if unsure how to proceed. Finally Sam coughed and held out his hands to both Dean and to Castiel. Dean did the same, with a faint huff.

“Uh...” Sam looked at the angel as if he was trying to ask him something.

“Just do it,” Dean muttered. His fingers barely touched Castiel’s, a tension there as if holding them steady was a matter of will.

“Heavenly father, thank you for the food you bring to our table, praise be, amen,” Sam said stiffly, eyes screwed shut. Then he opened one of them as if not entirely sure what would happen, though the brothers must have done this ritual several times a day for all their lives,

“Same as usual,” Dean grunted in the direction of the round loaf of unleavened bread that had appeared on the previously empty plate in the center of the table. A wooden bowl left on the kneading board before the prayer now contained a few apples and an orange.

If Castiel were gracefully flying along, minding his own business, and suddenly sprouted a third wing, the result would be similar to what happened next. Both brothers reached for the food with
what was obviously well-rehearsed coordination, Dean started to break the bread in two... but then paused in a shower of crumbs, fingers frozen in the act as he glanced uncertainly at Castiel. Sam fumbled his brother’s bowl he’d filled with stew, spilling some of it, and looked at the one set in front of the angel, ladle twitching in his fingers as if ready to either advance or retreat at a moment’s notice. The brothers kept their respective poses a few seconds and exchanged a look.

“You, uh, you told me you don’t eat. Right?” Dean asked.

Castiel shook his head.

The ladle promptly fled back to the neutral ground of the pot, dumping its scoop of stew as if afraid it had somehow offended with its silent offer. Then Sam must have recalled he hadn't served himself yet. He looked sour as he picked up the utensil again and started to dish out his own serving without looking in the angel’s direction.

Dean was still staring at Castiel pointedly. “…You don’t have to sit here if you don’t want to.”

“I don’t mind.”

Both brothers glanced at each other, then Dean shrugged, handed Sam half of the bread and dipped a section of his own portion in the bean dish.

The brothers washed their bowls after the repast, even though the machine would have rewritten them as clean in a day or so if left alone. Instead they had to heat water in a pan on the stove, and scrub out their bowls with a mixture of - Castiel glanced and analyzed - sodium bicarbonate and fine grained sand. The pot of beans, still half full, went back into the larder to cool once more. So complicated. Why not simply eat what was provided by Divine grace? It had been two centuries since humans had been adapted by the Machine to survive on a diet of fruit, vegetables and enriched bread, they didn’t need beans or anything else to stay healthy.

“So...” Dean glanced around the kitchen, scowling. “I’m... gonna go take a short nap. ‘m tired for some reason.”

Castiel looked up from the streaks of water - visible to his eyes - where Dean had sponged off the spilled stew and crumbs. “When I healed you last night, the regeneration of your flesh will have used up a portion of your stamina.”

Sam stiffened and nearly dropped the bowls he had dried and was putting away in the corner cupboard. “Healed?”

“That’d be why,” Dean said quickly and casually without looking in his brother’s direction.

Castiel got to his feet. “I can assist with that if you wish-”

Dean backed away so abruptly he almost ended up against the hot range, hands held out. “All good, I’ll go take a nap. Uh, Sam?”

“I have work to do,” Sam said stiffly. “I was delayed in some of my tasks yesterday.”

“Right. Uh...” Dean scratched his head. “Cas, you play checkers?”

“I know the game.”

“‘kay, well that’s the rest of the afternoon settled then. Great.” Dean’s shoulders slumped. More than mere fatigue, he’d lost some of the vitality that’d run through him up until now. Sam gave
Castiel a hot angry look as if this was also somehow his fault.

The afternoon was quiet as promised. Sam had some papers and letters to read. Castiel took the opportunity to borrow his copy of the New Talmud and read it curiously, sitting at the kitchen table, a casual ear out for movement upstairs.

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While the brothers finished a desultory game of checkers, evening started to gather outside the window. Dean made a crack about it being mighty kind of Castiel to let that happen on schedule. Both Winchesters retired early to bed.

Dean stretched, undid the top three of his shirt buttons - and froze when he noticed that Castiel had appeared on the couch.

“Uh… you sleeping there?”

“I don’t sleep.”

“Don’t eat, don’t sleep, don’t screw. Yeah, you guys are just angels, aren’t you.”

“Yes.”

“Huh uh. So what are you going to do there all night?”

“Sit.”

“And?”

Castiel looked at him, not knowing what more Dean wanted to hear.

Dean’s expression changed abruptly, eyes widening and that tight muscle in his jaw releasing a notch. “When I said you were gonna spend our honey- er, that you had to- to sit on the couch, I didn’t actually mean that you had to stay right there. You can go somewhere else if you want.”

Castiel looked around the room. It wasn’t that large and there was nowhere else to sit. A room off to one side, which would have been a nursery at one time, had a long table covered in a dust cloth and a chair, but he wouldn’t have a very good view of the bedroom. He could stand of course, but that would perhaps make him loom, which was not going to get the human to relax around him.

“I’m fine here.”

“Dude, how do you expect me to sleep with you staring at me?”

“You slept last night.”

“I was tuckered out, I’d have slept on a hornet’s nest. Tonight’s not the same. Don’t you have anything to do?”

“No.”

“Go sit somewhere else,” Dean ordered tersely, his hand grasping the top of his opened shirt so that his collar bit into his neck a little.
Castiel reflected. “I will be downstairs in the kitchen, then.”

Dean seemed to debate that, then shrugged. “Okay. You know, feel free to leave the house if you got something better to do.”

“Not at present.”

Dean didn’t move and waited for Castiel to fly away.

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Seated at the kitchen table, Castiel communed with the Machine and sought Revelation. It failed to come. A few hours hadn’t illuminated Heaven as to what was going on with the Machine or this unheard of union. Castiel was not surprised. He’d had a few minutes to talk to Balthazar after his uninformative meeting with Zachariah, and as his brother had put it, everyone in the hierarchy was ‘in a complete flap’. The Word and other departments were on the case, but it would take weeks, months, perhaps even years before the Machine’s directives and decrees could be decoded down to the finer details of this particular occurrence; it was exceedingly difficult to unravel the Machine’s complex set of operational functions that expressed the Will of their Father, as it should be. It was not theirs to question, after all (though a little more guidance would be appreciated- Castiel caught himself sternly.)

The only new message since this morning was an offer from Naomi to bring ‘his human’ to P102 so she could study this phenomenon. Castiel filed that suggestion away under ‘certainly, right after the next apocalypse.’ Under no circumstances would he be bringing Dean anywhere near Naomi unless directly ordered to, and it shouldn’t come to that.

Alone in the dark room, watching the embers in the oven slowly cool and a spider tiptoe across the ceiling, Castiel pondered.

Other angels would have been completely overwhelmed by this situation. Given a duty but no indication on what it entailed, no directives, no rules, no orders to follow- they’d have been useless. Castiel was out of his depth too, but as a Seraph he’d been given basic orders before and expected to come up with solutions without a lot of hand holding. In return, he did have a lot of authority over said mission. This was why he’d made that promise to Dean. Since the God Machine had given him this duty, it was his call and his alone on how it was to be carried out, and as far as Castiel was concerned, that did not involve harming innocents - or people who had declared they were giving up their involvement in the resistance and were thus no longer a danger.

The spider had spun its web in a corner, silent and dainty. Castiel watched it curl up in a corner and wait for the early morning breeze to arrive in a few hours, bearing seeds and pollen for it to eat (after carefully releasing any flies that might have meandered into its lair by accident).

Without any other instructions, he would have to draw his own conclusions. Or at the very least, fall back on what was known. The purpose of a union was to make humans happy, stabilize their society-

Dean’s vicious words last night - babies and leverage - flashed through his mind and he shook his head sadly.

Making Dean Winchester content seemed an odd reason to wrench Castiel out of the skies and pin
him to the ground, but... it was perhaps no coincidence that Dean’s unhappiness had pushed him to
the resistance. A rebel, yet also someone who could be honest and open to dialog. More than that;
the fact that the machine had matched them meant that they should be able to create an
understanding that few other angels and humans had elaborated. Castiel couldn’t begin to conceive
of this actually happening, since so far Dean was a puzzle wrapped in annoyance and finished off
with a prickly ribbon of past grievances, anger and stubbornness. But the God Machine knew best.

So that meant Castiel was the key to open this human up (somehow.) Get to know Dean, learn to
communicate, help him see the rationale behind the system and accept it. Not only would Dean be
a vastly happier individual then, he would be more amenable to voluntarily helping the Host. He
would not betray his former organization; Castiel didn’t understand humans much, but for some
reason he knew right out of the box that Dean betraying his friends and his cause was never going
to happen. Not if their marriage lasted hundreds or thousands of years. But...

Like the web in the corner, a sparkling mental picture wove itself before his eyes. The man who’d
very nearly outsmarted him - him, a Seraph purposely hunting him - who’d shown brains, grit, but
also a strange kind of honesty, discipline and honor, and a deep love for his brother, a man whose
soul shone bright, true and strong despite his transgressions... that man, helping the angels finally
understand how the railroad worked and how humans could be so mistaken as to think rebellion
was a good idea in the first place. He could help them improve their communication with these
stubborn human elements, think on their level... Once he realized how much damage his precious
resistance caused, perhaps he might eventually help the Host plug up the holes in their defences,
dismantle the railroad the passive way, the non-confrontational way, and forbid it from ever
sprouting up again. Yes, that would be a good reason to ground one of the few remaining Seraphs.
This... this could be the key to everything. This could be-...-

Castiel reined himself in. It sounded nice, bar a few big IFs, but he did not know for sure that was
what the Machine wanted. If it was, then glory be. If not, then he still had the basics of his mission.
Somehow get along with the human - the hostile, puzzling and occasionally annoying human - and
at least get this union to work.

Castiel tipped his head up to stare at the spot where Dean was sleeping overhead, then he glanced
towards the center of town where the Machine shone bright and golden, warm and kind.

“I accept,” he said to the silence and the spider. Though I would have preferred a posting on the
front line fighting Leviathan with my bare hands, added a small part of Castiel with a faint sigh of
resignation.

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Maybe Dean was dead.

Yeah, that would actually make a sort of sense. He was dead. Deceased. Passed away. The
proverbial doornail.

Dean leaned against the broom’s handle and watched Castiel carefully carry away the spider that
Dean had been aiming at. The angel hadn’t simply tossed the varmint outside, no, he’d carried it
over to the shed and put it on the eaves. Now he was staring at it unblinkingly until its tiny brain
learned the Word.
It was firmly believed and accepted by most operators that the mojo allowing key personnel to trap their own brains was tantamount to corrupting one’s soul - that was certainly the rumor Naomi’s lot tried to spread - and dying in these conditions would result in either final annihilation or limbo, nobody knew for sure. Dean had been rooting for the former, but it’d make sense if that blasted angel had killed him by that well the other night, and this was some neither-here-nor-there, neither-happy-nor-painful personal non-heaven he was now stuck in for the rest of eternity, with the illusion of a weird coot currently instructing a spider to stay out of doors from now on.

He just couldn’t reconcile the - the force of nature that’d stopped the sun, lifted him one-handed out of that well, razed the colony in Libertad, murdered scores of Leviathans, bossed every angel around including Zach... with this guy. A suspicious part of his brain wondered if this wasn’t some clever plan, but every other part of Dean jeered that part down, because if this was deliberate, well, it was just too weird a way to go about it, whatever the plan ultimately was. Plus, his gut, which he trusted, told him Cas might be a killer and a humorless hardass and as dumb as a sack of hammers when it came to understanding humans and their point of view, but he didn't have a weaselly bone in his body. It was pretty much his only charm.

...Still no news from the resistance. It’d only been a day, so that made sense. He had no clue what they would make of this. What they would now make of him... Somehow this had to be an amazing opportunity, but maybe even the Joker and the other blackbirds might struggle with how best to use it.

Dean sighed and swept away the cobweb, then went about finding other things to do now that his main occupation up until now, the railroad, was no longer accessible.

---

It was early morning on Saturday - two days of Dean being a married man, not that that was any less weird. The day was going to be hot, the morning was already quite warm. Dean had hung his jacket and shirt on a fencepost. The usual coterie of ladies and gents who liked to garden were conspicuous by their absence, so he wasn’t going to shock nobody. They’d better get used to it anyway; Dean stripped down to basics when he got too hot, never mind the decrees on decency… and though he wouldn't admit it, he liked to feel the gentle touch of growing plants on the skin of his arms as he reached among the rows.

This, tending the Winchester’s designated plot and helping out the neighbors with their own, was going to become something of a daily habit. One more little piece of make-do work that would stop Dean going out of his mind, and also put something tasty on the table for the two of the house’s inhabitants that did like to eat.

Cas was helping out, naturally. In the past two days, Dean had been unable to shake him except for the daily ten minutes of Zachariah summoning Castiel to his office to say ‘nothing’ (Dean could have been suspicious and assumed the angel was lying about that, but measuring Cas’s sour look when he came back, and from what he knew of that pretentious windbag Zach, Dean was ready to bet that Cas was being honest.)

“At least take off the coat, man,” Dean grumbled. “I’m getting heat stroke just looking at you.”

Castiel considered that the same way he usually did, as if Dean was speaking a foreign language he had to translate in his head before he responded. Then he slipped off his coat and laid it flat on the
“Wait, you’ll get your trousers all dirty.” Dean sighed. “You want to go home and change? I got some spares.”

Cas ignored that and went on with the work Dean had charged him with. There was already loam on the knees of his pants. Oh well, muddy up the angel, no harm there.

Dean wondered why he was dressed like that: a city slicker suit, cravat and all, under a caballero duster. Weird mix. Like an scrivener who’d picked up a herder’s outerwear by mistake. Was that what the poor sap, Novak, had been wearing when the angel chased him out of his meatsuit? That... was ten kinds of creepy. Dean didn’t ask, though. Other than that frank discussion their first morning, he and Cas had not really brought up any loaded topics. Dean didn’t like this feeling he was skirting a whole bunch of difficult subjects, he was a naturally combative get-to-grips kind of guy, but this whole situation just felt too... new, too strange.

Cas straightened up from the tomato plant he’d been instructed to check for aphids. Dean saw him stare at the far corner of the communal garden area.

“S’up?”

“...I make the humans here nervous.”

Dean glanced around to see why he’d say that - then realized that the very absence of anyone here was kinda to the point, though he didn’t think Cas would catch that.

“A couple of humans were heading here and turned around when they saw me,” Cas explained.

Dean looked at the far corner (pointlessly) “Oh.”

“Martin McGuffey and Asa Clearwater.”

Dean stiffened. “How do you know that?”

Cas glanced at him. “I’ve memorized faces and names.”

“R-right.” Probably had the whole town under that messy head of hair. “Look, Marty and Asa, they’re good people, okay? They’re not- I mean, they’re just- they’re not like me.”

That earned him a frown of incomprehension that then cleared. “You mean they’re not railroad operators.”

Dean found himself glancing around - though there were no humans at fifty paces, and no angels either except for the one who’d just trotted that out in broad daylight, Jesus. “Yeah, they’re just regular folk.”

There was a moment of tense silence - tense on Dean’s side, all Cas did was turn back to his tomatoes after one last glance at the corner with those - those hooded eyes that always looked just a touch sad, weary. But they’d crinkled a little at the corner when he’d smiled yesterday, after Bobby had served him up the Word, human style, and Cas had approved of it as being ‘very direct’ instead of blowing up Kiowa junction.

For some reason that memory had Dean opening his mouth without thinking it through in the slightest.
“It’s not that they’re afraid of you.” Oh, great, that made it worse since Cas hadn’t gone much further than the word ‘nervous’. Dean cleared his throat. “Keep in mind, you did kind of stop the sun and turn the town upside down.”

“My intervention was extremely benign,” Cas said a little reprovingly.

“I meant our, you know, us. Our marriage. People here, a lot of them don’t adapt to change all that well. Every day the same for a hundred years - they forget how to be flexible, how to cope with weird crap. Having something this bizarre happen in their backyard, well... they’re kinda scared Michael himself will come down to pound on our doors for answers.” Dean ripped out a weed and tossed it on the pile.

“He won’t.”

“Yeah, but they don’t know that. Besides, it’s... honestly, when it comes to Marty and Asa and most of the others, I don’t think you make them all that nervous really, it’s more that they’re born and bred to be neighborly in these here parts, and nobody has a fu- freaking clue what to say to you other than ‘Hi, nice weather we’re having’.”

“The weather is always good.”

“Which is why it’s a conversation killer.” Dean rubbed the back of his neck. Sweat trickled down from beneath the soft straw farmer’s hat that’d replaced his beloved cavalry one, which had disappeared down the well never to be seen again when Cas had grabbed him. “Look, if it bugs you, this afternoon we can go order some wood n’ stuff from the Machine, hopefully some oak if I can swing it with Sam’s accumulated merit. On our way back we can visit the northeast corner of town, near the garrison. That’s where all the bible wavin’ crowd lives. Trust me, you’ll be mobbed.”

“That doesn’t sound better,” Cas said after a moment of somber reflection.

“Wouldn’t be my choice, but hey, if you want to get to know humans other than me and Sam, and getting threats from Bobby, that’d be the place to go.”

“... We can stay here. Eventually your neighbors will get used to me.”

“Hm.” …’Eventually’. Dean was taking it one day at a time - sometimes one hour at a time - in an attempt to keep his bearings and sanity. ‘Eventually’ was a word too hard to cope with, and he glanced around for a diversion. The blue sky prompted a question.

“Say, Cas, what’s a storm like?”

The angel looked up from his leaf. “A storm?”

“Yeah. You’ve seen them before?”

“Yes.” The way his lips folded together briefly suggested a memory that was not altogether pleasant.

“What is lightning like?”

“It’s an electrostatic discharge. I... cannot really describe it beyond that.”

“Is it big?”
“...It’s... not really. It’s a current. But to human perception, it might seem like it spans the sky for a brief instant.”

Dean’s eyes widened. “I just can’t imagine it. So it’s bright?”

“Yes. It can temporarily blind up close.”

“Blind? So it’s like a guy getting smited?”

“Smote. If you get struck? Yes, somewhat, though some people survive.”

Dean stared at the trees at the edge of the gardens under the perpetually blue sky, but he didn’t see them. He was seeing charnel fires. Angels striding among the ranks of the Croatoans, luminous and terrible, killing the ravening demon-infected creatures with a touch, leaving only husks of what were once men, women and children. For his sins, Dean had been part of the human reinforcements to assist the Host. That first three months on the front lines, before he’d made rank, he’d mainly helped burn the bodies.

“What a world I live in. I know the smell of a man’s charred eyeballs, and not what a lightning storm looks like...”

The morning was no longer warm. A breeze wafted by and left Dean almost off balance when it didn’t carry the reek of burnt flesh and sulfur, or that weird mossy-swamp smell of Leviathans, or that odd tang that permeated the air when one of the angels on the front lines scythed into the enemy, and a flash of shadowy wings and bright light rent the air.

“... I kinda fudged the truth earlier. They are scared of you.”

“I know,” said Cas simply.

The rest of the morning was spent in silence.

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Tending the gardens had been a new and interesting experience. Castiel had never had the chance to sink his hands into loam before, trace the intricate veins on the underside of a leaf, or watch a tiny life sprout from the dirt. He’d spent a full half hour observing bumblebees work their way through a row of potato flowers and dance their success back to their hive. Dean had given him odd looks, but let him be. Castiel had still done his share of work by carrying full buckets of water from the pump to their destination with less effort than humans would need to employ.

Dean had cleaned himself up at the pump, swilling off dirt and sweat before pulling on his shirt and jacket again. He’d looked both startled and a little miffed when he turned around and found Castiel once more pristine in his suit and duster. Castiel had belatedly suggested he do a similar cleanup for his human spouse next time and Dean had given him the same look as when Castiel had offered to restore his stamina, throwing up his hands while backing away and saying not to bother.

After lunch, they made a trip to the garrison. Castiel went to talk to Balthazar. Dean went to the warehouse where people could ask the angel in charge to make a request to the Machine for anything they might wish and that did not come as naturally as food, or replacing something
On their return, Dean went back upstairs but not to nap. He drew the dust cloth away from the table in the adjoining room, revealing small boxes of metal pieces, tiny nuts and bolts, springs, wires and some half assembled mechanisms.

“It’s a hobbyhorse,” Dean said in explanation. “Something I picked up from Dad. He learned it from Grandpa Henry, who made the clock downstairs.”

Castiel nodded. He was standing by the wall near the window. Something had happened this morning while they were gardening, Dean seemed uneasy with having him too close again. This was a neutral distance, the angel judged.

Dean picked up one of the pieces on the table, examined it, put it down. He seemed distracted, and he was glancing sideways at Castiel every few seconds.

“Am I bothering you?”

The question seemed to intrigue Dean. “I dunno. Aren’t you bored though?”

“Bored of what?”

“Standing around, staring? Or sitting around all night?”

Castiel tilted his head, weighing that in surprise. “After only two days? Maybe if I didn’t do anything for a thousand more years, I might be, but I usually find something to do or think about before that happens. We handle time differently than you do,” he added as explanation when Dean shot him a startled look.

“Good for you,” said Dean a little sourly, looking back at his mechanisms.

Yes, that was a problem. Angels were created to handle eternity, humans were not. Yet the Plan had them immortal, death vanquished. The angels tried to find them things to do to fill their paradisiacal leisure; games, entertainment, art and such.

“This looks interesting,” said Castiel encouragingly - and also because it did look intriguing. “May I observe?”

“Er, sure.” Dean didn’t tense when Castiel came up closer, to stand at a two foot distance. But he still seemed discontent as he returned the mechanism he was holding to its box. “Not that I can work on them that much, not without breaking a decree.”

“Decree?” Castiel looked up from the little assemblies of springs, gears and cogs - like tiny Machines, intriguing and oddly charming in their unexplained complexity. “Why would this violate a decree?”

“That’s what I was told.”

”...Who said that? Did they say which decree?”

“Uh, Jonah a couple years ago, after he got here. Also Afiel, the guy who was here before Zach - he told my dad to quit it. Long time now, before I was born.”

Somebody told John Winchester to stop making harmless little pieces of clockwork assemblies and... what exactly? Go and have fun in the resistance? Afiel... oh, fallen on the front lines over
 twenty years ago. May their Father take him to his eternal rest, however bad his judgment in handling humans had apparently been.

Dean scratched his forehead with a very small screwdriver, looking puzzled. “Now that I think about it, Jonah didn’t say why he wanted me to quit it. Just snipped in passing when I was working on this lil’ guy here in the yard one day, then sent me a sharp note via the Machine the next morning. I just thought it was because we’re not supposed to change stuff. You know.”

He probably should... but Castiel was not entirely versed in the all the finesses of the Word, and his expression must have said as much.

“You know. We’re not supposed to invent or improve stuff because that’d imply there’s things to improve, and everything around here is perfect. So I can’t invent a better cuckoo clock, that’d put the entirety of salvation in jeopardy - forget about learning how to- to build trains, or those velo-cycle things, or an automated water pump. Never mind. We got more time on our hands than we know what to do with, so why bother making a springwork that saves someone labor down the line.” Dean snorted.

This put Castiel in an awkward position. Dean was already deeply discontented with the system. Did this call for honesty or should Castiel present a united front with Jonah?

Recalling their talk Friday morning, he went with honest. “I think Jonah’s interpretation of the decrees might have been a bit over stringent,” he said, to compromise. “Improving Henry’s clock won’t put anything at risk. If you’re still concerned, I can ask the Machine specifically about it,” he added. “But only if you’re really worried. I wouldn’t be.”

The look of surprise that got him, and the faint release of tension in Dean’s shoulders, hopefully meant he’d chosen the right approach.

“Eh, don’t bother, I had the feeling he was just being a di-... he was being a bit stroppy.” Dean cast around, then took out another small piece from one of the wooden boxes. “Here, this is something I was fiddling with. See? Wind up the spring and this little piece turns. You can make toys with this. I was making it for-... for someone who moved away. She had a nephew. He’s all but grown up now. I should work on it again, now I’ve got the time, I’m sure some other lil’ guy would love it. I hear that kids in the big cities had all kinds of these wind-up toys before the Big A.”

“I wouldn’t know, I wasn’t walking the Earth back then. I know humanity made amazing progress in many fields in a very short time.”

“Yup.”

Dean was bent over the piece, but his screwdriver was idly tapping the table. He was watching Castiel out of the corner of his eyes again. Castiel wondered if he should move back to the window. He’d rather hoped to see Dean work on the small mechanism up close. What even was a wind-up toy?

“You, uh, pray or- or talk to the machine every night?”

“Yes.”

“Oh. Uh. Got all kinds of information in that sparkly ball up there. Right?”

“The Machine is only one entity, the ultimate manifestation of my Father to take His place among you as decreed by the-.”
“Yeah yeah yeah, I know the Word. So, uh, that thing knows everything about our lives. Human lives.”

“Angels too,” Castiel added automatically, then he frowned inside. He hoped Dean wasn’t going to try to winkle information out of him. He wasn’t trying to trip up Dean into revealing anything about the railroad, out of respect for the truce they’d established.

“So you could probably find someone who left-...” Dean stared blankly at the toy’s bare heart. Tap tap tap went the screwdriver. “You know what? Never mind.”

Castiel turned his attention back to the mechanism, following with his eyes the whorls of the spring and the sprockets. Dean seemed to drag his thoughts back from a very long distance. Castiel wondered briefly who that conversation had been about, but since Dean had told him to not mind, it must not have been important.

“This is all but done, but for some reason it keeps slipping this gear here. I can’t figure out why. Gonna take it apart and see if it’s just loose somewhere, and if not, I gotta punch a new gear out of this tin sheet here- huh, you can help with that, you can probably do it cleaner than I can any day. I-” he turned towards the door into the bedroom at the sound of feet climbing the stairs.

“Dean-” Sam interrupted himself as he caught sight of Castiel, that faint hostility still there. “That was Zuriel at the door. Some wood came in from the Machine for you?”

“Already? That was fast. I was expecting to have to wait a few days.” Dean’s gaze leaped to Castiel then away again. “Did she do me a favor and drop it off?”

“Does she ever? Did you want to go pick it up today? I can probably go in a few hours, I just need to finish this procedural document first.”

“I can go now, Cas here can help.”

“Sounded like there’s a lot, you two can’t carry-... oh, never mind.”

“Yup, he’s handy to have around at times,” said Dean with that same large brassy smile that Castiel now suspected meant that this was some form of comical overstatement.

The very small feeling of detente between them had frittered away, but Castiel had hopes - had faith - that one day he’d be able to establish a true long term rapport with both Winchesters. It was surely just a matter of time. If he continued to act calmly and reasonably, as humans always preferred their interactions to be, surely both brothers would unbend in short order.

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Next Chapter: Angel vs. In Laws, The Tie Breaker

Sam’s letter sagged over his fingers, unnoticed. “You... you’re joking...You’re not joking.”

Castiel didn’t answer that. It had to be painfully obvious that human humor was as foreign to him as their customs.
Keen-eyed readers will note that humans refer to Zuriel as 'she' rather than the preferred 'he'. Their society for the most part has barely evolved since 1836, talk of gender identity would merely be met with puzzled looks. Zuriel himself doesn’t care enough about humans and their opinion to correct them. If he did, then I’m sad to say that Dean and even Sam would then take a perverse pleasure in calling him ‘she’ anyway, because an opportunity to piss off an angel should never be passed by.

By contrast, gay marriage is perfectly and anachronistically accepted, but we’ll see that this is due to angelic meddling at some levels in a future chapter.
Angel vs. In Laws, Tie Breaker

Chapter Notes

Trigger warning (tags added): Mentions of past depression and suicidal thoughts. Also, keep in mind, Cas hasn't seen the light yet, so he's still convinced the angels are in the right even when they are, oh boy, so very, very not... The switchback in tones continue to amplify, and will continue to do so in the next chapter as well until that holy levy begins to break.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.”
- Isaiah 11:7 (Prophecies of ‘The Millenium’)

On Sunday, Dean started building a bigger table in the workshed out back. He could have just gone to the Machine and put in a request for one, he had to do so for the lumber anyway. Castiel was perhaps not very surprised that Dean would choose to build it himself. As he watched Dean carve planks into shape, Castiel wondered what lay behind this construction project; did the brothers feel uncomfortable sitting close to him during meals at the small table? Or was it a symbolical acceptance of the enlargement of their family?

...When had he become so desperate to understand humans that he was searching for meaning in their choice of furniture? He felt like some ancient augur looking desperately for guidance in the flight of birds.

Dean looked happy at getting something to work on, he liked using his hands as well as his brain. Castiel watched for awhile, but the lathe, run with a foot pedal, was noisy and forbade conversation. Dean seemed to have forgotten he was even there, which Castiel couldn’t decide was a good thing or not. Not wanting to bother his spouse with a question he had, he went in search of Sam.

While Dean was merrily violating the decree against working on the Sabbath (Castiel had decided not to make a deal about it) Sam was reading letters with his quill and ink conscientiously put away.

“Sam, do I need-” Castiel paused, tilting his head curiously.

The warmth in the parlor/study was a little oppressive. Sam had undone his cravat and loosened the shirt and vest he’d worn to temple that morning. The open collar revealed a black mark that was familiar but out of place on the skin of an advocate.

Sam, waiting for him to finish his question, followed his gaze with a frown. He pulled his shirt closed and did up a couple of buttons.
“I got it for Dean,” he said.

Castiel shelved his hurried re-review of Sam Winchester’s life, trying to figure out how he’d missed that the man had been a soldier.

“How does having an anti-possession tattoo help Dean?” he asked instead, thoroughly puzzled.

“It was when he got his own. Before being shipped off to the front lines. We got them together.”

He said it like it was supposed to explain everything. Castiel was going to have to point out that it did not.

Sam sighed heavily. “A gesture of solidarity. I didn’t want him to... I didn’t want him to go, but after the trouble he got into, it was either that or he’d be shipped to the other side of the world forever as punishment. Knowing Dean, he’d never work his way up the merit ladder to come back, and I knew the garrison wouldn’t tell me where he was in a million years - actually Uriel would have, just to get rid of me, but he wasn’t stationed here at the time. Going off to serve, he knew he’d be allowed to come back here with a clean slate afterwards.”

You and your stupid rules are at fault here, seemed to be what he was saying. Castiel frowned. He’d only known Dean a few days, Sam undoubtedly knew his brother better. But remembering that hectic chase through the streets of Paradise, the fierce fearless skill he’d displayed fighting Castiel hand to hand, and the way the man acted even now, Castiel found himself thinking that Dean being Dean was the reason he’d opted to go to war rather than do penance, or behave, or follow a modicum of good behavior until he was allowed to return. But that really wasn’t his place to say. Neither was it his place to question some of the knowledge he’d gleaned from Sam’s mind: that back then, the two young men had not gotten along well at all. Sam had been in near constant conflict with his father when the latter was there. And though he loved and respected the brother who had raised him in his parents’ absence, Sam had fought with him as well every time Dean had defended their father’s memory or acted like him. Yet there it was, as clear as black lines on pale skin. Solidarity. Whatever the past, whatever the difficulties between them, the lack of communication at times, what was done to one Winchester was also done to the other.

“What did you want?” Sam asked, picking up his next letter a bit pointedly.

Castiel sighed internally. Time. It would take time to strike up a truce with either Winchester.

“I’m not familiar with human customs.”

“We noticed,” Sam commented. “What did you want to know about?”

“Do I need to bring a gift to dinner? Are there any rules I should be aware of?” Humans had this thing, etiquette. It changed every few years as far as Castiel could tell. Last time he’d run into it was over a dozen centuries ago in a small village near Damascus, back when eating with ones fingers from a common dish was expected and polite (and indeed the only option.)

“Dinner? What dinner? We’re eating here, aren’t we?”

“No, Robert Singer invited the three of us to eat with him today.”

Sam’s letter sagged over his fingers, unnoticed. “You... you’re joking... You’re not joking.”

Castiel didn’t answer that. It had to be painfully obvious that human humor was as foreign to him as their customs.
Sam stared at him for twenty whole seconds, then he looked away, towards the window. “That was a big gesture on his part.”

“I thought you and Dean ate at his house every Sunday.”

“Yeah, yeah we do, but it never even occurred to me that—... he actually said that? Bobby?”

“Yes.”

“You absolutely sure you were included?”

“Yes.”

“...never thought I’d see the day he invited one of you into his home.”

“Because he worked with the railroad?”

“No idea what you mean by that,” said Sam acidly, “and no, because of—... because of something that happened a while back.”

“Because of Karen Walker?”

Sam hurled down his letter and stood up. “Here’s a tip, forget flowers, forget even being polite. You want to bring Bobby a gift? How about not bringing up Karen.”

Castiel nodded, but Sam had turned away and was staring out the window, peering through the lace.

“You know what happened, I suppose.”

“Yes.” Castiel had read the file as soon as Robert Singer had come to his attention.

“...I have to ask. Does any part of you, even the smallest fraction, feel just a bit guilty?”

“I was not responsible for her death.”

“Not you specifically - thank Heaven. But doesn’t it bother you? How she died? You say you’re our guardian. You keep harping on about it. You and all the angels and your—... and the God Machine whose decision was the root cause of it all.”

His words were a hard jab, maybe he didn’t expect an answer. Castiel considered it carefully nonetheless.

“It’s true that the pronouncements of the Machine can be difficult to accept at times, but accept them we must,” he said slowly. That pretty much encapsulated his presence here and current circumstances. It’d be nice if Sam Winchester could remember that one of the Machine’s decisions meant he currently had a living brother, even if Dean now came complete with an angel. “The Garden is sacred. God lives here among you. This is a place of peace and harmony—“

Sam made a noise that was rather unpleasant. He was still staring out the window.

“We can no longer allow humans to run rampant and procreate without restriction. Karen was blessed with finding her match, her soulmate. They lived for decades in peace and comfort—“

“She wanted kids, Cas. She just wanted kids.” Sam leaned his head against the fist he’d planted on the window, pressing the lace against the pane.
Castiel looked at him curiously. “You are very upset by this. I agree it was unfortunate—“

"Weeping saints..."

“But you did not know Karen yourself. She died before you were born. I don’t see why this affects you so much.” Because he’d seen this in Sam’s mind during his search through the advocate’s memories, even though he’d been concentrating on something quite different.

“Yeah. She died because all her life she wanted to be a mom. The Machine said, hey, guess what, you’re not one of the lucky few chosen to have children, and there’s no appeal. Tough! And then my mom—.... my mom who had already had Dean and who was—. You’re right, I never knew Karen, and Dean was too young to remember her, but I know her through Bobby and Ellen and others, and she would have made a great mom. And instead, who gets in the family way for a second time, when hardly anyone has more than one kid anymore? Her best friend, Mary Campbell, a Hunter on active duty who probably didn’t even want a second child at all. How does that make sense to you…? Bobby tells me mom tried to help. She got Karen to watch Dean for her, she hoped Karen would— would get to be our second mom. Instead, Karen brought Dean back one day, gave my eight-month old pregnant mom a hug, and went home, and you know what happened next.”

Castiel knew what had happened next.

“The Rit Zien did what they could for her.”

“The Rit Zien murdered her in her kitchen in the dead of night.”

Both statements were true.

It was harsh, but there were reasons for it. What were the angels supposed to do? They were Karen’s guardians, they were supposed to protect her. But they could not protect her from this, from demons of her own mind. The Rit Zien could cure some types of depression, when the cause was more of the body than the heart. They could not cure Karen Walker. And they could not leave her like that, in darkness and pain. It was not in their nature. As for the other angels, they would call the action of the Rit Zien justified. The harsh mercy they’d exerted meant that Karen was beyond help and right at the very edge of the brink. Suicide in Paradise was a tragedy that went beyond death itself; in some instances, the soul was so desperate and worn by sorrow at that point that it managed to flee even from the Reaper trying to guide it to the light. The souls became ghosts, and then, when terminated by angels or Hunters, were lost forever. Unacceptable. With the Rit Zien’s intervention, Karen had died quickly, painlessly, and had ascended to her Eternal Reward in Heaven before it was too late.

Karen’s immortal soul hadn’t been the only concern either. Maybe her husband and friends would have wanted to help her if they’d known the abyss she was falling into, but that was dangerous too. These communities of immortal humans were tight-knit, they were small, they were oddly fragile in a way. The Host had lost a lot of humans in the first century after the apocalypse, when some found they could not cope with immortality, and spiraled into depression that had seemed almost contagious. Whole families, neighborhoods, even an entire Paradise had been lost to this strange malady. The humans saw the eradication of Paradise 45 as an act of barbarism, they thought it had been destroyed as retaliation - and there were certainly acts of atrocity and rebellion performed there, two angels of their garrison had been killed and countless innocent humans. But that’d only been symptoms of a greater ill that had invaded the town, a collective madness the angels had found themselves helpless to stop. The purge had been surgery, not punishment.

This was probably not the time to mention that. He didn’t think Sam would be receptive. Nor
would he probably care that the final notes on Karen’s file by the angel who had come for her simply stated, ‘I ended her pain. She accepted.’ If Sam Winchester needed a villain in this tragedy, well, Castiel’s brothers of the Hands of Mercy had accepted this role before. They would not wish Castiel to hurt Sam’s feelings only to clear their name.

“I don’t feel guilty,” he said, answering the original question. “Neither should you.”

Sam gave him a startled look, flushed and turned back to the window, eyes wide and blind.

“I... I don’t-...”

Castiel was silent, and Sam stopped trying to lie.

“You can blame the Machine and the angels if you need to. It is a failure on our part when one of our charges perishes, when they get so lost. We were tasked with caring for Karen Walker’s life and happiness. We could not. We could only save her soul. I will accept this as a failure, but I will not accept that I have participated in it. Your birth triggered Karen’s depression. You know intellectually that this is in no way your fault, anymore than the fact that a- a shooting star passing overhead at your birth was an omen of misfortune. You know this because you’re an intelligent man. I think that’s why you want to blame yourself for this. It’s easier to look for guilt than acceptance sometimes. But this guilt is not yours to carry. Robert Singer doesn’t want you to carry it at any rate, whatever you may think.”

"... Yeah, thanks for reminding me of your little trip through my skull the other day,” Sam said sourly. His eyes flickered from the window to Castiel and back. “You can’t know that. That Bobby... I mean, he knows I didn’t do anything myself, but when he sees me, how can he not think that she’d still be here if I’d never been born...”

“Hm. I can’t answer for him. But he sees himself as your father just as much as Dean’s. He told me so the other day when he threatened to kill me.”

Sam had flinched at the word ‘father’, but he reacted like he’d been stung by a hornet to the end of that sentence. “He did what?! You’re not serious! He- he didn’t-...”

Castiel was silent.

"...Cas? He-... he didn’t actually say-...”

What had caught the angel’s attention wasn’t Sam’s words, it was the lack of another sound. Now that he thought about it, it was a good five minutes or more since he’d heard the lathe whine, or the noise of any other tools coming from the shed. Castiel glanced towards the garden out back. Nothing, but the shed’s door, previously open to the morning breezes, was now shut. Just as he turned back to Sam, his eye caught a sliver of a reflection from a mirror over the cabinet near the desk. The image was small but clear for one such as he. Dean was in the kitchen near the sink with an empty glass in his hand, staring through the parlor’s kitchen entrance at his brother; he’d be visible to Sam if the latter turned away from the window to look that way.

Castiel wasn’t good at reading human expressions all that well. But Dean didn’t look angry. He looked... shocked? Pained?

“Castiel.” Sam turned fully away from the window to face him. “Did Bobby threaten to kill you, yes or no?”

“No.”
Sam relaxed and his expression became extremely sour. “Can you please be more careful about what you say when-“

“He said he would destroy me,” Castiel corrected absently. Then he cocked his head in a sudden thought. “That somehow sounds more impressive, why is that?”

“Oh my god-” Sam clapped his hands to his mouth and stared at him, alarmed.

Castiel ignored the blasphemy. “He only said it because he cares about you and Dean. It was a promise of retaliation if you were harmed. Since I am not going to harm either of you, the threat is moot.” Most of Castiel’s focus was on Dean’s expression, he couldn’t make out all the shifts and currents there, the reflection was small.

“You... just like that?” Sam’s eyes narrowed when he added: “Any other angel know about this?”

“Yes, just like that, and no, I have not reported what a human said in a moment of concern for his family, nor do I intend to.”

”...Good. Good. Thanks.”

“Gratitude wasn’t the point.”

In the mirror, Dean suddenly rolled his eyes, put down the glass and walked silently out of view, heading to kitchen’s back door out to the garden and the shed.

“Say...” Sam had turned back to the window again, but he tilted his head towards Castiel. “You are aware Bobby and Ellen are living together, right?”

“No they’re not.”

Sam sighed. “Yes, they are.”

“Ellen Harvelle lives in her own house nearby.”

“It’s actually Ellen’s house we’re going to. Bobby’s house has been unoccupied for ages. Is that going to be a problem?”

Were all Paradises this complicated? Maybe he’d been a bit too harsh on the garrison here, he should have looked into their working conditions before passing judgment. “I suppose that since both their spouses have passed, any adultery is now harmless...”

“Indeed.” Sam was now giving him the intelligent advocate look.

”... I could be doing them a disservice. Sharing a house does not mean they are having unlicensed relations.”

Sam suddenly laughed, short and sharp. “That’s the idea. You’d make quite the advocate, Cas.”

“It seems so.” His unenthused expression made Sam laugh again. “As for a gift, I could help them regularize their situation. Permission to-... share a house can be obtained. Since they’re widowers, not bachelors.”

“Yeah. They never tried because they knew Zachariah would shoot it down. If you can get a permission past him, that’d be one heck of a present. Not that they’re actually doing anything wrong that I am admitting to right this minute,” he added smoothly.
Castiel, with his limited contact with humans until now, had never had much to do with advocates. He was beginning to understand why his brothers found them something of a chore. “I understand.”

“Just save it for Christmas. Don’t bring it out on the first visit, that’d make for awkward table talk,” Sam said, sitting back down.

“I’ll take your advice. Thank you.”

“Gratitude wasn’t the point,” Sam shot back ironically, but he seemed less hostile than before. “Let’s just try to get through this dinner without anyone getting arrested.”

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At six o’clock, they made their way a couple of streets over to the house of Ellen Harvelle, dressed in their Sunday best (that is to say, Dean and his brother were dressed in clean shirts, pressed trousers, western ties, vests and jackets, and as for the angel, one had to presume that what he was wearing was the best he could do…) Sam had given Dean shit all the way for forgetting to tell him about this dinner. Dean had pointed out very rationally that, on the one hand, they were invited to Bobby and Ellen’s every Sunday so Sam was the dumbass for not inquiring, and on the other hand, Dean had been pretty damned distracted, so excuuuuuuse me for forgetting small details.

...he was still distracted. The conversation he’d overheard kept playing in his mind. It burned him on so many levels. Sam had believed Bobby could resent him for the mere fact of being born? Dean had never guessed, while the angel who’d crash-landed into their lives had gotten that out of Sam in just a few days. And then he’d said what needed to be said in that hard, clear, simple way of his that just seemed to- to bypass the Winchester code and all sorts of crap and make things real clear, so clear even Sam might have a hard time beating himself over the head with this in the future - and Sam was as good at flagellating himself as he was good at advocacy. Dean knew without a doubt that he’d not have talked Sammy out of it… and he was the big brother here, dammit. He tried to resent Cas for all of this riot of feelings kicking his ass, but really, mainly he just felt a little bit grateful. Just a bit.

Ellen opened the door to the three of them. Her smile was one tense artificial line as she said, way too loudly, “Ah, there you are. Welcome to my house.”

Dean and Sam shot each other looks of sudden concern. Castiel, who this has been specifically directed at and who had the social ineptitude of a couple of bricks, said “Thank you” as if there had been nothing odd about her tone at all.

Despite pretending otherwise, Bobby didn’t sneeze without Ellen’s permission, so no way no how in ten bloody Hells would he have invited an angel - after what happened to Bill - to their house without Ellen’s explicit permission. What-

Past a grumpy looking Bobby and a tense Ellen, Dean spotted the problem. Jo, with a hat firmly pulled on her head despite being indoors on a Sunday - covering one’s head being a long standing practice of those who wanted to subtly protest having the name of God branded on their forehead for any angel to see. She was standing near the stairs with a stiff look of sullen disapproval.

Ah shit.
The situation burst onto Dean in all its complexity. Was Jo still an operator? No, surely she’d been retired - forcibly - by Bobby and Ellen’s choice. And that’d go down like a weighed anchor as far as she was concerned. Her mother had welcomed Cas, but angels had killed her father and the rules of hospitality didn’t trump that in any way. And the worst tangle... how would she see Dean now? Jo was like a sister to him. But if Sam had had the occasional hard time swallowing this situation- had he lost Jo?

Oh, and another complication, of course, was with Dean himself, and the *stupid* hand he’d thrown up to stop Castiel in his tracks as if protecting him from a sudden abyss that’d opened at his feet right on the doorstep. Cas was looking down at the hand and then at Dean with that- that weirdly innocent expression of puzzled confusion that had Dean repeating some of Castiel’s storied career to himself just to remind himself that the dude was fucking dangerous despite acting like a puppy at times.

Jo was staring at the hand too, and then up at Dean, and her eyes were hot. Sam, bless his noble soul, was making small talk for all his eternal salvation was worth, which at least allowed the other people in the room to ignore the undertones of hostility and drama until they hopefully sorted themselves out and went away.

Dean transferred the hand from Cas’s chest to his shoulder - once more that odd out-of-his-depth look from the angel. Dean decided in a pinch that he was doing two things at once here: he was protecting Jo - who might not be covered by the ‘family’ clause - from provoking a guy who could level the city with barely a blink. And he was also protecting Cas because- because the thought of Jo smashing him repeatedly with barbs over dinner when the guy couldn’t even understand a tenth of them and would probably accidentally thank her for the rest was- it went against the spirit of the kind-of-truce he and Dean had established.

“Scuse me.” Dean physically swiveled Cas towards Sam, Bobby and Ellen. Clever Sam immediately included the angel into the conversation with a question so inane it probably made the Machine instantly overwrite it, since Dean could not say what it was a second later as he headed towards his lil’ sis.

Her fine glare bounced right off his hide. He hooked her by the arm and headed towards the kitchen. A glance back before the door closed showed that Cas was staying put, though a look of almost painful indecision was scrawled over his face.

“Hi Jo. Got something to say to me?”

“Got tons, Dean.”

“Fine, lay it on me, but don’t go provoking the angel. Okay? Leave him out of this. Your mom welcomed him-“

“Oh, mom!” Jo rolled her eyes. “This is Bobby’s fault. I can’t believe him - but above all I can’t believe you!”

“Huh-uh.”

“What the hell are you still doing here, Dean?! Why haven’t you made a beeline for the hills?! This creature is treating you like you’re its *pet!*”

Dean tamped down a flash of anger. “Jeez, Jo, no. Awkward house guests is more like it-“

“*Why are you still here*?! Don’t you realize what they’re saying?!”
“I hope they’re saying, wow, clever Dean, staying put until someone smarter than he is can figure out what to do with this.” He kept his tone light, but inside, that’d hurt. Yeah, he’d wondered what his friends and comrades from the resistance were saying about this too; he’d hoped they’d understand rather than reach for the tar and feathers… but Jo’s tone wasn’t helping his optimism in that regard. “Also, how the hell could I make it to the hills? He caught me dead to rights when he didn’t have a clue where I was or who I was, and he’s been stuck to me like a leech ever since.”

“There’s ways to deal with that,” Jo said in a dead serious tone that had Dean open his mouth for a quick put-down.

“That would not be wise.”

Dean tensed and Jo stumbled back, hand flickering to her back- Jesus Christ let her not be armed!

“What the hell, Cas! What-how-” Dean stared wildly at the angel who’d popped into existence six inches away. The door behind him was still closed.

Castiel looked straight at him and only him. “Dean, I should have mentioned this before, but I have very good hearing.”

“Yeah, I know-” Oh hell. “I... I thought that- that you guys- I mean, other sounds get you mixed up-... you couldn’t hear my footsteps last Thursday when I was creeping around.”

“Possibly irrelevant noises like footsteps in a town of people do get drowned out by ambient sound, yes. But a known voice talking fifteen feet away from me, even through a closed door, is very distinct.”

Dean’s mind ran scared over his and Jo’s words, looking for anything actionable. Sammy was nearby - actually it sounded like him and the others were clustered right at the door, probably worried stiff.

Cas turned his hooded blue eyes towards Jo. She stared back, smart enough to be cautious, but too proud and bold to hide the defiance on her face (fortunately that wasn’t penalizable.)

“Family?” Cas asked significantly, looking back at Dean.

“Yeah, feisty lil’ sister,” answered Dean, relief blowing out his ears like steam.

“Any other family members I should know about?” Cas asked, his usual rumbly voice dipping until the grim question sounded almost like a growl.

Dean scratched his head. “Mom’s got a clan of cousins back east, and-“

“I meant here.”

“... Rufus, the guy you dumped back home the other night, could qualify as my crusty ol’ uncle.”

Castiel’s narrowed eyes suggested Dean not push his luck. He turned that same look on Jo.

“Your mother and Robert Singer invited me here, so I would rather not leave. Don’t talk about anything I need to act upon while I’m around. Or ever. There is going to be more oversight in this town. A lot more. Find other things in which to occupy your time than dissidence.”

“Are you threatening me?” Jo asked brightly, hands on her hips.

Cas looked vaguely puzzled. “No. I’m advising you. I’ve never had cause to intimidate anyone.
I’m not sure I would know how. This notion of hanging a threat over someone’s head... If I have just cause, I act, otherwise I don’t. Don’t give me just cause. Dean would not like that, neither would Sam or anyone in your family. Also— he added even as he turned away, “Dean and I have been matched by the Machine, married as you humans call it. He is not my pet, nor do I treat him like one.”

He opened the door rather than flying through it, ignored the three white-faced humans outside and the very awkward start of the evening, and went to sit on a couch in the parlor.

Ellen, wan and furious (though mainly scared-furious rather than angry-furious, Dean judged) was glaring at her daughter who was glaring at Dean as if this was somehow all his fault. Sam looked like he wanted to be on the other side of the the country. The only one who seemed to take it in stride was Bobby who ironically asked, “So, who’s hungry?”

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The last dinner they’d had as a family before his mother had left for good was probably more awkward than this one, though it’d been almost forty years ago so Dean couldn’t quite remember it. He just remembered it as being awful.

Cas got a plate and had been informed ahead of time that for politeness’ sake, he had to eat a bit. He hadn’t objected, and Dean hadn’t known enough to ask a few pointed questions, such as, ‘You do know how to eat like a normal person, right?’ So Cas was putting tiny little bites in his mouth - one pea, one corn kernel, one forkful of the savory zucchini cake at a time - and then chewing for what felt like ten minutes with a very analytical look on his face. Ellen was giving him glares that rivaled the ones leveled at her daughter. Jo was talking to Sam ostensibly, but every three sentences was some sideways swipe aimed at Cas, which made Dean feel riled up for reasons he couldn’t even put a finger on, though Cas missed most of the veiled insults thrown his way and ignored the rest. Sam still looked like he wanted to grab a shovel and start digging until he reached what was left of Hell and hide out there. Bobby ate his dinner with the air of one who was going to enjoy his food come what may, as long as the house didn’t blow up.

The house didn’t blow up. They left earlier than they normally would, but by then things had simmered down a tad anyway. Jo had given up on getting under Cas’s skin, knowing futile when she saw it, while Ellen was just glad to have them out of the house.

“That was grand,” Bobby declared as Sam and Dean took their leave. “See you next Sunday.”

“Seriously?!” Dean blurted out, almost falling off the front porch.

“Sure thing. Next weekend, Rufus is invited too. It’ll be fun.”

“...Awesome.”

They headed home through the quiet evening. Castiel suddenly said, as if remembering words in a foreign language he’d learned by heart: “Your family is nice. It was kind of them to invite me.”

Dean and Sam both examined him for the slightest trace of sarcasm. Finding no evidence of such, the brothers exchanged a resigned look.

“Wait till next Sunday, it’ll be spectacular,” Dean grumbled, shaking his head at a nearby star poking its nose through the gathering dusk.
Next chapter: Pie and Grievances

Why was his spouse and his brother getting along so well bugging the hell out of him?

Because it’d looked natural, and good, and right for a minute there, and it shouldn’t. It shouldn’t... If Sam hated the bastard, it’d be easier for Dean to hate him too.

Chapter End Notes

I'm hoping to post the next chapter on the coming Saturday, maybe earlier, but after that I am falling off the edge of the planet for a couple of weeks. I am not sure when I'll have internet again, much less a computer and a chair to sit on, but I do hope to at least be able to eke out chapters of this fic. It's mostly written up to the final chapters, just needs polishing, and Chuck made internet cafés for a reason. I'll be updating my status on https://maldoror-chant.dreamwidth.org/ if the silence threatens to last.
Pie and Grievances

Chapter Notes

Posted at the eleventh hour from a random hotel just before the last flight, and polished on my phone, so please forgive typos and rough patches.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When the Lamb opened the third seal, I heard the third living creature say, “Come!” I looked, and there before me was a black horse! Its rider was holding a pair of scales in his hand. Then I heard what sounded like a voice among the four living creatures, saying, “Two pounds of wheat for a day’s wages, and six pounds of barley for a day’s wages, and do not damage the oil and the wine!”

Revelations 6: 5-6

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Two more Sundays rolled around. Against all rhyme and reason, the world was still spinning merrily along for anybody who wasn’t a Winchester.

In the Magic Lantern, the little girl (whose name Dean was trying frantically not to remember) finally made the right prayer to the Machine which her magic doll needed in order to speak to her again. Or something.

There were a line of seats drawn up before the entertainment in the plaza, in the warmth of the eternal sunshine. It was Sunday afternoon after morning temple and lunch, and before the afternoon Word by Jonah. Children were not supposed to run and play on a Sunday, so this pap was spoonfed to them instead. Parents and other adults were welcome to come, it was fine for anybody to watch, including, it seemed, bad-ass Seraphs. Cas was up on the first row of seats, watching the entertainment alongside Adella Little Bear - equally fascinated by the story, since she was all of three years old.

The other children were watching as well, having logically concluded they did not have a choice in the matter. Normally the kids stayed five seconds into Sunday’s entertainment and then they were running around like nutbags, decrees be damned, but not today. Jesse, the oldest of the school-age lot and a friend of Dean’s, was giving the latter looks of pleading combined with reproach.

Dean felt honestly guilty, since he’d arranged to walk through the plaza at this time on purpose, knowing full well what would happen. Sorry, Jesse, but Dean had things to do. Urgent things. Important grown-up things. Things that should not be witnessed by angels.

...He had things to do, but instead of ditching Cas, he was stuck there like an idiot, watching his spouse’s face change, waiting to see if that rare faint smile would make a reappearance today.

Cas leaned forward, intent on a plot twist that had been semaphored for the past half hour. Adella looked puzzled and lost, and tugged at his sleeve in a silent demand to share the Word. Cas leaned towards her and whispered, pointing towards the scene. (Behind the seats, Adella’s parents had a
weird look on their faces, as if they were caught halfway between finding that adorable and worrisome, the kind of mixed bag Dean was becoming all too familiar with.)

... Dean had assumed that some severe dick angel was voluntarily making this bull-crap as bland as possible to get the next generation to grow up dull, joyless and obedient, and also for the express purpose of being an asshole. Now it seemed just as likely that the angel in charge was like Cas and thought this was good entertainment, because for them, this was all new, this- this human theater was not something they could anticipate or get bored of.

Between their angel overlords being absolute tosspots, or frighteningly naive about their charges and condescendingly unwilling to face that fact, Dean could not tell at present which was the worse option. Either would explain the present fix they were all in. But the second possibility meant that maybe, just maybe, if a guy could find an angel who was smart, not an out-and-out prick, open to listening - a captive audience in fact - then juuuuust maybe the human point of view could be explained and the heavenly Host’s attitude could be adjusted, which would be infinitely better than a war neither side could really afford or win.

Dean spun on his heels and fast-marched towards Cavanaugh street.

In the alley between two houses, protected by the walls of a warded shed, he checked the hole under one of the toolboxes, ignoring the grumpy cat he had to nudge aside. Then he hooked a right onto Fallow avenue, checked the metal basket welded inside the storm drain. And then, without much hope, the fake drainpipe leading off the Mullerson’s roof.

Nothing in any of the dead drops. The railroad would be using brand new ones now, what with their linchpin and their station master re-categorized as security risks (at best), but since Dean knew these old ones, it would be a good way to get him a message.

Only there wasn’t any.

Dean ended up on a stile, staring blindly at the rich earth of the field before him. Crows hopped about, pecking at the new corn, and occasionally taking a break to shit on the ineffectual scarecrow.

Nothing today, nothing last week or the week before. What did it mean? Did it mean anything? It was still early days, right? The orders were sure to come next week.

When those orders came through... what would they consist of? The thought ‘thank god I promised not to stick a knife in his back’ flashed through Dean's mind and made him grip the stile's spar so hard that a rough section pierced the skin of his palm, a welcomed punishing bite.

... Worse though... what if orders never came? What if the Joker was as perplexed and lost as Dean, Cas, the entire Host and everybody else? What if the order, or the lack thereof, was: do this the soft sell way, try to convince Castiel, soldier of the Lord, to see the human point of view.

Bloody hell, there were at last count some six hundred thousand humans left on planet Earth, and that meant there were five hundred and ninety nine thousand of them who would undoubtedly be better at doing that job. Dean couldn’t. He’d spent too long hating, too long fighting, too long being angry. The possibility that he might reach out to Cas hadn’t even occurred to him three weeks ago. It shouldn’t occur to him now, yet there was something - in a faint smile, moments of patience in the face of Dean’s anger, the way Cas spoke to Dean’s family, tiny moments that should mean nothing, that were nothing and yet... like a will o’ the wisp, the idea was there now, beckoning a way forward, and the very thought made him feel like he was spitting on his father’s grave.
“Dean?”

Dean made an ugly noise in his throat and half threw himself off the stile. “Yeah,” he muttered. “Coming.”

Cas was giving him that look again. A bit like Adella's earlier. Like he wanted so hard to follow the story but needed help with the plot.

For some reason, it’d been easier at the start of this farce. Dean had been coping with shock, with the consequences, with navigating around this massive sinkhole that had appeared in his life. But now, over three weeks later, he was getting over those things and... and his days kept veering between two poles, one where he was only pretending to exist in this insane parody of a life while he waited for orders to end it, and the other where this was... just his life now, the new normal. It was the same teetering dizzying effect he had ten times a day when his perception of Cas veered between this- this naive but rather well-meaning guy, and this all-too-old all-too-powerful being who’d murdered hundreds, who-

The blue eyes centered on the hand Dean had stuffed in his pocket, palm oozing a few drops of blood. “You’re injured,” Cas said softly in that rumbly voice of his that seemed inexplicably gentle and intimate even when ten feet away on the other side of a stile.

“Scratches.” Dean’s voice, for his part, made it as clear as the Word what would happen if Cas offered to heal them. The contrast in tones made him sound like an unreasonable jackass to his own ears, and he had to restrain himself from digging his nails in deeper.

Cas didn’t comment or insist. That was unexpectedly insightful and kind of him, and Dean was damned if he understood why it made him want to pick a fight all the more.

“C’mon, we got stuff to do,” he said abruptly and stomped off, trying to figure out what ‘stuff’ possibly needed doing so urgently in Paradise on a Sunday afternoon now that he’d gone and said that.

Cas followed him in silence instead of calling him on his bullshit. This did not make Dean feel any happier, believe it or not.

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Castiel spent his nights in the kitchen. He was not welcome in Dean’s bedroom, and he felt like an intruder in Sam’s office when the latter was not there. The kitchen was neutral ground, so he sat until dawn at the table Dean had built for them. After seeking Revelation, he would meditate, or Commune with the Machine or some of his brothers. Sometimes he read (he didn’t need a light) or examined once more minutely the little clockwork piece Dean had given him. It was an old unsuccessful attempt at a new gear work and not worth the time to fix; the springs were ‘gonners’, according to Dean, but some of the sprockets could be reused in other projects. But Castiel had found the idea of dismantling the small machine tragic for reasons he could not well define, and asked if he could try his hand at fixing it. Dean had given him the little assemblage with a shrug. Castiel spent many hours examining it, understanding how it was meant to work. He hoped one day to borrow Dean’s tools to see what he could do, once he’d thoroughly understood its operation (using Grace, he felt obscurely, would be a faux-pas even if the result was more reliable.) He was in no particular hurry, though, just examining the complex whorls and elegant gears was absorbing
and oddly satisfying.

There was no book or clockwork on the table tonight; it was the table itself he was examining. He looked at the fittings, examined the skirt, remembering Dean’s hands running along it to test the wood grain. The lines were sober, but Dean had worked hard on the roundness of the table legs, giving them a slight fluting effect. Castiel looked at them carefully. Not very symmetrical to his eyes, but they would be to a human who could not see with that precision. The fact that they were disparate, yet had been made to fit together, was pleasing. A tiny revelation, not Heaven-sent in the least... maybe it truly was better to build than to be given.

“Did you want something?” he asked without looking away from the table leg he was feeling with his fingertips.

”... Well, I wanted to talk to you, but now I really, really want to know what you think you’re doing right this second.” Balthazar had his head tilted as he leaned over Castiel’s shoulder. He looked fascinated.

“Examining the handiwork. Come with me.”

A flutter and they were both perched on the roof. Castiel had discovered a section near the chimney stack where he could stand and talk without being heard from inside the house.

“Can’t we stay in the kitchen? I wanted to look at that entrancing table myself.”

“Sam is a light sleeper and his bedroom is on the other side of the wall.”

“Right.” Balthazar glanced up at the moon as if he’d only just realized it was nighttime. “So, since I was able to tear you away from your study, I might as well bring you up to speed.”

Castiel perked up. “Any news?”

“None whatsoever, everyone is still chasing their tails, and now I think it’s obvious what happened here, right? Your first instinct weeks ago was correct, the resistance is somehow behind this.”

“No,” said Castiel simply

Balthazar stared. “No? Not, ’How do you know?’ or ’Can you prove it?’ or ’Wow, Balthazar, you clever dog, how did you guess?’ Just No?”

“If what you’re saying was true, that would mean the union is a fraud. It’s not.”

”...Why do you say that? Are you saying you’re starting to connect with Dean and you miraculously understand all his little quirks and foibles?”

“No at all,” Castiel said flatly. “But considering we are from two vastly different species, that is not surprising. I’ve only known him a short time.” Not even four weeks at present; less than a fraction of a blink in his existence. “But we’ve already evolved a limited understanding, even a degree of mutual respect. Considering the gap between us, we’re obviously connected.”

Balthazar stared at him, his vessel unusually expressionless while his wings on the higher planes curved back and bunched. “Castiel,” he finally said, almost carefully, “don’t jump down my throat when I say this, but are you possibly convincing yourself here? Forcing yourself into the mold because the Machine said so?”

“No.”
“There’s that No again. Cassie, please, please, please don’t ever forget that Dean is not your friend, he’s an enemy.”

“I know.”

“Do you really?”

“I hope one day this will no longer be the case. It will take time, but unless one of us dies, we have an eternity together.”

“…That’d make me want to plunge into the sun.”

Castiel gave him a reproving look.

Balthazar’s gaze settled idly on the city around them. “That ‘no dying’ may be a bit of an obstacle. Dean’s bean is still trapped, right? Sooner or later, someone’s going to ask to see this extraordinary human and touch his mind—”

“Not if I forbid it.”

“I suspect that will just make them more curious.”

“This is my mission. Given directly to me by the God Machine,” Castiel said steadily. “Not even Michael can defy our Father.”

“Does he know that?”

“Balthazar.”

Balthazar bit his lip.

“They might find other ways of getting rid of the problem,” he said after a few seconds of silence.

“What problem? This is a union ordained by our Father. Our problems begin if we attempt to show it is a mistake. I think even Naomi can see that.”

“You better hope so, because it’d be pretty easy to take out your human otherwise.”

Castiel scrutinized him. “Meaning?”

“Well…” Under Castiel's unblinking stare, Balthazar seemed to sort through several possible answers before saying, almost brightly: “They could send him back to the front line on some infraction.” His grin indicated there’d be a choice of those, as Castiel had even better cause to know. “Have you thought of that?”

Castiel looked down at the roof, feeling out with his senses. Both brothers were sleeping, Dean deeply, Sam more lightly, mired in REM. He still kept his voice low as he admitted: “I hadn’t originally. Last I’d heard, it was forbidden to break up a union by sending one or the other partner off to war.” There were not many children born as it were in Paradise, no need to put potential parents in danger. “But then I heard them mention their mother. I looked into it and realized they were correct. Unfortunately.”

“Right. Mary Campbell, of course. There was a clanker of a business if I ever saw one. No wonder it was first and foremost in their little human brains. If the upper cadre pull that trigger, Cassie, there’s nothing you can do. You’re not involved with human relocations, and you can’t bend the rules for your own spouse, you see that, right?”
“I see that. They can send Dean off to war,” Castiel assented. “But they cannot send him alone. Unless the Machine Himself reassigns me elsewhere, His order supersedes any deployment, and He has declared that I should be with Dean.”

”...Fine, I grant you that. Dean by himself is already a force to contend with, human or not, adding you to the mix - I’d almost pity the Leviathans.” Balthazar lapsed into a few seconds of pensive silence. “Hey, is that why he did it? Joined the railroad? Because he’s angry at what happened to his mom?”

“I’m not sure. This is not a subject I can easily bring up.”

“I can see that.”

“I suppose I should try.” Castiel looked over at the Machine in the distance, glinting warm gold in several dimensions, a subconscious wish for guidance. “If I can find the origin of his discontent...”

“Maybe you can kiss it better? They always said you were the most optimistic of the Seraph, Cassie.”

“I have faith,” Castiel answered with a sigh, still staring at the golden springs and cogs, the outward manifestation of the inner workings of the great construct their Father had become to stay with them all, both his first born children and his final creations.

---

Four weeks after Dean had gotten hitched, he still wasn’t over the shock. It was a bit vexing that other people seemed to be acclimatizing faster than he was.

“Right there. That’s just perfect! Thank you, Castiel,” said Donna as the angel deposited the massive metal flour bin he’d been carting around effortlessly.

Castiel gave his usual solemn look, and then as if he could see Dean’s embryonic scowl aimed at his back, he added: “You’re welcome.” If Dean was going to drag the ol’ ball and chain everywhere - as it appeared was the case - then the guy might as well learn to behave in a neighborly fashion. (Sam had tried to point out the irony of Dean of all people teaching an angel some manners, but nobody listened to him because he was so tall, he was always talking down at people anyway.)

Donna had lived in Lawrence for near on a century, not that she looked a day over thirty. She loved people, and she loved baking. She filled her Salvation and the streets with lovely smells day in and day out, and gleefully fed any neighbor or stranger who happened to wander by. Sitting in her large flagstone kitchen with the warmth of the oven on one side and a breeze from the ever-open door on the other, people started to relax, to open up. Sometimes they’d talk about their problems; Donna, for all her over-the-top good cheer, could be a good listener, and had a solid head on her shoulders. But most of the people just listened to him because he was so tall, he was always talking down at people anyway.)

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Although he pretended to be merely resigned to her chatter, Dean had in fact been her ardent pupil.
two decades back when he’d first tasted her pies. He still dropped by her place once a week when he could. Even though he could make his own pies now, Donna’s were still the best. They’d remained good friends, until The Thing happened.

Dona was one of the habits Dean had been forced to change. She was ‘good people’ down to the bone; in no way a rebel, but hardly a supporter of the garrison either. She disapproved of ‘people throwing their weight around’. If she’d been sheriff, her policing would have been the diametrical opposite of Uriel’s style. But humans couldn’t be sheriffs, of course, and she wasn’t contentious enough to want to be an advocate. The irony of it all was, Donna and her sweets and her talks and her visits to her neighbors was one of the reasons the southwest quarter was a calm, courteous peaceful place where tensions were defused before they even began. The angels had no clue… though Uriel had once called her an insufferable busybody, so maybe he had an inkling (Donna had advised him that he would look much nicer if he smiled from time to time, because not even flies liked vinegar.)

A fortnight after The Thing had occurred, Sam had left after lunch to go fight Uriel over some poor loser’s minor misdemeanor charge, with a spring in his step that suggested he was really looking forward to it now that he had the sheriff’s metaphorical gonads in a vice. Dean had answered a knock on the door. Donna was on the doorstep with a large pie and an unusually severe look on her face.

"Really, Dean?"

He had the intuition that she’d had a long speech prepared for when he opened the door, but in the end that was all she said, and all that was needed. The pie ended up on the new kitchen table, along with herbal tea in a strainer over the teapot waiting for the kettle to whistle. Dean apologetically and belatedly introduced her to the other half he’d recently acquired, and who regretfully did not eat pie, the heathen, no, not even Donna’s oly koeks or pastry puffs either. Donna graciously forgave the puzzled Seraph for such lapse in taste, and Dean for thinking that his accidental marriage to an angel could affect their friendship in any way.

They were at Donna’s today for another routine that revolved around her, the annual cleaning of her kitchen and bakery. Castiel, radiating confusion, managed not to point out that the Machine rewrote the place spotless every other day or so, and thus this annual ritual of giving the place a thorough spring cleaning by humans ‘to get it right’ was useless.

Loaded down with a basket of sweet ‘thank yous’, Dean led the way back towards home.

“You see, it’s... it’s a thing. She just wants to do it herself once a year. Like that she really knows it’s done.”

“It is done,” said Cas, not too strenuously, more like one knowingly fighting a losing battle. “All those other friends of hers who came in and out today to help must have tracked in more dirt than we cleaned away.”

“Just on the main part of the floor, she’ll have that mopped by tonight.”

”... Is this like the kitchen table?”

“Huh? What do you mean? Oh nuts. Your little fanciers are here again.”

Castiel looked around, and then nodded serenely in greeting. The three dizzy dames at the corner of Parker street looked like they were about to faint.
The whole southwest of Lawrence had rallied past the shock in the last four weeks. People no longer ducked down alleyways when they saw the pair of them. Rufus, with some sardonic delight, kept Dean abreast of developments; according to him, the good folk around here refused to even speculate about how this had happened, why this had happened, and exactly what it was that being hitched to an angel might entail in the privacy of Dean’s home. P342’s southwestern citizens sat around and drank herbal tea and would say, “Oh look, there’s Dean and Castiel, not that there’s anything odd about an angel being married to one of our own now, and what nice weather we’re having.”

But the rest of P342 was not going to take it quite so casually. The northwest part, the rougher side of town where many of the other railroad operators lived, felt wholly unwelcome, and Dean avoided that quarter now. Southeast stared at them curiously and somewhat cautiously, with no attempt to hide their curiosity, but that was as far as it went. The problem was the northeast, the section past Calvin street and Hennity, and it wasn’t as if Dean could even avoid them as they’d rapidly taken to invading his quiet little neighborhood. People from that quarter tended to be the proper members of the flock. And Cas seemed to fascinate them, even though most of them lived within stone’s throw of the Machine and had eight other perfectly serviceable angels they could go gawp at.

Pastor Jim had a theory about this. Jim was the local pastor of the Southwest temple of the Lamb, and a good friend of Dean, and John Winchester before him. In fact Dean suspected Jim had been part of the railroad in John’s time, and still had a corner of the temple basement where he made sure angel-proof wards were in place in case runners needed to hide. Pastor Jim speculated that the interest from the sheep was because Cas was something new, like a bridge. Alfie, Eliezer, Balthazar, even Melod, they were all pretty damn approachable for angels, but Cas was different, a Seraph brought into holy union with a human. For a week once the news had spread, there’d been a stream of sheep, dressed in their Sunday best, coming through Dean’s neighborhood to knock on his door, shake Castiel’s hand in the street, stay and hang worshipfully on his every word... It made Dean cringe on behalf of all humanity, especially since it was obvious that Cas didn’t really care for this kind of attention, failed to fundamentally understand it. That is, it was obvious to Dean. Sam and Bobby and Jim and the others kept going on about Cas being ‘unreadable’, but they just weren’t looking properly.

The Sunday morning before last, Castiel had suddenly announced he was going to a different temple, and disappeared before Dean could ask what the hell. Dean had gone to Pastor Jim’s service with his head full of questions and sat blindly in the pews, every breeze or flap of a lady’s fan making him look around like a ninny. Pastor Jim did not call him to task for it afterwards; his specialty was prayin’ and preachin’ from a high pulpit while looking straight over the congregation’s head. Sundays, and the decree to be in temple on Sabbath, gave the garrison a great opportunity to do headcounts on their humans. Jim’s style of preaching meant he could honestly claim not to have noticed somebody was missing - somebody who’d still registered as present as far as the Machine was concerned through the good offices of a railroad friend and the appropriate magic spell. This had allowed Dean and his buddies weeks of operating out in the Wilds without any angel the wiser. Not that this applied any more. Now Dean’s hind quarters were in the pew every Sunday between Sam and Cas... or in the instance of that particular Sunday, between Sam and a conspicuously empty space that seemed to gape wider and wider for every new homily Jim started.

Cas was back after lunch. He proffered no explanation at the time, but Dean later learned he’d been at the temple of Brother Amos Matherson in the Northeast Temple of the Holy Millenium right below the Machine, and the Seraph had had words with certain people. The trickle of enthusiastic believers had lessened since then, and none of them knocked at the door anymore. But not all had gotten the message.
It was usually a pack of women in twos and threes, occasionally a couple of young fellas instead. They did respect Cas’s wishes not to be disturbed, so they weren’t coming nearer. They would always just stand there, tittering together and staring at Cas. They ignored Dean completely, or else they gave him a rather unimpressed look before returning to their main focus.

...Dean was hard pressed to explain just why these admirers annoyed him so very, very much. They weren’t doing anything wrong. The streets were free and for everyone, they didn’t stop the two of them, didn’t disturb them at home. Cas didn’t seem to mind them at all, which for some reason did not help Dean’s equanimity at all. It was... rather irritating. He marched on without further comment, maybe just a little bit faster than usual because he did not want Donna’s gifts to gather flies.

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Most of Donna’s bounty ended up in the larder, but Dean indulged himself with a cup of coffee and a slice of her pie right there, and who cared if it was three in the afternoon, it broke no decree. Actually the coffee did, so he’d let Cas understand that his absence would be much appreciated. There was something of a gray zone for minor transgressions like this, so a thing with no name had evolved between them. Dean made a minimal effort to keep his little rule breaking out of Cas’s way and Cas returned the favor by ignoring them.

He enjoyed the sweet, the kick from the coffee, and the rare chance to be alone with his thoughts and the tick and the tock of his grandfather’s clock. It felt good to be without his bloody guardian angel at times.

Eventually Dean cleaned away all signs of rampant sin, brewed some decree-approved herbal tea and put a scone on a plate for his brother.

He heard Cas’s voice through the parlor door, talking legalese. Sam was at his desk, scribbling quickly, apparently transcribing what Castiel, standing next to him, was reading from a document.

”- ‘this means that Decree 2341 MT is in direct contradiction of Decree 932.3 SH in these particular set of circumstances-’ I see what she’s saying. This is very clever.”

“Isn’t it?” Sam’s pleased grin lit up the room. “Zhen Jia is a genius.”

“This was in essence what you already had in that letter you showed me, though,” Cas said, not looking up from the sheaf of papers he was still skimming through.

“The basics of her argument were there, yes, but man, translations are often very dodgy. I just wanted to be sure our version wasn’t missing anything. The bit about the Paradise boundaries, for instance, that’s new, we didn’t have that.”

“Chinese is a difficult language for the non-initiated. Oh, this next part is also very good.” Castiel looked down at Sam and there was that ghost of a small smile on his face that made Dean’s fingers grip the tea cup harder. “I don’t think I agree with all of it, Decree 80.43 is very hard to get to grips with-” he interrupted himself when he saw Dean.

“Brought some tea. Something from Donna’s.”

“Oh, thanks!” Sam gave him a sunny smile. He had ink on his hands as he combed back his
overlong hair, he must have been writing hard. “Sorry I couldn’t help with the cleanout, guys, it’s so busy. The League only comes out with an addition to the New Talmud every ten years or so - and Zhen Jia’s contributions will make up the bulk of it, I’m willing to bet, right, Cas?”

Cas was looking at Dean searchingly, but he still answered: “It’s quite possible, she is a very intelligent debater. But I don’t know what other contributions your League might have.”

Dean silently put down the small plate and cup at the edge of Sam’s desk and walked away.

...Had to cut some wood. Stores were getting low. Beans needed to be cooked, that’d take awhile. Why was his spouse and his brother getting along so well bugging the hell out of him?

Because it’d looked natural, and good, and right for a minute there, and it shouldn’t. It shouldn’t. Oh, he trusted Sam down to the ground. Sam was an advocate, he was used to working with the angels and still keeping that inner space around his loyalties. So Dean didn’t know why it bothered him. No, actually, he did. It was one more way that Cas was silently and smoothly fitting into his life. If Sam hated the bastard, it’d be easier for Dean to hate him too.

Cutting wood was an excellent idea all told. Putting an ax through a wooden block was what he needed right now.

What he didn’t need showed up two minutes later.

“Can I help?” Castiel asked from a prudent distance. His whole demeanor seemed prudent. Guy was a fucking Seraph, he could wipe the town off the map with his pinkie.

Dean brought the ax down with a vicious whack, splitting the log in half.

Cas wouldn’t smoke the town, because he wasn’t a lunatic and there was no just cause. But there were things—there were things that were done with his tacit approval that were just plain wrong, and they were suddenly mobbing Dean all at once, like those god-fearing ladies in the street wanted to mob the angel. (Thwack!) Dean had been—been living on the outside of his skull for a few weeks now, just managing the outward problems generated by this bloody angel taking over his life, and tamping down on the stuff that boiled around inside and had pushed him to the resistance, and worse, ages ago. Today it seemed they didn’t want to stay tamped down. (Thwack!) Karen and Bobby, mom and dad, the yoke around all their necks, Uriel and Zach, Ellen and Bill, Sam and—(Thwack!)

“...Dean?”

“Yes, dear,” Dean ground out, grabbing the next log. A splinter tried to force its way through his tough canvas work gloves, the only indication how hard he was gripping it.

There was a few seconds of silence from an angel who’d just stripped a gear and was trying to recover.

“Why are you angry?”

Too many reasons, Cas, too many reasons... But one popped out his mouth unbidden. “Jessica Moore.”

Belatedly Dean craned his neck to check through the kitchen window into the parlor, made sure his brother was still sitting at his desk, poring over his legal stuff and sipping his tea. This brought Cas and the latter’s suddenly closed-off expression into his line of sight.
“I’m mad about her. I’m also kinda mad that you don’t need to ask me who she is. Right, Cas? Since you’ll have gotten that out of Sam’s brain. My brother-” Thwak! “My brother is a better man than me. In his shoes, I wouldn’t be able to look at you.”

After a moment of silence, Cas asked: “Has he ever tried to get in touch with her?”

Dean’s tension impeded his downward swing, and the ax lodged into the log. “Goddamn,” he muttered, putting a foot against it and tugging. “Don’t you know? Weren’t you ferreting around his brain pan?”

“I did ‘ferret’, but I did not invade,” Cas informed him in a measured tone that gave even Dean, who was beginning to decipher the critter a bit, no clue how much the angel did or did not regret having to violate Sam’s mind and privacy like that. “I was concentrating on the railroad. On you.”

“Good,” Dean said and meant it. Being a decoy was the linchpin’s job, and if that had protected just a bit of Sam’s inner life, his feelings...

”...Though focusing on that, I did see what happened right after Jessica Moore left.”

Dean froze with a log in his hand, blind eyes fixed on the far end of the yard as he waited for the hammer to fall. He knew what Cas was referring to. And he knew what an angel could do with that incident.

“Sam didn’t carry through with it - he was emotionally distraught, I would not judge,” Cas added quickly.

“Wow. Big of you,” Dean muttered acidly, putting the log on the block. Trying to ignore the way his heart was squirming, possibly in relief- probably in relief.

”... I was concentrating on you.” Cas was speaking carefully as if his words were negotiating a maze made of razor blades and knives. “I saw some memories of your childhood together. The two of you argued a lot when you were younger.”

Dean grunted. “And with dad back when he was here. Whew, I thought they’d kill each other at times, and decrees be damned.”

“Sam worried for your safety when you joined the resistance as your father had. Neither did he believe out and out rebellion was the best way to manage the conflict with the Host. While you disapproved of him becoming an advocate.”

“Yeah. Feeble chitty-faced way of fighting.” Dean now had the feeling he knew what question was coming. A part of him was surprised. Cas rarely asked questions, especially this kind.

“When Jessica Moore left-“

“Taken away. She was taken away, Cas. Because your damn Machine-” Thwack! ”- said some dude she never met from out east was her soulmate, never mind that she was in love with my brother and that he was in love with her.”

“The day after that happened-“

“Coward,” Dean said softly as he picked up the split log and set it on the block.

Cas didn’t touch that one either. “Why did you dissuade him from joining you in the resistance?” he asked instead.
Dean finally turned towards the angel, still standing at a prudent distance as if Dean might take a whack at him with the ax (and as if this might actually hurt him.) “Seriously?”

Cas stared at him, apparently waiting for an answer. Finally, when the human refused to oblige, he said: “The scene was very vivid in his mind. It was a memory of great importance to him. He told you that you were right, that the Machine-” the blue eyes flickered faintly. ”- that he had lost faith in the system, too much faith, that he could no longer work peaceably within the rules. He was throwing it all away to join you. You are the one who persuaded him to regain that faith. To once more take up the opposite stance to yourself. He did. And since then, you two have been closer than you ever were when you were younger, even though you both have to work around his advocacy. Neither of these things seems to make sense.” He sounded honestly puzzled.

Dean came this close to blurting all of it out. Words pressed against his clenched teeth: Yeah, it was like all my dreams came true, because Dad was dead and I felt like I was the only one fighting to make up for what happened to our friends and family now, to all of humanity. And suddenly my brother offered to fight at my side, no more distance between us, no more lying and weaving and dodging around his advocacy, no more people telling me my brother was halfway to being a collaborator - do you know how tempting that was? Do you know how very, very close I came to saying yes? Because I’m small inside at times, Cas, small and weak and petty, a little part of my soul maybe you’ll stumble onto one day, and that part just wanted my brother at my side whatever the cost to him.

He’d never even told Bobby of that split moment of weakness when the words “welcome to the resistance” had trembled on his tongue. He’d never felt this strong an urge to confess to that moment to anyone, yet he felt this near irrepressible desire to tell Cas. Just to see what he’d say. Just to prod him and - and- and see if that’d get that expression to change, those blue eyes to darken with a look of judgment, or maybe of understanding or-

“He was in pain,” Dean said, turning abruptly and giving a couple of billets a kick. “He didn’t mean it, he was just kicking against the pricks. He would have regretted it. I would have too. Never regretted talking him out of it. He’s going to outshine that Chinese bird and all those others one day with his legal stuff, he’s going to rewrite the New Talmud and find a way to get your boot off our neck, one inch at a time and perfectly legally.”

Cas once again completely dodged any possible confrontation. “Would you want me to find out Jessica Moore’s current location?” he asked instead. “She’s been with her soulmate for twelve years now. Knowing she is happy might make Sam feel better.”

Dean froze as he reached for the next log. It was hard to get a good head of indignant steam up to shout “Stay out of it!” when Dean himself had almost blurted out the very same request half a dozen times since they’d hooked up. It was also hard because it was obvious Cas’s offer was genuine. He really wanted to help.

He spun towards the angel and hefted the ax - not intentionally menacing, it was just in his hand. “Cas, listen to me real careful. Sam’s smart enough to have already figured out you could get him that information, and he hasn’t asked. This is his decision, and don’t you dare bring it up. I swear to god, Cas, you hurt him with this, I’ll-”

“I gave you my word I wouldn’t harm him,” Cas said quietly. His eyes hadn’t even flicked towards the ax waving a foot from his face.

Dean snorted. “Yeah, won’t stop you from doing it accidentally.”

”...You are correct.”
Cas walked off without saying another word, which made Dean mentally reel, unbalanced in an argument he felt like he was having.

Cas, face unreadable, reappeared later in the parlor while the brothers played chess. But the Winchesters were starting to get a bead on him even when he had that angelic mask on; Sam was giving him and Dean subtle unsure glances, and forcing the conversation a bit. Dean’s anger still simmered, defuse and illogical, as if a part of him was furious and hurt at Cas just for walking away earlier, for not arguing, not showing any emotions or reacting to Dean, for just... urgh. Fucking angel.

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Next Chapter: The Tangle at the Root

The situation was simple, really. Whatever Dean’s thoughts on the matter, it was Castiel’s mission to make sure this union was happy and free of strife.

Yet it was Castiel who started the fight.

Chapter End Notes

The levee breaks...next chapter. Yes, it’s a horrible place to leave it, especially since I’m not sure when I can get the next chapter out. Wish me luck, and hopefully I’ll stick my landing on the other side of the planet - literally - and have internet and computers and other essentials in order to get the next chapter reviewed and polished and posted. Ahh, to have an angel to miraculously transport me…
The Tangle at the Root

Chapter Notes

A reminder that this version of Cas is similar to early-days Cas in the series. He’s got blood on his hands, he’s a soldier of god. And like canon Cas, there might be reasons he’s not fully questioned that until now...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was allowed to scorch people with fire. 9 They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.
Revelations 16:8

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The situation was simple, really. Whatever Dean’s thoughts on the matter, it was Castiel’s mission to make sure this union was happy and free of strife.

Yet it was Castiel who started the fight.

He had good reasons. He had what he thought were good reasons. A fight might have been inevitable anyway. It was disheartening that every step he took closer to Dean, tiny, incremental ridiculously small steps that they were, seemed to increase some strange tension between them. Castiel had never been in a relationship before, but he was pretty sure this was not supposed to be how they worked. He and Dean had managed to establish boundaries and a modicum of mutual respect back when they’d been out and out enemies. Now they were getting a little closer, now was when Dean seemed to be getting increasingly argumentative? Confusing human.

But it was his duty to keep the mortal creature content, so he had to do something. It occurred to him during a night of meditation that the temper flares were outwards manifestations of inner strife, like a fever resulting from an attack on the immune system. Something Balthazar had said came back to him: find out the origin of Dean’s grievances. Kissing it better was not on the table, he failed to see how that could help anyway. But if he could get the reason for Dean’s growing irritation out in the open, he’d have a chance to address it. Maybe even bringing it up would help; after an interesting conversation about politics in Paradise 1 the other day, and the moment of peaceful quiet that had followed, Sam had let Castiel understand that he felt better about Bobby now, that it’d helped to admit it out loud and realize how unfounded his feelings of guilt were. Maybe if Castiel brought out Dean’s grievances, it would be something real, something that could be addressed. It could also turn out that Dean was just bored. Castiel’s misguided and easily-agitated spouse was no longer in the resistance, he had nothing to occupy his energies. That would explain why his irritability was increasing rather than decreasing. If he could be made to admit to this, he’d realize that he was letting it affect his temper, and then maybe the angel could suggest lawn bowling again.

“Dean.”

Dean, who’d been changing his bed, dropped the sheets in shock. “Goddamn- what did I tell you about flying around inside the house?!”
“You asked me not to do it,” Castiel answered. “I want-“

“If I asked you not to, then don’t!”

It seemed that his plan of getting into a squabble was proceeding perfectly. If only all his strategies worked that well.

Just appearing in the bedroom had been a bit of gauntlet. Since this odd new tension had started, he’d subtly felt less and less welcome in Dean’s room (once more, the exact opposite of what marriage should be about.) Dean now came downstairs to work with his clockwork at the kitchen table, which had truly become a neutral space where angels were welcome, or at least tolerated.

With a huff, Dean scooped up the bedding he’d dropped and packed it away in the large cedar chest. The machine would rewrite it clean in a few days. Which was good; washing sheets was a day-long arduous task that even the most desperately bored human would dodge if they could. Dean took out his other set of sheets the Machine had cleaned days ago, and spread them out on the bed.

“What do you want?” he asked over his shoulder, tone uninviting.

“I want to know why you are angry.”

Dean straightened up slowly and turned to glare, hands on his hips. “I wasn’t angry until you flew in here to find out why I was angry.”

“I meant in general. You and all these resistance members.” Dean tensed. “What do you have to complain about? Yes, angels have made mistakes, but humans make a great many more and you still find ways of working with each other. Our decrees can be hard to follow, but half of them were imposed at humanity’s bequest, and the other half keep you safe as a whole. You said we’re at war. Why? What have we done that is so bad? Is it our protection? Our efforts to feed you, clothe you, bring you peace? Our blood we have spilled to keep you safe from demons and monsters? The good lives we give you?”

Dean’s jaw dropped and he stared.

Castiel knew this was brash - voluntarily so. But every time he’d asked - calmly and civilly - why Dean worked for the railroad, or why he was so often angry, Dean would either answer rudely, ignore him, or bring up grievances on behalf of others. He’d brushed off all of Castiel’s gentle probes or offers of mediation, so perhaps a stronger push was needed. The question was valid anyway.

“Jesus. Not even Uriel would have asked me that.” Dean’s voice was totally flat.

Castiel tilted his head, not having expected that.

Dean shook his head once. “Not even he has the gall to expect me to agree you’re the good guys.”

“We are the good guys,” Castiel said, perplexed.

Dean made a noise in his throat that sounded a bit like “Ng,” as he looked away towards the far wall.

“Help me understand. Humanity is in Paradise. God lives among you. You are happier and healthier than you have ever been. You are at peace, content, you are immortal.”
Dean still stared at the wall. His jaw clenched.

“It’s a pity you do not like the entertainments, because I do see how you could be bored if you do not enjoy those—“

“You think it’s because we’re bored?” Dean asked softly.

“In part, yes. I do not see anything you lack here.”

“Freedom, you bastard.” Dean was looking at him again, gaze hard and unblinking.

“Having only a Father and no mother, I don’t see how I can be a—“

“Before the Apocalypse, the world was tough, but a man could choose his destiny, he was free. He might suffer, but he could dream and invent, he could improve and look for his value and make and hope. Now? We don’t get to choose our wives or husbands, we don’t get to choose where we live except if we beg and scrape to you, we don’t get to eat what we want, drink what we want, we don’t get to have fun the way we want and we don’t get to die the way we want. All because you want us to be content in your Paradise. Content and stupid and dull and unable to move or object. Yeah, you’ve given us contentment alright, you’ve weaponized it.”

“You have a romanticized view of the past. You have no idea of what it was like before.” Finally they were getting somewhere - and Castiel knew how to argue that one. Because Castiel knew; he was as old as the planet, and though humanity only represented a mere blink in the span of that time, it was an extremely busy, bloody blink.

“Yeah, and I never will, I’ll never get a choice or know what it was like, so don’t ask me to appreciate this blindly instead.” Dean’s curt gesture took in his room and the town beyond.

“Surely you don’t need to know death, famine and disease to abhor them. You’ve known a bit of pain in your life—”

“Yeah, usually when Uriel loses his temper.”

Castiel’s wings furled in tight in the higher spheres. He forced them to relax, even though Dean could not see the defensive gesture. “There can be… oversights in the system. But if there are issues you should refer them to an advocate like your brother.”

“The one getting tortured when you arrived?”

‘I stopped that when I got here’ would be a remarkably weak argument. “Uriel was wrong, I have already admitted that, but he is fighting the resistance,” Castiel said steadily, weighing each word. “Dean, I know you don’t want to face this, but your railroad is killing people, intentionally or not, by letting them get to the Wilds. And that is nothing to the crimes against men and angels that the resistance itself gets up to. Uriel is trying to stop them, he is trying to protect Paradise and the people living here, and he’s… lost sight of certain moral boundaries that he should not cross in his pursuit of what he sees as a necessary cause. I admit, he should not have done that to your brother, but taking dubious moral shortcuts is something humans get up to all the time, especially the resistance. Dean, these people, if they could, would dismantle the whole system. Then you would have your bloody history back, not just you but everybody else, including those who are presently happy. Do you feel comfortable making that decision for everybody?”

Dean’s gaze flinched away from his. Castiel already knew the answer to this. He’d carefully examined Dean’s record, and from that, his words with Bobby and what Dean himself had said, Castiel judged that Dean was part of the railroad, not the resistance proper. He wasn’t willing to
take that final step to fight the system and attempt to destroy it, he merely helped people escape it - still morally dubious as most of his ‘free people’ would have died in the Wild by now, or lost their souls to the Croatoan plague or to Eve’s kin. But at least he was not an anarchist.

“Uriel was different, once,” Castiel said softly, staring blindly at the basin on the shelf. “He was always strong in faith, but he used to be easy going for all that, and with a great sense of humor."

“You are not serious right now.”

"But there was an incident - several, and...things happened, misfortunes he was not able to prevent. He has regrets. He’s changed. Many of my brothers have. It’s not easy. We are your caretakers, your guardians, we care, and this- this fighting distresses us."

“We ain’t so happy about it ourselves. Specially when Uriel’s knuckles end up in contact with my kidneys. And we shouldn’t need guardians, we’re not fucking sheep to keep penned. Yeah, you know what? Some of us are bored, because you have us in a bloody zoo!” Dean gesticulated wildly. “How many people have gone to the front line just to feel alive rather than half asleep in this - this constant daydream?”

"...Many."

Dean stared as if he’d not expected Castiel’s acquiescence. But Castiel knew the numbers, and he knew the number of humans these last two hundred years who had approached the Rit Zien and asked them to end it for them. They died, they Ascended, they went to a better place, so it had to be part of the Plan too, but that part was... a little hard to decode.

“It’s different in Heaven,” Castiel said on the heels of that thought. “There it is individualized, it is made for each person. These Paradises - they are, well, they are restful and happy places, but they lack individuality, they-“

“Lowest common denominator garbage is what Sam calls ‘em after a bad day.” Dean informed him with a wolfish smile. Which slipped. “Individual- so wait, what they say is true? Heaven - when we go to Heaven, we live each in our own little basket? We’re alone?”

“No,” Castiel hastened to assure him, “soulmates share their Heaven.”

The words were out of his mouth when something deep within him shifted, like a painted screen of some idealized landscape falling away to reveal a window behind it.

...Dean would not go to Heaven, not with the sigils in his mind, he was lost if he did not remove them. But even if he did... he would not have a soulmate who could join him there forever.

“But- but no brothers - family - friends?” Dean asked, tone rising.

"...No."

Heaven would be Donna baking cakes nobody would taste anymore, other than figments of her own memory. Old Man Pete’s stories and tall tales only told to the children of his imagination. Dean - even if he did Ascend, Dean would be without Sam. Without Bobby and Ellen and Jo. Without his web of connections and family-

“How is this Heaven?!”

Dean’s words rang uncomfortably through the wide open space suddenly revealed within Castiel’s thoughts.
“Christ, you really have no clue about us.” Dean was staring at him as if he’d never really seen Castiel before. “But congratulations. You just made Paradise sound almost appealing. Give yourself a pat on the back, angel.”

“We- the humans in Heaven are content. I have been there, they are.”

“Yeah, or maybe they all lost their minds years ago and you never noticed.”

“They are. They relive their happiest memories, they are at peace-“

“Then why bother with us down here, then?” Dean scoffed. “Why this two-step affair? Shoot us all up there and be done with it.”

That hit close to the bone, though from the off-hand way he’d tossed that out, Dean did not know it. Did not know that this had almost been what the angels had opted for originally, until the God Machine, the Will made manifest of their Father, had insisted it should not be. But they hadn’t seen how Paradise on Earth with humans was going to work back then. It was... well, perhaps it wasn’t entirely flawless, but what was the alternative?

“If all of humanity had Ascended, then we wouldn’t have this.” Castiel turned towards the window and gestured out at the tidy rows of houses, roofs gleaming with slate and shingles in the afternoon sunshine. “Yes, humans would perhaps be happier in Heaven, but all of this would have stopped, there wouldn’t have been all the generations born since, this town, this community, this constellation of living souls. It would just be an empty Garden. I-“

He turned when he heard Dean move towards him.

Dean stopped a foot away, which was the space he always told Castiel was Way Too Close Seriously Dude. His green eyes were fixed on Castiel’s, unblinking, hard as jade.

“Paradise, Heaven or nothing, huh?” Dean said in a very soft voice. “Those really your only choices, Castiel?”

The angel opened his mouth. Closed it again, uncertain.

“Then I would have chosen to have never been born.”

Castiel stared at him, at the hard green eyes and the bright steady soul behind them-

“Don’t say that!”

His voice rang harsher than intended, making the pane behind him rattle. Dean tensed. Castiel had never raised his voice until now, not after their first night in this room.

Then his spouse grinned raggedly and saluted as he stepped back. “Yes sir, boss, won’t say that no more. Wouldn’t want to get my ass smote.”

“That’s not what I-“

“Save it.” Dean walked out and slammed the door, leaving the bed unmade behind him.
Castiel did what he usually did when Dean got agitated; removed himself from the immediate vicinity in order for the human to calm down, and avoid provoking him further. It felt unusual because this time Castiel was agitated too, and he wasn’t sure how to deal with that. But he came back right after the usual hour was up. This was a setback, this was upsetting, but on some front or other he felt sure he’d made progress in understanding Dean at least, and—... and something. Either way, his duty was to be with his spouse. So he appeared in his chair at the kitchen table shortly before dinnertime. He remembered belatedly that the brothers preferred that he appear in the hallway or in the garden and walk in like a normal person. But Dean didn’t comment, didn’t even turn around at the rustle of wings.

Dean was inspecting the lentils for stones. Then he washed some vegetables, cut some carrots up and dumped them in the pot of water starting to simmer on the stove. Some day old bread in the pantry was popped into the oven to make rusks. Dean moved easily, confidently around the kitchen. He obviously liked to cook, he was at ease here.

Never been born.

A month ago, Castiel would assume the words were born of ingratitude and ignorance. He’d have even agreed with the sentiment: if Dean had never been born, Castiel would be free to pursue a duty he understood, a work of meaning.

But something had changed in the last few weeks. It wasn’t ignorance speaking those words. Dean was considerably smarter than he made himself out to be at times, resourceful, clear-headed and astute. Those words… Dean had meant every one of them, Castiel knew to the depth of his being. Dean had only ever been straightforward with him, it was the kind of man he was.

Dean tasted the soup, rolled it around his mouth and nodded infinitesimally.

Castiel looked away, something sharp lodging in his mind like a splinter. His eyes fell on the table.

...He remembered Dean working hard to smooth the plane. A gleam of pleasure as fingertips lingered on the satiny feel of the wood. His hands on his hips and a faint nod when Sam and Castiel had helped him set it up in their kitchen... Dean tasting Donna’s pies, talking fillings with her. Looking at his brother when he thought nobody was watching, eyes soft. Never been born.

In Castiel’s mind was a large black hole: the picture of a world without tables and kitchens, friends and brothers, a world without Dean...

“That smells good,” Sam said, coming in the kitchen with a stretch.

Dean grunted, then visibly forced himself to focus on his brother and smile.

Sam sat down at the table, after putting down some bowls and spoons. Dean brought the soup over in its pot, careful to handle it with the pot holders.

“Should we get some bread to go with it?” Sam asked, getting an empty plate out and making a gesture to put it on the table.

“There’s rusks.”

Sam made a pleased sound. “Even better.” (A memory of a scream - not Jess!)

“Put out the bowl, though, wouldn’t mind apples.”

“It’s apricot season.”
“We should be so lucky. But I can get some from Jeremy later, he still owes me for that frieze I whittled for him. Pie!” (never been born-)

“I prefer them fresh.”

“Heathen.”

“Philistine.”

They’d sat down at the table as they talked. Dean took Sam’s hand and held out the other to Castiel. So did Sam, who looked puzzled when the angel didn’t take it.

There was a moment of silence which, for the humans, might have been awkward.

Castiel flew off. Only as far as the roof. He perched there and glared at the setting sun.

“What the heck- what’s wrong with him?” He was still close enough where he could hear Sam’s confused question. Barely. He could have easily blocked out their conversation, but he found himself listening intently instead.

”...We... had a bit of an argument.”

“Are you alright?” Sam asked, tense and worried.

“Hey, am I the one who flew away to sulk?” countered Dean, sounding oddly defensive.

Castiel didn’t know which was more depressing. The initial argument, the fact that Dean knew he’d gotten to him, or the obvious worry behind Sam’s words that implied he thought Castiel would hurt the human the angel was now united to. He thought he and Sam had ironed out some of their earlier mistrust...

It was tempting to think that this here, this feeling, the whole argument, was some form of attack, that Dean had done this deliberately to make Castiel feel doubt. Castiel had started the disagreement, but Dean could have had these points lined up for weeks, ready for an imprudent angel to ask an obvious question. That was what Uriel would believe, if he even thought about it anymore. And it was sure that Dean had thrown those words at him deliberately, trying to hurt. He’d been angry.

It didn’t make his argument wrong, however. It did not make his words a lie. Uriel would lash out because he would not want to face that, but it was there anyway. The very fact that Dean, a strong vibrant soul, who should have been one of the brightest ornaments of their new world, hated it here so much... was a failure. Their failure. They had failed their Father and the Plan he’d entrusted to them.

Memories flashed through the dimensional layers of Castiel’s mind - all the humans who were his charges and yet he’d had to hurt. A venerable rabbi shouting at him in anger. A woman crying as they took away the man she loved. A flash of light in another part of P1 where a Rit Zien had killed someone out of mercy. One of the Hunters, falling to the Croatoan infection caught too late, cursing him, cursing them all as Castiel ended him before his soul was lost.

The look on Claire Novak’s face as he took her father. Amelia had accepted, her mouth quoting scriptures her eyes did not echo, but fourteen year old Claire...- don’t take him! James had looked back. Only once. The depth of the sadness in his eyes was only now truly dawning on Castiel. What was more sacrilegious here? The fact that Dean would label that pious man, who’d unflinchingly made the ultimate sacrifice, a ‘sheep”? Or that Castiel had only thought he’d
understood the breadth of that sacrifice and accepted it as his due?

Libertad...

Libertad had been a congregation of clapboard shacks and tents housing some three hundred people. Muddy streets mounded with refuse which no Machine would clean away, surrounded by warded fortifications; the earthquake he’d sent ahead of him had dealt with those. Pillars of flame had erupted from the ground, surrounding the buildings. A half dozen people from the settlement had been outside, tending fields. He had let them flee. Their occupation suggested they were the least reprobate of the lot, and it had been ordained that he should leave witnesses to spread the Word of what happened to those who opposed the rule of Heaven.

Then he’d walked down the streets of beaten dirt, and Death had walked at his side. Houses erupted into flame, men and women vaporized beneath his gaze, small puffs of smoke and a little ash. Some tried to attack him. Bullets pierced his petticoat (he’d still been in Ethel’s vessel then, this had been almost twenty years ago now). It didn’t make him blink, and nobody got near enough to wield a blade or spell. Most of them ran away and died in the fire and the smoke and the fury.

“You’re a monster!” a man had screamed at him from within a burning building.

“You’re fortunate,” the angel had replied. Oh, they were. Those souls he’d reaped had not been innocent. They had survived by raiding the Garden and a nearby Paradise with a weakened garrison. They had pillaged and raped and murdered, they were sinners on a scale that someone like Dean could probably not conceive of. But Castiel had not cast them down into the Pit, as he would have done before Salvation, no. Hell was empty, other than a few remaining demons, no souls ended up there anymore. He’d sent them on to their Eternal Reward, before they could hurt or injure others, before they were attacked and turned by monsters, or defiled by the Croatoan plague and lost forever.

“So it is said, that all men should be saved,” Castiel remembered murmuring. Unlike some of his brothers, the thought had not left him feeling righteous. Despondency had walked at his shoulder, muttering ‘failure - failure - failure -’ but he’d done his duty without flinching.

Libertad had burned brightly in the falling evening when he’d circled the place, making sure his grim work was done. He’d ended up by the well to collect the lone survivor. The child had been too young to have committed any crimes, he’d been careful to spare her and keep her isolated from the stampede and the cull. Not that that made him feel any better when those wide eyes fixed on him blindly, after seeing her entire world erupt into fire and fury, slaughtering everyone she’d ever known.

She would have her chance to make her life in earthly Paradise for many years and centuries to come, if all went according to Plan. The others had been sinners and had been judged.

Had they all truly been sinners, though?

Now he wondered. He’d not talked to them; some were from a faction of the human resistance and knew how to combat angels, and he’d had no brethren to assist him. Besides, their elimination had been decreed by Michael himself, as a warning to others, so why examine every one of them? But had they all been condemnable? It was possible that some at least had not committed any act of barbarism, and were merely there because they’d come to the end of their rope in Paradise and had fled. This broke several decrees, but would not warrant death, only penance. He’d not wondered at the time because it didn’t seem to matter. If lambs were foolish enough to hold the company of wolves - the old testament kind - then their lives would have been miserable, he was probably doing them a favor by sending them on to their Reward. And to be fair, since their deaths had been
ordained, he would have executed them all anyway. Why bother splitting grain from chaff if it all ends up being burned, as Ishim had pointed out many decades before in similar circumstances (though it was fortunate for him that Anael was no longer the commander of the Seraphim when he’d made that remark.)

It would not have made a difference, yet thinking back on it now, not knowing felt wrong. It should matter. Maybe he could have done some things differently. And even if it wouldn't have changed much, well, it just seemed wrong. Even if it was just in the eyes of their exterminating angel, it felt wrong that they had not been... been known as individuals, as-...

The train of thought ran away with him, and he went back to wondering about Dean. Dean hadn’t known all the truth about Libertad or many of the other ‘crimes’ he’d thrown in Castiel’s teeth these past few weeks. He’d not understood any of the Plan. Castiel knew to the depth of his being that Dean was mistaken in what he thought he was reaching for. However that did not comfort him anymore. That misguided longing was also a failure on the Host’s part, now that he thought of it. If they could not make Paradise appealing… what was the point?

He was feeling doubt for the first time in millennia. Or... yes, it was the first time. Though it felt oddly familiar, like a deja vu. Strange...

Castiel’s Wings twitched and jerked angrily in the higher sphere. He shouldn’t be here (why was here here?!) He should be either down in that kitchen where God said he belonged or - or on the front line somewhere.

...wouldn’t hurt to go see what Rachel was doing. Talk to Virgil while he was at it. The front was quiet these days, which was why he’d been allowed an exceptional day of rest before an order had dragged him back here, but it wouldn’t hurt to check how the troops were handling the new patrol routes.

Castiel stood up. He could not run away from this problem now that he was, as it were, married to it, but he could go remind himself of the dangers he was defending Dean and the rest of humanity from. Dean could also do with a cool-down. Castiel would be back in a few hours, but... but maybe there were other things he ought to do around Paradise 342 as well. This was a set-back, but he could not possibly give up, on his implicit mission or on Dean. In the meantime, he did not want the resistance getting in touch with his companion and inducing him, in this uncertain state of mind, to do something stupid. He was going to go ask Zachariah, Uriel and Balthazar some serious questions about the railroad and the resistance, try to sound out the parameters of the problem. Would they try to contact Dean if they thought he was alone...? Might be worth seeing. He’d half promised Dean and half promised himself he wouldn’t use his spouse to hunt down the resistance, but this was sort of outside the bonds of that promise, he decided a little peremptorily.

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Next Chapter: Gordian Knot

So, it turned out there were worse things than being married to a bloody Seraph in the eyes of Earth and Heaven and the people of P342, and that was to be married to a bloody Seraph who was now conspicuous by his absence.
I am back on my posting schedule without a blip, through the wonders of modern technology (and our willingness to throw money at the internet until it allows us back into its hallowed halls - we’re all wire addicts in our family.) Next chapter should be out next Saturday :)

Warning for blood and battlefield surgery. Pretty tame compared to some of my other stuff... Also, as the warning implies, things heat up!

He will judge between the nations  
and will settle disputes for many peoples.  
They will beat their swords into plowshares  
and their spears into pruning hooks.  
Nation will not take up sword against nation,  
nor will they train for war anymore.  
Isaiah 2:4

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So, it turned out there were worse things than being married to a bloody Seraph in the eyes of Earth and Heaven and the people of P342, and that was to be married to a bloody Seraph who was now conspicuous by his absence.

Nobody said anything as he picked up a few supplies, but Dean still felt like he had a sign glowing over his head like a Lantern, ‘Had a fight with the better half, got dumped’.

Not that he’d gotten-...

He’d been entirely in the right, of course.

Why did he feel like he’d done something wrong then?

Sure, he’d handled it in exactly the wrong way: by getting angry and laying down battle lines and doing everything Sam always told him made arguments worse instead of working towards a compromise. But hell, it was inevitable, ‘cause that was what Dean was like. That was what Cas had married, assuming the Machine had gotten it right, and somebody feathered had probably just gotten a reassessment on his own thoughts on that score.

Fucking angels. Made everything complicated. Even more complicated than Dean had ever understood. Because angels were a bunch of dicks that had robbed humanity of freedom, robbed him and Sam of their mom, of Jess, robbed so many people of so much. But that was angels plural, as a group. Individual angels were sweet Alfie, Balthazar drawling out mock insults, Melod ignoring small transgressions because he understood a bit, it was Cas—... it was Cas. Listening, with that head tilt of his, trying to understand. Picking a tomato with an air of wonder, staring at bees, smiling at something banal on the Lantern, going down on one knee with a serious look on his face to better follow what a child was explaining. It was his spouse helping Dean haul in the wood, talking to Sam, meeting Dean’s friends, it was... just Cas.
Cas’s look of hurt and shock when he’d shouted ‘Don’t say that!’... It left Dean with this little sick wrong feeling inside, and he couldn’t say why. He’d meant what he said. He lived by those words, he fought and killed and would die by those words one day. Cas... Cas should know that. No, Cas did know that, he’d seen it when they fought by the well a month ago. Cas had not gotten upset when Dean had mentioned the railroad in the past, or their state of war; he’d lost it when Dean had said he’d rather not have been born at all rather than live forever in Paradise. The way Cas had said—... it was like Dean’s words had knifed him through the heart. As if Dean - the angry guy who kicked against the pricks because he couldn’t find a better way... it was like Cas thought that Dean made the world a better place, rather than the opposite, which would be what the Word would say.

Fucking angels.

There was nobody around the library building, it was getting late in the evening. Maybe he’d waited too long, but he’d been busy this afternoon, and then he’d aimed to work in the toolshed with the lathe running until Jonah had given the last Word of the day over the Magic Lanterns (You are the Saved, Everything is Fine, another Perfect Day, All Hail the God Machine-)

There was still someone in the library lobby, putting things away. Dean jogged up to her.

“Hi Serena. Still got a paper for me?”

“Sure do, Dean, there's a couple of them left.” There it was, that eye twitch, looking around to see where Cas was, because he’d always been at calving-rope distance before. She didn’t say anything any more than the others. Dean almost wished she would so he could explain... something. Urgh.

He glanced over the paper, a local production. Since it needed authorization by the garrison to print, it was never anything other than tame. Nothing much happened in P342 anyway... until the balls-up of a soulmatch a few weeks back, but the locals had wisely decided that that mess was not something that should be written about. Though of course they’d put their names up in the banns section the following week. It was right there, beneath Leah Sommers and Adelbert Hurley (visitor). Dean Winchester and Castiel (visitor). Dean had stared at it for something like a whole minute with bells - possibly wedding ones - ringing in his ears. Poor bastards at the paper must have spent hours on that one line, wondering how, or even if, they should report it. If they didn’t, that’d be quite an omission and a political statement in its own right. Dean just loved how his own misery was breeding company all over town in a hundred tiny ways.

This week’s offering was considerably tamer. Nothing else of note had happened, and they weren’t allowed to report news from the front line, not even to say that things were actually calming down these days. So the paper mainly consisted of carefully vetted editorials about life, philosophy and religion, as well as poems and short stories by the locals. Dean got the paper because sometimes, in the Letters section, there were carefully coded messages. There weren’t last week. He’d thrown the paper down on the parlor table after checking. Cas had picked it up and read every page assiduously. He’d mentioned liking the poem about the sunset (Dean had read it afterwards and even his unrefined tastes thought it too cheesy by half.)

Dean, making his way through the early evening street, deserted at this time, opened up the pages and glanced through the letter section as he walked. Nothing jumped out at him. He could run back and give it to Serena for another reader. He could, he should, he wasn’t going to. Instead, he was going to put the paper down on the same parlor table later, even though he didn’t have a clue if or when Cas would be back to enjoy it.

His usual mantra - fucking angels - was abruptly interrupted as he glanced up from the paper and noticed figures twenty feet ahead, coming out of a nearby alley.
Three of them. Wearing dusters and with bandannas over their faces. Drawing guns and staring straight at him.

The weapons cleared hidden holsters in slow motion. A breath thundered through Dean’s lungs, sweet as life and both about to end.

- So that was the verdict: the Joker, the railroad, the resistance, they all thought the angels might break him after all, or use him against the cause, so they were enforcing the role he’d accepted the day he’d become a linchpin.

No time to run, maybe he wouldn’t have even if he had seen them coming. His last fleeting thought was an ache of pain on his brother’s behalf, his family’s and - and a faint wish he’d died fighting by that well a month ago, a better way to go than an execution, and he’d have been spared yet another regret, someone else his death would hurt...

_Crack_ of gunshots- a hard impact-

- but nowhere near hard enough.

Dean blinked- he was staring at a tan duster.

Cas had materialized between Dean and the killers. He’d been reaching for Dean, but then the impact of the bullets hitting him in the back had knocked him into their intended target. Head thrown back by the force, eyes wide and unseeing _oh god they killed him!_ Dean’s arms leaped up to support him.

Then the blue eyes narrowed and Dean realized they’d been wide in surprise and a growing fury. Not the glazed-eyed stare of a dying man. Cas being an angel (of course).

Castiel looked around with an expression on his face that made Dean think of that hackneyed phrase the preachers used, ‘righteous wroth.’ He started to turn to where the attackers were running away down the street- but then he suddenly staggered.

“Whoa!” Dean instinctively caught him by the elbow, and then around the waist as Cas listed to the right. It was only for a few seconds, the angel managed to straighten up, but there was something heavy and off about his movements.

“What-” Cas looked as close to swearing as Dean had ever seen him, his eyes turned inwards. “What weapon was that?”

“Huh? Looked like revolvers. But- but that shouldn’t hurt you, angels are bulletproof. What- shit!” Red stains were spreading down the back of Cas’s coat. “You’re injured! Can’t you heal yourself!”

“No. The damage is manageable, but I can’t-...” Cas was still leaning on him heavily. “That weapon was meant for angels. If they’d hit me in a vital center-“

“But they were aiming at me,” Dean objected, mind whirring.

“And you _let_ them,” Cas ground out savagely, glaring right into Dean’s face up close and personal. “After the fight you put up with me last month- Were those your resistance _friends?”_

“I-“

The eyes of the central figure came back to him in a flash. That glare over the bandanna… It’d been
faintly familiar, but he’d not had time to place it in that split second. But he thought he recognized that hateful glare now, and no, not a friend. And though his group fell under the four-and-twenty blackbird umbrella, they were not a part of the railroad or the Joker’s branch of the resistance, not at all. Gordon and his lot had their own agenda. Dean had good cause to know. Back when he’d been marched off to war, in the horror and the fury and the fear of the third year of his deployment. The Hunters had fallen back and he’d been garrisoned in temporary camps and some endangered Paradises, and there he’d joined in with Gordon and his lot. Just for a few months. Fortunately he’d not been in deep enough where he could not back out. But deep enough where he’d done things he’d regret - deeply, harshly - all his life. Deep enough where he’d seen what kind of man he could become if he let himself.

And yeah, even if they were gunning for Dean, Gordon and his men would have packed weapons that could kill angels too, just in case they got a shot at any. I hope they didn’t run into Alfie or Balthazar, was the thought that dashed through Dean’s mind too fast for his loyalties to stop and examine closely.

Gordon, he was almost sure of it. Not the Joker, or the railroad, or Charlie or Benny or any of Dean’s friends. Fucking Gordon-

Oh god.

“What- Dean-” Cas staggered as Dean turned abruptly. The angel’s arm was still around Dean’s shoulder, and it held him back instinctively.

“Leggo! I need to- Let me go! They’re going after Sam!”

“Sam?” Cas ground out, his gravelly voice deepening with pain. “Why would they- wait!” He didn’t let Dean squirm away, holding him so tight it made Dean’s bones ache.

“Cas! I need to-“

“I’m faster.”

A woosh- they were in the middle of the Winchester parlor, and Sam had just sent a stack of papers flying towards the ceiling in shock.

“Dean?! What- Cas!”

With a ragged tearing gasp, Cas had fallen to his hands and knees, the back of his coat stained with two red stripes of blood.

“Get away from the window!” Dean barked. “Cas! Stay down!”

Sam, with creditable speed for someone with book learning rather than army smarts, crouched down and made his way, staying low, towards Cas, his eyes fixed worriedly on the angel. “Cas! Are you hurt?!”

Castiel lifted his head a mere inch. His face was pale, but he looked more annoyed than in agony. He grunted something uncommunicative.

Dean sneaked a peek out the window. The street outside looked deserted. “Is anyone in the house? Did you lock the door?” Stupid question; in Paradise, nobody locked their door unless ordered to by the garrison.

“Lock- no. But somebody just knocked, I was going to go see who it was.”
Dean hissed in alarm, gaze darting down the hallway leading to the front door. Cas, eyes narrowed, also stared fixedly in that direction.

Only silence. Nobody was knocking now. Could be a friend or neighbor over to talk to Sam about some advocate issue, who’d been scared off by the sudden wing flap of their landing.

It could be that.

“Both of you stay here,” Dean ordered.

Cas immediately struggled to get to his feet.

“Cas, stay put. They can hurt you- they might even be able to kill you.”

“They can hurt and kill you too,” retorted the stubborn feathered fool.

Truth be told, Cas didn’t seem to be so much in pain as weighed down. Dean won the argument by simply taking off towards the front door before Cas had gotten back to his feet - which got a few bitten off words of what sounded like decree-breaking Enochian hurled at his back.

Dean, however, knew what he was doing. The fact that they’d knocked but not busted in... yeah. He did not open the door, just looked at it carefully, then got on his belly and peeked through the crack at the bottom. Then he hoofed it back towards the parlor.

“Stay here and do not open the door,” he ordered a startled Sam, who was now holding up Cas like Dean had done earlier. He went to the side window, examined it carefully, slid it open and made his way around the house to the front door, wary of anyone taking a pot shot. Night was falling fast, and revolvers didn’t have a rifle’s range, they’d likely miss if he was more than thirty yards away... unless he got unlucky. Dean suspected he’d already spent every ounce of his luck tonight and was now running a tab.

A wire was looped around the front door’s handle. Dean examined it without surprise, with nothing more than a deep, dull anger. He carefully followed it down to the ground where a clay pot was planted right where the door would swing open. There was a smell of resin in the air, the pot had been stuck there with a large daub of it. The wire connected with a scratch pad pressed to a card glued inside the jar, probably sulfur or some other ignitiable surface. It was half buried in grainy gunpowder. Crude but efficient, since Sam would not have been expecting a booby trap when he opened their front door.

Gordon, definitely. That bastard. Dean was pretty sure he’d recognized him despite the bandana, and a bomb was his signature move alright. So was targeting a collaborator’s family.


Dean carefully untwisted the wire from the door, then for extra precaution, he broke the part of the jar where the scratch pad was glued to remove the igniter. A couple of lead ball bearings and a few nails fell out of the hole, and gunpowder blackened Dean’s fingers. He brushed them absently against his trousers before knocking at the front door.

“All clear, I’m coming in, don’t smite me.”

“Dean?!” Sam’s voice sounded worried, sending Dean’s pulse jackrabbiting again. “Come help! There’s something wrong with Cas!”

Cas had sunk into Sam’s chair which Sam had brought over from the desk. He still looked more
irritated than agonizing. “Well?” he asked before Dean could get his own question in.

“Booby trap. Let me check the rest of the house - don’t open any doors or windows,” he said tersely and ignored Sam’s gasp and questions.

Nothing else had been disturbed, so he made his way back to the parlor to squat in front of Cas’s chair. “House is clear. Cas, how bad is it? Do I need to call someone?”

That got him an exasperated look, reminding him that Cas could handle that himself, thank you very much. He didn’t look like he was dying, at any rate, so Dean straightened up, gesturing at his brother.

“Sam, check Cas’s back, I need to run to Bobby’s.”

“What?!” Cas’s growl actually shook the panes a bit and he half surged out of the chair, nearly toppling out of it. “Do not leave this house!”

“The bastards could be after Bobby too-“

“Stay! I’ll make sure they’re safe!”

“How?! You can’t even move!” snapped Dean.

“I’ve asked Balthazar to go to Ellen Harvelle’s house. He appeared there three seconds ago, he says they’re fine. He’ll stay to insure their security.”

“Balthazar?! Look, no offense, Cas, but these guys are packing angel killers, and Balthazar, I mean, he’s not exactly-“

“He is considerably more than he appears,” Cas said firmly, slowly leaning back in his chair. “With forewarning, he can handle these humans, have no fear. He’s also pestering me for explanations. I want those too. Who was that?”

Dean was silent. No point lying or pretending. But he wasn’t going to say anything either.

He wasn’t going to say anything because he believed in the cause he’d been ready to die for since he was a kid, the one John had been ready to die for. Even though the tally of the evening was that humans had tried to kill Dean and Sam, while the angel had saved them both.

Castiel made a noise of pure frustration and then his low hard words hit like punches. “Why? Why protect them? They tried to murder you - they broke the greatest of the Commandments. These men are sinners. They are wrong. They tried to kill your brother!”

Dean ran a finger through his short hair, unable to look in Sam’s direction. “Yeah. I know.”

“And yet you’ll still let them get away with this? What is to stop them from trying again? What if they succeed in killing you next time. Or Sam!”

That’s what bit down hard. Dean was a linchpin, his life had the weight of a bullet about to be spent. But Sam... Sam was his brother, his only family, his everything, and Sam was brilliant, committed, he could- he could change the world if only they gave him a chance, he-

“Then they’ll kill me.”

Sam tossed aside the few papers he’d picked up and walked over to Dean. His hand landed on Dean’s shoulder and he turned them both to face the angel.
“I don’t use the same weapons as Dean and I don’t agree with everything he does, but I’m sorry, Cas. As far as I’m concerned, what you angels and the Machine have done to us is inadmissible. It’s stifling us, it’s killing us with kindness. This is something I believe in, and I’m willing to die for it. I don’t want to protect these men who tried to take my brother away from me,” Sam added harshly, fingers tightening almost painfully on Dean’s shoulder. “But I will never betray anyone to the Host. I know some things about the resistance. Cells are independent, but many of their methods are the same, and they all use the railroad. Betraying even these maniacs could compromise the bigger picture, bring down someone else further down the line who could help free us one day. I won't do it, and neither will my brother. End of discussion.”

Cas stared at the two of them for what felt like a very long time. Like maybe he could figure them out if he counted Dean’s freckles, or measured the exact level of determination in the jut of Sam’s jaw. Dean didn’t say anything since the grandstanding advocate had already done all the necessary oration, and the Winchester code forbade him from pulling the big lubbock into a hug and never letting go...

Finally he cleared his throat. “That’s the sum total of it, Cas. But let’s take care of you now. We can’t just leave you like that. Why haven’t you called the garrison yet? You brought Balthazar into the mix.” Even as he said that, Dean’s gut suddenly informed him that Balthazar was not the same as the rest of the halo brigade...

Cas stared straight ahead, even more inscrutable than usual. Finally he said: “I think I can manage. With your help. If you would.”

“Uh, sure,” said Dean, intuition confirmed. Balthazar was not just a desultory run-of-the-mill angel, he’d been a player once, and Cas relied on him and his discretion... which also meant that Cas was trying to keep what happened here tonight in the family, so to speak. The why’s were hammering at Dean’s head, but that could wait, there was more urgent concerns.

“You got hit in the back. We’ll need, uh...” First aid for angels was not something Dean had ever had to master.

Cas was leaning forward and Dean realized he was trying to get out of the chair. He moved forward to assist. Cas leaned against him so heavily it was even odds that Dean was the only thing keeping him upright.

“Cas, this isn’t right! You’re getting worse! You were doing better out in the street. Maybe those shots were- were poisoned or something.”

The angel shook his head in a minimal gesture and grimaced. “No, but these things in my back are paralyzing me somehow. My Grace cannot affect them. When I flew, it caused a- a movement that pressed one of these objects deeper.”

When he flew over here to save Sam’s life. Shit. ‘Deeper’ did not sound healthy. “So what can we do?”

“Put me down on the ground, and get these things out of my back,” Cas said in a ‘what did you think?’ kind of way.

Dean and Sam looked at the worn carpet, which was as clean as the Machine dictated but still had had feet cross it all day.

“Nuh-uh. I’ll help, but we’re putting you down on something a little more clean and comfortable. Come on. Sam, go boil some water.
“I don’t need asepsis,” Cas ground out, hobbling with Dean’s assistance towards the hallway and stairs.

“Well maybe I just need some tea to steady my nerves,” Dean groused, giving a ‘go do it!’ look over his shoulder at his brother.

He distantly registered the sound of the kitchen pump ratcheting, water tumbling into something metallic as he helped the angel up the stairs. Cas wasn’t dead weight, he could hold himself up somewhat, he just seemed unable to move his legs all that well. Dean’s mind was a steady boil of concern. Could angels get paralyzed? Wait, this was a vessel, Cas could... just go find another (leading to a whole plethora of uncomfortable thoughts.) Except-

“Wait, Dean.” Sam popped up behind them in the hallway, kettle in hand. “Why don’t you put him down on my bed? Avoid the stairs.”

“We’re halfway there anyway,” Dean said shortly.

"I can help you down-“

“We’re fine, go get the water, and also a few clean towels.” Dean was really hoping his brother would do as he was told, because if he asked one more question, Dean would have to confront the little thought of ‘no, he’s going in my bed here’ that was scurrying around the back of his noggin like a roach trying to hide from the light.

“But Dean-“

“Sam.” Cas turned his head and winced, unable to look around all the way. “You’re an advocate. I don’t want you involved in this.”

“In- in- but you’re an angel!”

“Yes,” Cas grunted, negotiating the next step by dint of sheer bloody-mindedness by the looks of it. “Dean, I don’t need hot water.”

Boil it, mouthed Dean over Cas’s shoulder. Sam rolled his eyes and vanished back towards the kitchen, looking worried.

Dean lowered Cas onto the couch, then he went to draw the drapes before striking a match and lighting the kerosene lamp. How long was he going to have to do that for? Would Gordon and the others be back to finish the job one day? As if his life wasn’t complicated enough.

He then strode over to his large cedar chest and dug around. The Machine hadn’t cleaned his previous sheets yet, while the ones on the bed had been there since yesterday: he’d tossed and turned in them a lot last night after the fight. Not clean enough for battlefield surgery. With an internal shrug, Dean pushed aside a blanket near the very bottom and got out the sheets his mother had sewn and embroidered for him decades ago, before she went off to war one last time and never came back. They were wedding sheets, as it were, the first of many sets of linen and household items she and John would have made for their boys if life had been very, very different. The sheets had never been used, they were clean, and it wasn’t as if Dean would need them. Sammy had his own set, and hopefully the Machine wouldn’t send him an angel full of bullet holes to be his other half, and he could actually use them for their intended purpose.

“I told you, I don’t fear infection,” Cas groused, trying somewhat unsuccessfully to remove his shirt. He’d gotten the duster off, more by wriggling out of it than removing it.
“Yeah? Well correct me if I’m wrong, but you don’t fear bullets ordinarily either. Right? So indulge me.”

He quickly got the bed stripped down to the pallet mattress, spread the new sheets, left the covers off. “C’mon then, let’s-“

The next bit of sentence dangled, forgotten. Cas had managed to get the shirt off by dint of busting the buttons and letting it slide off his arms. With all the layers until now, Dean had never had the opportunity to judge what was under there. Turned out, what was under there was mighty fine. Lean frame, strong yet spare, wider shoulders than he’d initially thought, the corded arms of a soldier and a maker and a doer. The words ‘wedding sheets’ went through Dean’s brain, and the complete inappropriateness of that kick-started his higher functions. He went over to help Cas, managing to ignore the touch of warm skin on his hands and through the thin shirt he was wearing.

“Let’s get you lying down. Here, sit first, I’ll get your boots off.” It was painfully obvious Cas couldn’t lean over to do it himself.

Between Cas’s limited movements and Dean’s help, they got him into the bed on his stomach. Cas turned his head on the pillow, his face pinched around the mouth suggesting he was in some pain, but that the angel wasn’t going to stoop to acknowledging it.

“Dean, in my coat, you’ll find my blade.”

Dean looked up from where he was inspecting the damage. “Your blade? Why would I need that?”

“I told you, you’ll have to dig these things out.”

“With your- dude, are you nuts? That thing can kill you!”

“They did not go in deep. I’m hoping you can tell the difference between a bullet and my vessel’s vital organs,” said Cas stroppily without ever changing his tone all that much. People who said he was expressionless just weren’t paying attention.

“Why don’t you just go to the garrison?! Whatever reasons Cas had, this was surely way past the line where that call had to be made.

Cas stared up at him, and this time he really was unreadable. “I choose not to. Can you assist me?”

Dean shook his head - not in denial, just to clear it. “Sure. Sure. Lemme go get that water - and I’m using my penknife, I’m not hacking at you with an angel blade, that’s just begging for an accident.”

Cas seemed to consider that, his expression softening a tad. He nodded against Dean’s pillow.

A jug of boiled water, a clean basin, the pillow case of his sheet set used as clean linen to wipe away the blood, the other ready to cut into strips for bandages, and his penknife heated under a match flame, ignoring grumbles from his patient. Good thing Dean was a rebel in final. His adventures on the front line and in the Wilds meant he knew first aid. Most people in Paradise didn’t know the basics of tending injuries. Few here got hurt, or if they did, they went to the altar to get healed, or the Machine sent an angel to tend to them if it was serious enough they shouldn’t be moved. Unless they died on the spot, in which case it’d just been Their Time To Go.

Dean carefully cleaned up the blood smears down Cas’s back. Two fresh trickles pointed to the impact spots. One of the shooters must have missed.
“Okay, hang tight.”

It didn’t take long to dig the first shot out, it hadn’t embedded deep, not quite an inch through muscle and then it’d hit a rib. Cas looked supremely unconcerned by the human drilling into his bullet hole. Dean found himself wincing in his stead. Fresh blood spilled out and stained the sheets.

The bullet was a .38 caliber, Dean gauged. It looked like it was made of silver, and the really weird thing was that it was still bullet shaped, it hadn’t deformed in the slightest. Dean frowned at it. Cas half turned, hissed at the sight and made an abortive attempt to snatch it out of Dean’s fingers. Dean slipped it into his hand rather than see the angel accidentally spill himself off the bed.

Cas stared at the shot. “I didn’t know this was possible,” he said in a monotone.

“What? What is it?”

“A projectile made from an angel blade.”

Dean stared at the slug with new eyes. “That’s doable? I thought they weren’t actually made of metal - not real meltable metal.”

“...didn’t think it’d be an attack…”

It was barely a whisper, Dean had to lean over sharply to hear. Cas didn’t seem to notice, eyes riveted on the evidence in his fingers.

“I nearly missed it. I wasn’t paying enough attention, my mind was-… I couldn’t stop the bullets… I bent space, slowed time, they just kept on coming so fast, they just kept on coming...I barely got in front of them in time, I barely…”

He stopped as if suddenly realizing he was talking out loud. He stared at the pillow a few inches from his face, his fingers closing to grip the bullet, knuckles taut and white.

After a few seconds, Dean cleared his throat and brought their attention back to the present.

“The other one, um, it’s right over your spine, near the neck. You sure it’s okay for me to dig around?”

After a whole thirty seconds of silence, Cas said in his usual matter-of-fact voice, “Do not push the bullet in deeper.”

No pressure. No pressure at all.

Dean took a look at the hole, at the way the angry red swelling of blood and flesh looked larger than for the previous bullet.

“Cas, I think this is the one that moved around when you flew. It’s the one paralyzing you. I can’t see it. This... you sure we can’t get Balthazar over here? Maybe he can get me over to Bobby’s and-“

“No.”

“But-“

“No.”

“You’re a bloody stubborn son of a bitch,” Dean growled, getting up from where he was kneeling
by the bed. “I’m gonna need more light. Kerosene lamp ain’t gonna cut it.”

“You are going to need my blade for this, Dean.”

Tension ran up Dean’s spine like ants. “Why?”

“The bullet struck me. That’s why it’s affecting me this much.” Cas was still staring at the fist gripping the bullet. “I don’t think you’ll be able to cut it out with a regular knife at this stage.”

Dean had no clue what that meant, but he did not like the sound of it. “Cas—“

“It’s fine. I’ll direct you. You do not need to sterilize my blade,” he added dryly.

“I was just trying to make sure—wow, you’re going to be a joy to nurse back to health.”

“Once you get this shot out of me, you won’t have to,” was the immediate curt counter.

Dean rolled his eyes and went to gather more supplies. He got an extra lamp and some candles from an anxious Sam, lit up the room, then he went to fish around in the duster. The blade was just lying there in the sleeve, not in a scabbard or anything. Why it didn’t immediately fall out when Cas put on the coat was a mystery for the ages.

“Okay,” Dean grumbled (because he didn’t do ‘uncertain’), “What do I do?”

Cas was silent for a spell, as if thinking. “Use my blade- or your penknife if it makes you feel safer - to open up the area above the impact spot.”

“Open. Up. The... By which you mean your body?”

“Yes. There will be some bleeding and pain since I can’t use my Grace, but it won’t kill me. You know this. You could stick your penknife through my heart even now and it wouldn’t do that.”

”...I know that.” His brain knew that. His hands were sweaty and shaking. He glared them into submission. “Uh. Okay, I know what you’re going to say, but I need to ask anyway. Is there anything I can get you for the pain? You see, my old man, he might have had a stash of something perfectly illegal around the house that—“

Castiel stirred and looked at Dean sideways (not that he had much choice, considering his face was mashed in the pillow.) “Are you referring to the container of hard liquor that was hidden in the cold room in the cellar?”

“The pony keg of moonshine, yeah- wait, ‘was’?”

“I disposed of it. It contained an unacceptable amount of methanol. From the dust on it, you and Sam didn’t use it, but I didn’t want to take any chances.”

”...We’re gonna have a talk about that when you get better.”

“It wouldn’t have done much more than inconvenience me and given me a mild headache. But thank you for the thought,” Cas added unexpectedly.

“Right.” Dean took a deep breath and picked up the penknife again. It wasn’t ideal for this kind of surgery, but the knife he would have preferred to use had been in his get-away pack, presumably in the garrison storage now, and he didn’t have anything else to hand except for the angel blade gleaming silver and gold at him under the lamplight, giving him the heeby jeebies.
But Dean was made of stern stuff, and since it had to be done, it was best to do it quickly. Cas, to his credit, lay perfectly still, though something in his breathing, or, well, something, told Dean that even the penknife was hurting in these circumstances. But a few slices through skin and muscle got Cas open right up to the fucking spine. Dean used the clamp from his workshop, soused in hot water, to hold the wound open, and thanked providence and Cas for the decision that'd kept Sam out of this room...

“Okay, I can see the bullet,” Dean muttered, moving the extra lamp around as close as he could get it without setting the bed on fire.

“Good, now take my-“

It was right there, gleaming silver in the light. Dean instinctively used the tweezers from his clockworks to grasp the bullet’s base and tug.

There was a bitten off sound of pain, and Cas’s hands balled into fists. The bullet hadn’t moved a single hair’s breadth.

“Sorry.” Dean leaned back and wiped his forehead with his sleeve. “’s lodged in the bone, wedged right in there.”

“It’s not.”

“It is, Cas, I’m staring right at it.”

A short huff. “Being lodged in the bone or not is irrelevant. It struck me, it’s injuring me. The real me, not the vessel. You’ll need my blade now.”

“Okay.” Dean had used angel blades before. He had no idea why this one felt hot and twice as heavy in his fingers. “What do I do?”

“Put the tip near the bullet without touching it, and then cut gently towards it.”

”...Cas, I repeat, it’s stuck in bone. I’d have to use a hacksaw to-“

“It’s not going to cut the bone, it’s going to cut me.”

“This is sounding nuttier by the second.”

“Just do it,” groused his patient.

,...I need to point out, for the safety of my brother and myself, that if I accidentally, um, that is-”

“I am confident this will not kill me, but if it does, Balthazar is fully aware of what is going on. He will testify that this was done under my instructions and he will protect the both of you.”

“Is he okay with all this?”

“Not even remotely,” Cas said, with a tart side glance thrown Dean’s way. “But at least he knows how to follow orders.”

Dean swallowed the first five replies that came to mind, and realized that left him nothing to say. Nothing to say, just a stray thought... that oddly enough, he kind of liked this Cas more than the Cas that had been tiptoeing around him these past few weeks. Well no, not quite true, it mattered that Cas had been patient, had tried to understand... but Dean liked seeing this side too, it was the guy who’d fought him by the well, the stroppy bastard who’d silenced him with a gesture
afterwards, and who felt so strongly about Dean not being in the world that he’d lost that otherworldly calm of his.

...Maybe less distraction so he wouldn’t accidentally kill his husband. That was bound to be messy. Yup.

Dean put the tip of the knife against the bone and gave the smallest pressure. It sliced with barely a hitch, and a light much purer and brighter than the lamps twinkled beneath it.

Dean had had to kill two angels before, once during his stint with Gordon, the other in one of the worst railroad foul-ups he’d ever been involved in out in the Wilds. He’d seen it happen during the war, too. Well, a Levi killing an angel was considerably messier than this, but he knew that if you cut the vessel with the right tool, you’d see their inner light. He’d seen angels strewn on the battlefield, ash and scorched marks shaped like wings flung out beneath them. The sudden juxtaposition of that memory with his room, his bed, his angel, made his stomach flip as if he could already see the shape and shadow of Cas’s feathers charred into the wall and the wedding sheets... With the discipline he’d cultivated on the front line and in the railroad, Dean slammed shut all the doors to his imagination, his feelings, and concentrated.

The light grew brighter as he sliced, as shallow as he could, towards the bullet.

“Nearly there,” he said, voice informative rather than soothing under the effect of focus. Cas said nothing. A glance at his husband’s face - tight, pale - said better than words that yeah, this was hurting sure as hellfire, but Cas was taking it like a man. Or angel. Like a badass, at any rate. Now-

Dean blinked. He’d thought it was afterimages from the brightness of Cas’s light in the wound, but it wasn’t. What was that?

He looked away, closed his eyes a second, then looked again hard.

There were tiny pinpricks of light on the back of Cas’s neck, skull and forehead, the part Dean could see in profile.

The first vague thought - maybe the third gun hadn’t been a revolver but something with angel-blade grapeshot - petered out. No, too small. Too neat. Too evenly spaced and symmetrical.

Too goddamn familiar.

A dazed sort of incomprehension trickled down Dean’s spine like cold water. What... what... why...?

“Dean? What is it?” Cas was frowning at him, not moving his head but straining to see out of the corner of his eye.

“Um, fingers cramping. Just a sec. Getting there.”

The knife back in the injury nudged the bullet. Dean couldn’t help but glance up to see those pinpricks burn bright for a second.

Feeling numb, Dean followed instructions and sliced around the bullet - more light trickled out, an odd feeling, that this here, this was Cas, more than the man walking around that Dean usually addressed by that name.

Tweezers around the bullet, he gave Cas’s face one last look - and the pinpricks shone fitfully as he drew the slug out without a hitch. And yes, there was no doubt about it, the pattern was familiar.
Dean had seen them before. He’d seen them, bloody little fingerprints, on his own face and neck years ago. The day he woke up after a night he could not remember, in a shack out in the Wilds, with Bobby, face grave, at his side. The station master welcoming the new linchpin of P342. The day Dean had received the wards deep in his mind to trap it so no angel could dick around with his thoughts.

...Why did Cas have the same kind of markings?

Cas gasped and reached back with barely any sign of stiffness. His fingers touched his shoulder an inch from the injury. The light glimmered, and then faded as the rip Dean had made repaired itself slowly. The pinpricks on his neck and forehead were already gone. Dean stared, but couldn’t even see scars. There wouldn’t be scars - not the way the flesh beneath Cas’s fingers was knitting itself together. What had happened had not marked the flesh. It had marked what was underneath.

Dean opened his mouth... closed it again. He did not know what to do with this knowledge. He knew he could not point out to Cas how Dean recognized the significance of those injuries, because that might reveal too much on the mind trapping technique. Hell, maybe it wasn’t strange. Maybe it was normal. Almost all techniques used against angels had originally come from their magic and lore, hijacked and re-purposed by humans. Cas was a soldier, a high level one at that. Maybe all Seraph had the same kind of binds in their minds so that if they were captured, the enemy, be it demon, Leviathan or human, could not use magic to read their thoughts. Right.

The wounds on his back were still red and angry, but Cas let his hand drop back to the mattress, and his eyes fluttered shut. He was pale, there was sweat on his brow. Dean hadn’t even known angels could sweat. Learn something new every day.

“You okay? I mean, is there anything I can do?”

Cas sighed. “I just need some rest now. It will be better in a few hours, when my Grace-“

“Whoa! Whoa! What are you doing?!“

Cas had heaved himself up onto his arms and knees, breath hissing in pain. He froze at Dean’s bark and tried to look around without moving too many muscles. “I was going to go down to the kitchen.”

“Why the bloody dickens would you do that?!“

”...Where else am I supposed to recuperate?“

“Right here, you bloody idiot! Oh for Pete’s sake- Cas, you took a bullet for me, two in fact, I’m not going to kick you out of my bed the instant they’re gone. Just lie here until you’re better.”

“But-“

“That was not a suggestion. I’m the one who dug those out of your back, that makes me your doctor and I can damn well tell you what to do until you’re better. Your turn to shut up and follow orders.”

Cas made a sort of non-sound of vague confusion. “I... you understand I do not actually need to lie down to-“

“What did I just say?”

”...Very well.”
“Get some sleep - or whatever you do.”

“Meditation and focus are usually—“

“Or whatever you do. I’m going to tidy up, tell Sam you’re still alive, then get some sleep myself. You, uh, you don’t mind if I sleep next to you, right? I guess I can share with Sam- don’t you fucking move!”

Cas paused in the act of once more pushing himself up onto his elbows. “But if somebody needs to not sleep in a bed—“

“Fine, we’re sharing. It’s decided. Now shut up and stay still or I’ll tie you down. How you think you’ll bloody well heal—“ Dean grumbled all the way down the stairs.

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Dean woke up slowly. He hovered for awhile in a half-awake state, eyes closed, knowing what was going on, but unperturbed, even perhaps appreciating this lazy moment with another body close by, even if it was just the container for a tough and feathery sunovabitch.

Finally he rubbed his face and opened his eyes. Cas had turned his head during the night to watch him, which did not rate high on Dean’s comfort level

“Still alive, I see,” Dean grunted.

“Yes.”

“Awesome.” He levered himself up into a seated position and looked down at Cas’s bare back, which still looked mighty fine in the light of day. Perhaps even more so. It’d been awhile since Dean had gotten laid, and he’d better get used to that state of affairs, he reminded himself. Cas, pure and prudish feather-duster that he was, probably wouldn’t care who Dean had a discreet fling with as long as it wasn’t him, but Dean wasn’t going to drag any poor sap into committing this kind of adultery; there had to be a special name for the sin of cheating on an angel.

The two wounds had closed up, but there was a lot of bruising, particularly around the neck, a red and purple welt the size of both of Dean’s fists.

“How come you’re not all better?” On the battlefield, the Rit Zien had healed Dean up of a badly bitten arm in a handful of seconds.

Cas’s eyes had followed his movements without moving his head or any of his body. “I spent a lot of my Grace healing the injury to my being and knitting up the vessel’s flesh.”

”...And what, you ran out of juice? Don’t move!”

Cas had started once again to put his hands beneath him. He looked up at Dean and then craned his neck as if he could see his own back. “I am fine, Dean. I am keeping my full reserves of Grace in case we are attacked again, but I’ve healed up to the point I need to. The remaining bruising and tearing are not important, they don’t impede me.”

“And so what, you were planning on going square dancing now?”
"...No?" Cas answered cautiously as if he thought this might be a trick question.

"Then stay down until all the bruising is gone and you’re completely fit. How long will that take, a couple of days?"

"No, a few hours at most."

"...Yeah, freakin’ angels. Okay. Stay here and stay calm and stay lyin’ down or I’ll sit on you. Need anything?"

Cas looked faintly mystified by all this. "...No."

“All good then.” Dean got to his feet with a stretch.

“You are not to leave this house,” his spouse said sharply.

“Uh-uh, don’t worry. We’ll stay put for now, until you’re all better and Bobby’s hopefully had time to check his sources. I’m assuming G- those bastards didn’t make a move on him, or Balthazar woulda told you?”

“Correct.”

“‘Kay, lazy morning indoors it is.”

Dean walked over to the dresser. His face felt grimy and stiff. The porcelain bowl’s water was scuzzy with the blood he’d washed off his hands last night. Dean tipped the jug over his cupped palm-

Instead of water, a note fluttered out. Dean managed to grab it before it fell in the basin.

Cas was still facing the other way, towards where Dean had slept. Mouth dry, Dean turned so his body hid the note in case the angel glanced around.

’Wow, Winchester, you sure make things complicated. The rabid dogs who attacked you will not be coming back. Your standing orders are to keep yourself and your angel alive until we figure this out. 4+20 Blackbirds.’

It wasn’t specifically signed, but it didn’t need to be. The jug had been half full of water last night, today it was full of information. While Castiel was not ten feet away. Only the Joker could pull that off, his mastery of tricks and magic were second to none. Hell, that’d been part of the message. ‘Sure, Winchester, you have an angel up your craw, but that’s not a problem, see?’ Also the fact that Gordon was apparently dealt with, or would be soon - that was nice to know. And that the Joker saw something that could be made from this situation.

“You get some rest, Cas, I’ll be downstairs.” Dean carefully pocketed the message, he’d burn it in the oven as soon as he got to the kitchen.

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Next chapter: Old Sins Cast Long Shadows

"Cassie, what are you doing lying down?"
Good question. The answer to which was: Dean’s anxiety spikes whenever I try to get up, he seems to think he can take better care of me lying down. Castiel ran that sentence past what he knew of Balthazar and the latter’s reactions, and offered a truth that was only faintly tinged with the sin of omission. “I’m working.”

“We’re allowed to work in bed with our shirts off? Why wasn’t I informed?”
From the time that it goeth forth it shall take you: for morning by morning shall it pass over, by day and by night: and it shall be a vexation only to understand the report. For the bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it: and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it. For the Lord shall rise up as in mount Perazim, he shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon, that he may do his work, his strange work; and bring to pass his act, his strange act.

- Isaiah 28:19-21

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Reports, analyses and decrees flowed through his mind. Castiel frowned into the pillow. He was normally better at it than this. He couldn’t concentrate adequately, his senses on too high alert covering the house, making sure Dean and Sam didn’t leave, and that nobody uninvited burst in.

Talking of uninvited.

“What are you doing here?” Castiel asked sharply.

“Right this moment? Staring down at you in wonder. Never thought I’d see the mighty Castiel flat out on his stomach.” Balthazar had his customary amused drawl firmly in place.

“The Harvelle residence?”

“Safe as houses. I learned a few tricks on the front line, some wards and sigils that’ll keep ‘em safe for now. I applied the same to this house on my way in. There, see? Anyone coming in the front door will set off an alarm that will have us back here instantly. Um, Cassie, I do have to ask, are you okay?”

“Yes.”

“What are you doing lying down then?”

Good question. The answer to which was: Dean’s anxiety spikes whenever I make a move to get up, he seems to think he can take better care of me while lying down. Castiel ran that sentence past what he knew of Balthazar and the latter’s reactions, and offered a truth that was only faintly tinged with the sin of omission. “I’m working.”

“We’re allowed to work in bed with our shirts off? Why wasn’t I informed?”

“I’m posted to this house by necessity, I can work where I please. Besides, those killers know they
injured me, they might make another attempt on Dean or Sam while they believe me incapacitated.”

“That’s part of what I came to tell you. They’re no longer here, they left town right after they winged you. The railroad in 342 may be currently defunct, but their escape routes are still functional, and these kind of rodents know all the rat-holes. I found traces - don’t look so surprised, I’m not that dull a blade yet.”

“I’m surprised they left the job unfinished,” Castiel said truthfully. But now that he thought of it, there was something different about Balthazar these days. He wasn’t the burned-out being Castiel had met when he’d first arrived in this Paradise, he seemed more vital, more alert. A blessing, as Castiel was going to need his friend more than ever.

“Well, I’m not surprised. These lot aren’t soldiers. They hit and run, and live to fight another day. Wish we’d learn that lesson.” Balthazar sighed, but then his usual facade quickly fell back in place.

“If you can tear yourself away from Dean’s bed, brother, I’ve found a few additional things we should look into.”

“About our attackers?” Castiel leveraged himself up without any difficulty from the mattress. With a flicker he was fully dressed next to Balthazar, the bed neatly made behind him.

“No, I think your husband has a better chance of finding out about them. I’m digging around for dirt on our side of the fence. You know, it just occurred to me how very bizarre those two sentences are in conjunction... But we shouldn’t talk about it here, trust me. In no way, shape or form do you want to be in this house when I tell you about this.”

“Is Dean safe?” The question slipped out reflexively.

“He’s completely and utterly safe, more so than he was yesterday at this time, good grief. Come on already.”

Castiel contemplated telling Dean where he was going to be... but he didn’t want to waste time convincing his spouse that he was fine if there was something that needed his immediate attention. Dean would realize, if he came up here and found the bed empty, that Castiel had recovered and gone back to his duties. He surely wouldn’t mind.

The next second they were in the garrison’s loft, which had been quickly reconverted into a courtesy office for the Seraph grounded here, and which Castiel had promptly given over to Balthazar, to the other’s evident satisfaction in the face of general disapproval. It was a large room with high ceilings, void of any decorations or furniture since angels did not require any and this was not a room set up to host human visitors.

“What is it?”

“Did you check today’s decrees?”

“Yes, briefly. I saw nothing relevant to my situation.”

“You missed it, then. Check it out.”

Balthazar lifted his hand. To a human, nothing would be visible. To an angel’s eyes, light blurred and shaped itself into the complex and beautiful letters of Enochian, streaming by like complex gold filigree.

“It’s a repeal. What is it repealing?” Castiel’s mind flashed over waves of light. “Oh... that... “
“Funny, huh? The original change to the decree was made for his mother, now your boy gets his own modification to repeal it.”

“They can no longer force Dean to reenlist,” Castiel said slowly, in wonder. “This restores the original decree that said soulmates can’t be separated from their spouses, relocated or sent off to war.”

“The modification of which had been made expressly to get Mary Campbell back to the front line. Indeed.” Balthazar stared at the luminous writing as if impressed.

“It was past time. The original decree should never have been modified in the first place. Separating families like that—”

“Oh we agree on that, it was a complete fabrication born of necessity. But Azazel and his Croatoans were kicking our derrieres and threatening hundreds of Paradises. We didn’t have enough angelic troops to combat all the fronts Azazel created, we needed some good human fighters to supplement our strategies. And so what did it matter that she was married and the mother of two kids? There was no way a warrior and general of Mary Campbell’s caliber would be left to rot at home. Mind you, she could have fought it. We thought she would. She didn’t. Seriously, Cassie, I spoke to a couple of angels who knew her back then. She wanted to go.”

“We shouldn’t have let her.”

“She helped turn the tide. It took humans to think down to a demon’s level, and the Hunters had the numbers to oppose the Croatoans. She wasn’t the only wife or husband called to the front last century. All those humans helped do what we couldn’t do alone: finally took down Azazel’s army.”

“Most of them died accomplishing this. Mary Campbell died. Azazel killed her with his own hands - and she shouldn’t have been there in the first place, she should have been at home with her family.” Castiel’s eyes never left the two lines added to the original decree, the repeal that would keep Dean safe, the earlier modification that had doomed his mother. “We took a shortcut, Balthazar. We broke a rule and bypassed one of the Machine’s decrees. And now we’re paying the price. We’re only just discovering, as we’re looking into this family, the damage John Winchester did to us over the years in the resistance. His family, his friends, they are all ripple effects from that one bad decision.”

“It saved a lot of angels’ lives. And humans too,” Balthazar added before Castiel could remind him who were the ones in charge of protecting who. “As for John Winchester’s biggest ripple effect—... oh, maybe you don’t know.”

“Know what?” Castiel asked sharply.

“Mary took out Azazel’s army, John took out Azazel himself.”

“What?!?”

Balthazar nodded to himself. “You didn’t know.”

”...Does Dean?”

Balthazar cocked his head and looked at him for a short time as if saying, you think about Dean a lot. “No idea. Because John died as a rebel and with a mind trap, his soul didn’t make it upstairs, so he was never officially recognized as deceased. Tell you the truth, the whole episode is wrapped in mystery. Old Yellow Eyes being so tough was already odd. I was more involved in that side of
things than you were at the time, and let me tell you, the demony toff was downright eerie. Virgil got him with one of his weapons, and Virgil does not miss, yet Azazel walked away laughing. We couldn’t figure out how to kill the bastard - which was why it was so fortunate Mary clipped his wings by helping take out his small army of demons and Croatoans. Then years later, a couple of Asmodel’s trackers stumbled upon Azazel’s remains, with John Winchester’s body nearby. Seems Azazel stabbed him, but John took him out... somehow. Azazel was gutted somehow, even though he’d laughed off angel blades before. He also had a bullet hole in his heart, but again, not sure how that would have affected him. Heck, we’re not even all that sure John is the one who killed him, we have no concrete evidence, except there were no traces of anyone else around, just a few dead resistance fighters and deader demons. But I wager he’s the one who did Azazel. To avenge Mary.”

“But- but that’s-“

“Life. You can’t tell Dean either, it’s decreed and the record sealed, my friend.”

Castiel’s jaws clenched hard enough to make his vessel’s teeth creak. The Word, probably. Damn their- their crazed need to control all information, on Earth and in Heaven. Couldn’t they see this was surely causing more damage than it could possibly be avoiding?

“I had a feeling you might not know. Now you see why I didn’t tell you any of this under Dean’s roof. A rare moment of sensitivity on my part, you’ll grant.”

Castiel nodded distractedly, mind still on his thoughts. “Was that what you had to tell me? I’m glad they can’t send Dean off to the front line -”

“Oh no, the repeal of Mary’s decree is just the start of what we needed to talk about.”

He seemed both amused and irritated by Castiel’s interrogative look.

“Cassie, Cassie, Cassie. Mary’s amendment to the decree was over forty years old, you think it’s a coincidence it was only repealed today?”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying I need your access level to do some digging, because we have two things we need to find out very quickly. Why was this amendment repealed today, out of the blue? It can only mean one thing: someone put in a request to get a spouse into the army, which triggered a review of the decree involved. But the front is quiet, there’s no reason to drag a husband or wife away from their soulmate right at present. So who was it that they were trying to march away to war?”

“...Dean?”

“This could be something completely unrelated to him, but I’m thinking not. We need to verify it though. Because if it is related to him, we need to find out who on our side was trying to kill him - I’m sure you agree - and also who on our side went to the trouble of getting a repeal in place to keep him safe. Both interesting questions, don’t you think?”

“Yes,” said Castiel tersely, reaching out for Communion. “Show me what you need.”

Light sprung to life between his fingers. A kind, gentle Light divine; it knew him, it acknowledged him. The warmth he touched was indescribable. Even if this part of the Machine’s function was automated, just a tool, and he used it every day, he never got tired of this. After millions upon millions of years of silence, following a time when their Father only talked to a selected few, now God was finally among them in his new form. He had talked to them all during the Apocalypse for
a few years, telling them there was a Plan, a way out of this darkness, and that he would be with them from now on. Once Lucifer had fallen, He had no longer spoken to the rank and file, only to Michael back in Heaven. But He was still here, Castiel could feel His presence when he Communed, and he had felt the touch of His hand when he’d been united with Dean. Their Father was still here... How humans could consider this... this sacred gift to be a convenience, or even an inconvenience according to some... but they had not stood in silent vigil for billions of years with silence and faith as their only guide.

After giving silent thanks, as always, to their Father, and humbly asking for His guidance, Castiel plunged into the flow of divine Light, Grace and multidimensional spatial folds that was the real mechanism of the Machine. The clockwork on top of each Paradise puzzled many angels, actually, not that they’d admit it to their charges. Depending on his mood, Castiel either thought it was merely a visible symbol to remind humans of the place of God among them, or else it was a subtle form of humor. Yes, humor. The Light that poured forth from the Machine no longer talked with them directly in so many words, but it still carried their Father’s Will, His Intent, echoes of His Being; Castiel had discovered with a mix of puzzlement and delight, that it was considerably more lighthearted and whimsical than he’d ever imagined.

Castiel dove through beams and layers of divine Light. The Machine had its own functions, such as uniting souls, which it carried on in magnificent independence. But it had left the Host with the mechanisms to manage the Paradises that were their charges, like a father bequeathing a library and additional empty shelves to his children as he moved on to a different house. There were four hundred and thirty one Paradises to date, supervised by tens of thousands of angels, with a total of six hundred and thirty five thousand and ninety three saved souls (that last number being subject to regular fluctuations, naturally.) Plus all the movement of the Spheres which needed to be recorded, troop movements managed, confirmation that the personnel assigned by the Machine could be spared to where He wanted to send them, the decrees, all the entertainment and updates coming from the Word... That was a lot of information.

Reports, orders and decrees flashed by at the speed of thought. Castiel came up against a wall in no time. “This is the order to enlist a soulmate, but I can’t see which Paradise it was sent from, whom it concerns or which angel made the original request.”

“Oh Cassie, you lack finesse.” Balthazar touched Castiel’s hands and jumped into the flow at his side. Castiel could only watch in admiration. Balthazar was on fire today. Drilling at full speed through reams of data at Castiel’s side, pausing to look at the oddest things, such as timestamps and data markers. Castiel rarely paid those any attention, the orders themselves were usually his only concern.

Finally Balthazar broke the connection, conjured a chair into the empty space and sank back into it. “Hm, it’s not the sordid and revealing plot I thought it might be.” He sounded disappointed.

“You found something?”

“Nothing I can prove. You want to know what I think anyway? Knowing you can’t act on it directly.”

“Of course.”

“Zachariah was trying to get rid of you, that’s all.”

“What?”

“Looking at the times logged, and knowing what I know of report routing, this is what I would bet
my Grace happened. Remember when you stormed in here two nights ago asking pointed questions about the railroad, the resistance and how he could get away with such shoddy oversight?"

Castiel winced internally. He’d dropped by the garrison minutes after his disagreement with Dean, and he’d been in a rare bad mood. It was embarrassing to think back on it, because Zachariah might fully deserve to get his feathers blown about, but that had not been the reason Castiel had been so angry... an unfortunate lapse of discipline for a Seraph when he thought on it. Not that any other Seraph in the history of Creation had ever found himself in his position before, but Castiel had the feeling that ‘I had an argument with my spouse’ was not the kind of excuse he should bring to bear at work.

Balthazar smiled dreamily up at the ceiling as he tipped back in his chair. “Something you need to learn, brother of mine, Zachariah’s pettiness knows no bounds. If we could weaponize it, we would have decimated all our enemies eons ago. He wrote this thirty minutes after you left his office - probably the time it took him to realize he could do this and what would happen. It’s not half as dumb as his usual plans. Dean was a highly ranked soldier, he’s been called back to the Hunters several times over the years, nobody would have reason to find this particularly odd. Yank him away and put him at the front line, you’d be bound to follow, right? Hey presto! No more Seraph in Zach’s feathers.”

This time, Castiel’s anger was entirely legitimate and directed at the right target. That- that petty bureaucrat! Ripping Dean away from Sam, from his family-

“Remember, you can’t call him on it, he’d deny it. I trust you to find other ways of making his life hell. I can give you ideas if you want,” Balthazar said brightly, leaning forward again and reaching for Communion. “Now for the other side of this equation. Here, join me, it’s easier to dig around when you can cut through the Word’s authorization layers.”

“Other side?”

“We know who started the process to drag Dean out of here. Now, who blocked it?”

“Does it matter?” Other than thanking them.

“Yes, Cassie, it does matter,” Balthazar said, sinking into the Light. “There’s stuff going on here. Trust me.”

Twenty minutes later - flying through layers of data at the speed of a thought - Balthazar leaned back once more, this time with a moue of disappointment.

“Unfortunately this entity covered his tracks... I wonder why...”

“What do you mean?” Castiel had the information they’d found in minutes sparkling in his palm, he gestured at it with a wing tip. “It’s here quite clearly. This angel here in the Statutes Library looked at the request, realized which decree was being used, against whom, and put in a counter-order. It makes sense to me. Do you know what Sam and the League could have done with this? If we tried to use the same dubious decree that killed his mother to rip his brother away, especially when the borders of Purgatory are calm and we’re cutting back on our number of human troops?”

Balthazar rubbed his eyes, one of his quaint human gestures. “Cassieeee, don’t be so naive. Yes, that’s a great explanation, but I know how these yahoos work. There’s a reason they’re not on the front line, or working in a Paradise. These are the most dogmatic unimaginative angels you can dream up. They would not have put two and two together unless there was an unofficial note on the report - the kind I’d stick on to highlight dangerous situations while keeping it on the down low.
Somebody put a great big warning label on this order so that by the time it arrived to get sorted and followed, it was obvious there was a serious problem and it needed to be booted up to someone with pull. I’ll talk to the guys in charge there, I have my ins and outs still, but I’d be surprised if they can help me track where the original warning came from. My intuition tells me this is going to be a dead end. It tells me something else, too…”

Castiel watched Balthazar send shards of Light dancing up to the ceiling, an idle movement. “Yes?”

“The speed at which it happened... and the fact that it got put in so smoothly... I don’t know. My gut says this came from on high. Very on high. That warning either got flagged by the upper cadre of the Word or...”

“Or?”

“I don’t know. Maybe the Machine Himself decided it wasn’t fair.” He gave a snort.

There was a moment of silence.

“He... He can’t do that, can He?” Balthazar asked almost nervously, dropping out of Communion as if he’d been caught by their Father doing something not quite approved of.

“He united us.”

“Uh, that’s a function of the Machine, yes, but not this. Statutes, orders and decrees are our wickets.”

They stared at each other in thoughtful silence for a moment. Then Balthazar crossed his arms over his chest and looked down at the floor.

“I mentioned when you first came here that something strange is going on, right?” he said softly.

“Yes. You never really said what, though.” And it wasn’t as if Castiel had not had lots to distract him after that brief conversation.

“It’s hard to pinpoint. But you remember what I said when you first arrived? That nobody could be dumb enough to set up this powder keg of a town on purpose? Since your mishap with matrimony, I’ve reexamined that notion. Idly to start with. Just trying to figure out whose decision it was to send poor sods like me here. None of my inquiries led anywhere.”

“So nothing, then.”

“No, you don’t get it,” Balthazar corrected him, eyes still riveted on the floor. “There’s eight angels in this garrison, seven of them complete losers, and Jonah. Jonah is here because Naomi expressly sent him - and that’s weird. But every one of us screw-ups, there’s no clear-cut decision to punish us by sending us here. We just sort of... arrived. All seven of us. That’s a bit of a coincidence. And then there’s all of the others, the humans. Neither John nor Bobby were natives here. John was moved here during a forced relocation that I can find no clear order or effect for. He was a visitor to Paradise 209 where he met Mary and brought her back here, fine, that’s normal enough I guess. But Bobby Singer, Bill Harvelle, the few others I’m pretty sure are railroad- the only native here is Rufus Turner, all the others were moved here at some point or other despite having several black marks against them that should have avoided putting them all together.”

“Was somebody using Paradise 342 as a dumping ground?” The Machine normally made suggestions as to where humans and angels should be sent, but due to their losses during and after
“That’s what I initially thought too, but if that was the case, why is there no trace of this plan? This is not coming from one particular office, either. All these people seemed to have been brought west by an ill wind, and collected here like dandelion seeds, to sprout crazy. No wonder this is one of the main railroad operations on this continent. But then there’s odder stuff.”

“Such as?” Castiel had to urge when Balthazar paused and looked up briefly, apparently unsure how his conclusions were going to be received.

“In the past century, four angels have disappeared from this garrison. Vanished. Never found a trace. That can happen, sure, but nobody seems to have noticed. We have a major railroad here and there’s every indication that our humans regularly do favors for the Joker, so why-“

“Who?”

“The Joker. He’s a notorious resistance leader. Major thorn in everyone’s backside. This place is a hotbed of resistance... and there’s still only eight angels here? You see, I thought Zachariah was making us look good in his reports, but even he’s not that greasy a liar. Why is Asmodel or Naomi not here in person, kicking all our tails? Finally there’s the really weird stuff, that I only found out recently when I really started digging. I, ah, may have made a few calls from your office pretending to be assisting you.” Balthazar’s grin was charming and his eyes a trifle worried.

Castiel didn’t even blink. “As far as I’m concerned, you are. What did you find?”

“This one is weird and freakish in equal measure. I was focusing on the Winchesters, and one of the things I checked was the record of Sam’s birth. You know how they say he was born under a bad star?”

“Superstition associated with meteors are common.”

“Ye-es, except I happened to check, there were no meteors that night. Our Recorders are very thorough, for all they have the most boring job in all of New Jerusalem.”

Castiel frowned. “Then what was it?”

“Your guess is as good as mine. But you know the really freaky bit?”

“Just tell me, Balthazar.”

“I’m trying to keep the Winchesters off the Waves as much as possible,” Balthazar said, skirting the unspoken agreement they had. They’d not actually discussed it out loud, but it was a fact that they did not fully trust the other angels in the garrison - or the Word, or the trackers - to react rationally and calmly to Dean’s past. “So after realizing that whatever happened on the night of Sam’s birth was not a meteor, and that my query might bring a curious Recorder to follow in my tailwind, I, ah, traced my request for information back to see if I could, shall we say, bury it.”

“Balthazar...”

“Not destroy it, I don’t tamper with information any more. But in this instance, I didn’t have to. Every single trace of my request had disappeared. Erased.” Balthazar’s voice had sunk to a whisper (though the purpose of an office such as this in a garrison of celestial beings was that it was proof against multi-dimensional eavesdroppers as a courtesy.)
“Erased by whom?”

Balthazar made a wild gesture with his hands echoed by his wings, to indicate he had no clue and could not even begin to speculate.

“...Who erases a query about a meteor, or whatever it was?”

“I don’t know. Odd, right?” Balthazar asked brightly. “And you know what? I tracked a few other reports I sent over the years, anything related to Sam and Dean. Three others have disappeared. Poof. No trace. Gone. And another I sent, that required a response? I remembered that one, because I thought the answer I got back at the time was odd. Well the initial query - a detail about Dean’s grandfather Henry - was modified and half my initial information request had been removed. I have no idea how or why or by whom.”

Castiel felt a strong and oddly human urge to rub his forehead, like he saw Sam and Dean do on a regular basis when they were trying to explain a puzzling human custom to an angel. “What does that all mean?”

“No idea, brother, no idea. But I am going to find out.” Balthazar’s grin seemed to illuminate the plain rectangular office around them. “Turns out, I still do love a challenge after all. You go home and cosset that human of yours. Something tells me the Winchesters are at the center of all this. I thought it was because he’d ended up married to you, see, I thought this was somehow aimed at you. But now I’m beginning to wonder... maybe you are the one getting dragged into a long-standing plot surrounding Sam and Dean. Hmmm... they’re a fun pair of humans to tease, but I can’t imagine anyone going that far out of their way to-”

Castiel didn’t stay to speculate, he was home a second later, making Dean drop a jug in the kitchen in surprise.

It turned out Dean was upset that Castiel had left without informing him or ‘getting all better first’. Castiel accepted his tongue lashing without protest, subdued and worried about the nebulousness of the threat surrounding them. He thought he had hidden his concern adequately, but Dean abruptly cut off mid-argument, gave him a probing look, then made Castiel sit at the kitchen table for the rest of the day while he puttered around, baking and working on his clockworks without referring to the incident any more.

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Next Chapter: Promised Land

“Maybe they would appreciate Paradise if they knew what Hell was truly like.”

Chapter End Notes

The plot thickens! The next chapter is not related to the Winchester-centric plot, however, I'll leave it to speculation as to what it could be about... (obviously nothing rosy and happy and full of kittens.)
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners… You will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long devastated; you will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations.

Strangers will shepherd your flocks; foreigners will work your fields and vineyards.

- Extract from Isaiah 61, prophecy of the New Millenium

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Nothing untoward happened the day after the attack. Neither did the assassins come back the day after that, which happened to be a Sunday. Dean and Sam seemed unconcerned by the possibility of further reprisals as they made their way to Ellen’s house for their usual dinner. Castiel, who did not want to worry them, made sure that he showed no hint of tension or hyper-awareness of the streets around them as he escorted them to the door.

“Come in!” Robert Singer’s voice drifted through the open parlor window in answer to Dean’s knock. “Ellen’s busy in the- quiet, woman! The boys are old enough to open a door!”

From the kitchen - clearly audible to Castiel - came Ellen’s hectoring about manners and proper households and such. Castiel had spent hours examining this incongruous relationship (which he conscientiously labeled ‘can’t be proven to be anything other than friendship’, in a way that would make Sam proud.) At first glance, this association proved just how necessary the Machine was for a harmonious relationship. This adversarial pairing looked like a disaster. On the surface. Even an angel had picked up hints of the real depths beneath the nagging and grousing. If nothing else, the fact they’d been living together for a completely unapproved thirteen years was a good indication of how things stood. As Castiel lurked awkwardly in the entrance, caught between Ellen’s hollered ‘proper people show their guests in!’ and Bobby’s ‘what, they too stupid to figure it out?’, Castiel wondered what his and Dean’s relationship would look like in thirteen years. It was prickly enough after a mere thirty days. Or it had been, it was harder to judge since the attack.

“Don’t just stand there, come on in,” Jo told him with only a touch of resentment as she walked from the kitchen to the parlor, carrying a jug of water and a tray of glasses.

Castiel obliged, but paused again, startled, as soon as he reached the open door to the parlor. There was an additional guest this evening: Balthazar, a glass of lemon punch in one hand and looking perfectly at home and relaxed, was chatting with Rufus. Castiel scrutinized him, and so did the Winchesters.

“Ellen insisted,” Bobby answered from his armchair, looking a trifle disgruntled. “Because he came to help us the other day. Not that we needed help,” he added just a little louder.

“It was my pleasure anyway, Bobby,” said Balthazar, interrupting his conversation with Rufus and leaning past the man to smile at Bobby. The smile was oddly sharp, and in the higher dimensions his feathers ruffled in a provocative gesture. Castiel gave him a reproving look that bounced right
off Balthazar’s brass.

“Invite one, invite them all, who cares?” grumbled Jo as she plonked the jug and glasses down in reach of Sam. But she spoke with barely a tenth of her usual venom, she seemed more irritated and resigned.

“Bobby, you sure?” Dean muttered. Then he shook his head and said loudly, “Nothing against you particularly, Balthazar, I appreciate your help the other day, but it’s one hell of a political statement, right? Cas is one thing, but you... “

“What, Ellen and I can’t have who we want over in our own house?” Bobby said grumpily.

Dean didn’t answer directly, but he turned his head and looked at Jo.

Jo stopped filling a glass and thumped down the jug. “Let’s get one thing straight, you all know where I stand on angels.” She strode over to Castiel, still in the parlor doorway. “But I know where I stand on family, too. You saved my brothers’ lives, Castiel. For that, you’ll always be welcome. Even if they’re a pair of knuckleheads:“

“Hey now,” said Dean with an eyeroll.

”-and you’re still an angel.”

“You weren’t supposed to know all the details,” said Castiel, looking over her head towards Balthazar.

“Don’t blame him,” Jo snorted, “everything gets known here sooner rather than later, this place is a village.”

”...No, it’s got more than ten thousand inhabitants, it’s a town.“

“Oh, lord preserve us,” Jo said, but her mouth was twitching up at the corners, an unusual expression on her face as far as Castiel had ever seen. Beyond her, the Winchesters exchanged a look full of meaning, smiling quietly.

“You’re welcome,” said Castiel in knee-jerk reflex. He wasn’t even sure why he’d said that, but Dean frequently told him he wasn’t saying it enough and being rude.

Jo went hmf, but handed him the glass of water and then told him to stop standing in the doorway like an idiot. Since she called Dean an idiot all the time, Castiel decided this was actually a positive development.

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The evening was more pleasant than previous ones he’d spent here. Balthazar kept the conversation flowing, light and polite. Very polite when it came to Ellen, and very complimentary. Castiel approved, though for some reason it seemed to rile Bobby.

Castiel helped take dishes back into the kitchen, but walked out onto the porch leading to the garden rather than back to the parlor animated with conversation. He picked a wooden chair which would have been weatherbeaten and full of splinters if the Machine didn’t continuously rewrite it.
A whippoorwill was chasing dandelion seeds floating on the breeze in the gathering dusk. The voices from the front of the house made the back seem even quieter, bar the brush of boots coming near.

"Everything okay? Your back bothering you?"

Castiel looked up interrogatively at Dean as the latter stopped at his shoulder. "No."

"Oh. You’re awfully quiet this evening," Dean elaborated. "More so than usual."

"Nobody’s talking to me," said Castiel. It was a factual statement, yet it seemed to make Dean wince. He glanced back at the house.

"Uh, yeah, well, what can I say, Balthazar’s the new boy in town- I mean, not really, we’ve known him for years, but we don’t usually get to visit with him in these kind of situations."

"He is a much better houseguest than I am," said Castiel, once more perfectly truthfully. Yet that seemed to rub Dean the wrong way, he sat himself down brusquely on the wooden armrest of the chair.

"He’s a prat," Dean said in a low voice, then rolled his eyes. “I keep forgetting, bloody angel ears. No offense, Balthazar,” he added loudly. “You know it’s true.”

"None taken, Dean." Balthazar’s voice floated over the evening air through the kitchen’s door to the parlor. “And you know it!”

Dean looked at Castiel as if this had proven some complicated point he’d been trying to make. Castiel looked back at him blankly.

"Yeah, much better out here," Bobby grunted, joining them on the porch. “S’hot tonight.”

"The temperature is basically always the same," Castiel pointed out. “But humidity and wind conditions vary."

"He means it can feel hotter some days than others," Balthazar said smoothly, coming out of the door with Rufus in tow and sitting by his side on the stoop of the porch. They’d been talking most of the evening, and it had not always been polite or decree-approved, though Castiel had by now decided to exercise his own judgment in the matter. There were more serious sins. One of which presently occupied him, seeing Bobby and his family, the Winchesters - even Rufus might have been targeted two days ago.

These humans, these interesting, kind people...his way of seeing them had changed in the past few weeks. He’d always been their guardian, responsible for their protection, but in truth, he’d been more concerned about their souls first and foremost, and then their safety, their overall health and numbers. But these weren’t faceless humans anymore. Bobby had invited Castiel into his home because the older man loved Dean like a son. Ellen had given him a look of surprised approval last Sunday when Castiel ate all of the savory pie she’d made (Dean had coached him on table manners). Rufus treated him like someone ordinary, it was strangely refreshing. Jo had given him that small crooked smile tonight, and Sam and Dean had shared a look of warmth and happiness that had included him when she’d finally unbent a little. All of these things could have been extinguished two days ago. Assassination? Murder? Sin? There had to be a worse name for the crime that had almost happened here, it should have a name that would make the stars cry out in horror.

Sam was holding a tray for Ellen, who was dispensing drinks to all and sundry.
“Herbal tea?” Bobby grunted at his glass, leaning forward in his rocking chair. “I said I wanted beer.” He meant sassafras beer, of course, the kind Sam and Dean were drinking.


“No thank you, Ellen,” Balthazar answered politely, while Castiel absently shook his head.

“Then Jo and I are off to visit with Darlene and Marco.”

Castiel looked up swiftly.

“That’s your neighbors, right?” Balthazar put in.

“Yes, we’re setting up a reading circle with some friends.”

“So you’ll be right next door.”

“...Yes. Why?”

“Just curious.”

Balthazar had been admirably smooth, and Castiel didn’t think he’d let any emotions show, but Ellen’s astute gaze went from one to the other.

“I’m not cowering indoors, boys, any more than the rest of you. But if it makes you feel better,” she added dryly (and for some reason directing this at Castiel rather than Bobby or Dean or any of her family,) “if anyone bursts in with bad intentions, we’ll all holler loud enough for you to hear. You’ll be there instantly, I’m sure, which might be just about fast enough to stop me from doin’ something to those rabid prairie rats that the Machine would not like me doin’ on a Sunday, or indeed any day. Good night.”

Castiel listened until he heard the neighbors’ door shut and a very distant murmur of calm voices begin. It was surprising that Bobby and Dean were at ease enough to let Ellen and Jo leave unattended. Just because the killers had fled as soon as their assassination failed, did not mean they would not come back. Paradise no longer felt as safe as it should for the Seraph.

Bobby made a face at his herbal tea, then leaned back and rocked a few times, looking around. “I need to get some more tables outside at the Roadhouse,” he declared. “Ellen says proper eatin’ and drinkin’ are an indoor business, but it’s so fine of most evenings that-“

“I have something to ask of you,” Castiel said, standing up. Dean almost fell down as the chair shifted into his weight.

Castiel moved forward under their curious gazes. He wondered briefly if he should let the more urbane Balthazar, accustomed to humans, lead this conversation, but this was his responsibility.

“Please hear me out before you respond,” he said peremptorily. “Dean has already refused to answer questions about the man who attacked him, but-“

“Cas,” Dean said sharply.

He was about to add more, but Castiel spun on him and gave him a look in which he deliberately let slip some of his anxiety and frustration. Dean’s eyes narrowed, either in warning or in appraisal.

“Let him speak, idjit.” Bobby had not stopped rocking gently.
Dean blinked. “What? But—“

“Let him say his piece. If he asks me the questions I think he’ll ask me, I can say no just the same as you, but you can at least let him make his argument, can’t you? I’d like to see Ellen try to muzzle me like that.”

“Ellen muzzles you all the time,” said Rufus around the rim of his beer glass.

Bobby looked ready to dive right into that argument, but then he shook his head and made a grumpy gesture in Castiel’s direction. “Go on.”

“I am not going to ask you to name names,” Castiel said testily, with a bit of a glare of his own at Dean, who looked a trifle mollified. “But I want your cooperation. It does not need to be directly against the resistance. If we could improve the co-habitation of people and angels in Paradise, if we could present a common front against killers like the one who attacked Dean and Sam the other day, wouldn’t that be better for everyone?”

He wished he could read humans better (without scanning their minds) as he had no idea what those calm looks from Bobby or Rufus meant. Balthazar seemed intrigued at his tack; this was not the usual method a Seraph would take to approach the matter of a resistance cell, that was certain. That normally involved repeated smiting.

Castiel had never been any good at spinning persuasive arguments. Angels in general were not very good orators. Orders were orders, you did not have to make poetry out of it. But seeing Balthazar tonight had brought home just how very, very bad Castiel was at it in particular. But God had chosen Castiel, not Balthazar, for this union between man and angel. It wasn’t to the others he talked, even though he’d requested their attention, it was Dean, his partner, his soulmate, that he addressed.

“I don’t understand,” he said bluntly. “A man tried to kill you and your brother. I feel like this should be making most of my argument for me. I don’t understand why it doesn’t feel that way at all.”

Dean rubbed his eyes. “Cas...” It was soft, tired, and it ignored the spectators as much as Castiel’s words had. “I explained. Well, Sam did.”

“Do you approve of what those men tried to do? Even if you’d not been the one targeted?”

Dean’s jaw tightened. Then he said, “No.”

“But you let them use your railroad to move around.”

Dean glared at him, but he didn’t say anything.

“You protect them because they belong to the overall resistance,” Castiel said sharply, turning briefly to Sam, to Bobby and Rufus, but always returning to Dean. “Doesn’t that worry you?”

“Worry me? Look, some cells—... we don’t agree with the methods, but—“

“But that’s my point. You didn’t betray your railroad or your resistance or your friends, and they tried to kill you anyway. Saying that not all the resistance is like that does not signify, because that is what their rebellion is leading to. That freedom you threw in my face the other day, that’s your savage freedom, Dean: humans killing each other over a disagreement. Not even a disagreement as to a cause such as opposing the Host, no, simply in the way they think the cause should be fought, between those of you who believe that some compromises can be reached, some situations
accepted, and fanatics who will accept no compromise and who can only think in terms of blood shed. That is the result with a common enemy - angels - to oppose. Can you imagine if you were truly on opposite sides? The atrocities that would be unleashed? You think you’re at war with us? I’m sorry, but you have no concept of what the word even means.”

Dean’s eyes flickered sideways. Castiel followed his glance, saw Bobby stare at the ground, and Sam look perturbed. Rufus appeared unaffected.

“I accept that we have failed you,” Castiel said heavily, and how odd, what should have sounded like an admission of defeat, if not downright blasphemy, came out so easily, in so few words. “I accept that this Paradise is lacking in some respects, that some of you are not happy here. Then work with me. Balthazar and I have means, we have those who will listen to us.” He hoped. It might take awhile, but surely here was a cause worth pursuing. Between Castiel’s bloodminded persistence and Balthazar’s knowledge of both humans and the Host, surely they could at least lay the foundations of a new way forward.

“Give us a chance to build something better, something more adapted to those of you who don’t enjoy Paradise as it stands. But don’t wish for the alternative, Dean. This ‘freedom’ - it’s fool’s gold. Those men who tried to kill you and Sam, that is the freedom you were reaching for, that is a fraction of it. The barbarity of it- you younger humans have no notion, you’ve only heard the stories. Rufus, couldn’t you have told them more about it?”

Rufus, suddenly addressed, nearly spilled his sassafras. “’scuse me?”

At Rufus’ side, Balthazar suddenly straightened and shook his head quickly at Castiel while his wings flared in warning-

“You were there, you know what it was like before Paradise. Why haven’t you told them more about the horrors you survived? Why are you even helping them reach for a freedom you only achieved after the apocalypse?”

“Say what now?” Dean said, staring at Rufus. They all were.

Castiel looked around the circle of faces and then back at Rufus. “You... hadn’t told them? They don’t know you were born several years before the Apocalypse?”

Rufus stared at his drink.

Castiel examined the old soul in its casing of flesh and memories, flickering briefly then steadying again. “You should have testified. They should know what this ‘freedom’ they are reaching for means. You are infinitely better off now, Rufus Turner - since that is the name you chose for yourself. It was not the one your master gave you, though, was it.”

“Cassie,” Balthazar protested softly, eyes wide.

“No. Don’t you think they should know?” He looked around the stunned faces. “Dean here is the only one who has seen combat, and even that was only the tail end of Lucifer’s army, the death throes of evil. But that war was better than the day to day living of most of the humans before the apocalypse even happened. Why have you never told them, Rufus? You and others like you gave them these railroad terms they use, the tricks to get people away - you never told them what the people who originally created the railroad were running from. Maybe they would appreciate Paradise if they knew what Hell was truly like.”

Rufus looked up quickly over their heads, staring at the moon rising over the rooftops, the golden
glow of the Machine reflected in every Lantern, twinkling kind light into the streets all around them (“The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light,” said the Book of Revelations, and for centuries now it had been so during every peaceful night in New Jerusalem.)

“Paradise,” he said ruminatively. “We called it the Promised Land.”

Sam put down his glass with a click, still staring. Nobody else moved. Bobby’s eyes were perfectly round as he looked down at his friend sitting on his stoop as he had undoubtedly sat for nigh on a century, since they’d known each other.

“The Promised Land was a place we would tell tales about. At night. When-... when it wasn’t possible to sleep. In the Promised Land, we’d no longer be bought and sold. We’d no longer be flayed. Hobbled. Raped. Killed. Punished for the smallest reason. Or no reason. We wouldn’t be worked to death no more. We could have all the food we could eat. We wouldn’t see our parents die of old age, broke-back and bent at thirty. If we saw them die at all, if we weren’t taken-... there’s times even now... There’s times I think I’m asleep in- that I’m asleep and dreaming all this.”

Rufus’s usually cultured tone had slowly slipped into a different accent, one his friends had almost certainly never heard before.

“1844, here in the Promised Land, is when I learned to read. An angel taught me, ‘cause the good folk here and elsewhere, they were still...” There was a long pause and then Rufus rubbed his jaw. “They were still adjusting. He - Daniel - he encouraged me to explore all sorts of holy texts. Me and my sister, we converted to Judaism, more ‘cause we could than because it truly called to us. Already the notion of distinct religions meant little at that point. Then we settled down here. A good place. Then again, all places are the same now.”

Rufus was staring blind at the skyline, the trees swaying above, the peaceful stars and the scintillating Machine in the distance.

“All the food we can eat, appearing on our table. We can watch our kids grow up, as long as they’re not dispersed during a relocation. Or do something wrong and get punished for it. Or get picked for a visitor by your machine. But if your machine marries them off, at least they’re cared for, loved, they'll have children of their own. If they're allowed.” At his side, Bobby’s eyes flickered shut in sudden raw grief. “If they do get chosen, well, odds are it’s because of their bloodline, because their children could be called upon to be vessels. Right? But at least you require our permission before you kill us, that’s something.” This time it was Balthazar who looked away abruptly. Castiel didn’t flinch, he was already carrying the full weight of that cross.

Rufus shrugged. “Might not happen, though. Might be our children can watch their own children grow up the same way they did, and their kids too, safe and warm. They never have to work, or find their path, or watch crops grow on land they bought and cleared, or fight for what they believe in, or make a decision. We can live in the Promised Land forever. Forever and ever.”

Rufus stood up slowly, walked a few paces towards the garden gate and the street. He paused as he passed near Castiel and glanced at him, but only up to his chest.

“Yes indeed, master angel. These are mighty kind chains you have us in. Mighty kind.”

The old man crossed the garden, passing by Sam without a word. He made his way out into the street and down Maple, feet dragging in the dust.
Five seconds later Bobby scrambled out of his rocking chair and ran after his oldest friend, catching up but then just walking at his side, as if unsure of his welcome. They were still walking side by side when they disappeared around the corner to Potters lane.

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The brothers were silent as they walked back to their home. Sam kept casting side glances at Castiel.

“He’ll get over it eventually,” he finally said.

Castiel scrutinized him. “Get over what?”

Sam stared, then looked over Castiel’s head as if expecting Dean to intervene. Dean was staring straight ahead at the road, as he’d been since leaving the Harvelle residence. He said nothing.

“Castiel, he did not want us to know about his past. Didn’t you figure that out?” Sam finally said.

“Why not?” Castiel asked, puzzled.

“I-... I don’t know. But he didn’t. You didn’t realize that, and I’m sure Rufus will know that, he-“

“He survived. He’s thrived since then. He is an important witness to what the Old World was like before the Millenium. Why would he want to hide this?”

Sam once more looked pointedly at his brother who still said nothing, just climbed the steps to the front door in silence. Castiel realized that he had committed some kind of error, but he really could not say what.

“Cas-...” Sam turned around in the doorway to the parlor and to his room beyond. “Humans are complicated. Don’t-...” He did not seem to know how to finish that, whether it was an admonition or a ‘don’t worry about it’. He turned abruptly and left. Dean had walked straight up the stairs without a word and without turning back.

Castiel went to sit in the kitchen at the table. His thoughts drifted with the moon overhead, bumping into the whole nebulous ‘humans are complicated’ conundrum. He hoped he had not injured Rufus in some way, that had not been his intent. How the truth could injure anyone was a puzzle, but-

He twisted in his chair and glanced over his shoulder as Dean walked in, carrying his jug. He dumped water out in the sink and put it beneath the spout, pulled the handle a few times.

... Castiel did not know how he’d injured Rufus, but he was now certain he was going to find out, along with how mad Dean was this time. He’d not looked at Castiel once since they’d left the Harvelles, so ‘very mad’, certainly. Castiel felt a sinking feeling in his being, a smudgy sense of depression at the thought that this was what was going to be between them from now on; every attempt to breach the distance only creating a greater rift, more resentment and anger... Something had changed between them the other day, when they’d argued, or maybe it was within Castiel that something had changed. He hadn’t really cared when Dean was angry with him before, it had merely been an impediment to his mission, a problem to which he would search for a solution. The fear of failure had been the motivator there. Failure still hovered over him, but the fact that Dean
couldn’t even stand to look at him seemed to take up all the room in his thoughts, rather than concern over his duty to his Father.

Dean braced his hands against the sink and stared out the kitchen window at the moonlit garden.

“I’d heard-...” He paused, cleared his throat. His voice was softer than when he was angry, less sharp.

“I’d heard about the old world. We all have. Sort of. Stories, you know. I’m surprised... I’m surprised the Word don’t make this their weekly catechism. Behave or we’ll go back to that.”

“Talking about those horrors violates several decrees,” Castiel admitted. “‘The old ways are done.’ Revelations.” And the angels shouldn’t have to raise bogeyman and feed fear in order to get people to appreciate Paradise - there had to be a word greater than ‘complicated’ for these tangled bags of flesh, soul and free will.

“Hm. Figures. Got a great weapon there and you lot are too-... too stuck up in your ivory tower of rules and self-righteousness to use it.” Dean still hadn’t turned around. “Thing is, the stories don’t do it justice. Not when you hear a first hand account. That makes it real. Knowing what-... knowing that happened to someone you see every day. That makes it real. It’s been churning my guts for the past hour. I... I feel stupid for saying this. For not realizing. I guess you think I’m dumb. Ignorant. A baby in a cowboy hat.”

Castiel was silent. That was theoretically true, yet the image jarred with everything he knew and respected about Dean. He just didn’t know how to say it. He also wondered why Dean being upset at himself made Castiel feel just as bad as the thought of Dean being angry with him.

“The thing is, Cas… kids… kids are great. But not if they never get to grow up. You guys aren’t letting us grow up.”

“Our Father - the entity who made us both - he would not wish for you to grow up into that. Rufus’s experience was not even the worst that history has seen.” In his mind, the human existence was a tapestry of screams, people turned to meat in dungeons, stakes aflame in the night, men and women violated their entire lives, whole populations burying their children or throwing others to the wolves… “That life you are reaching for is a monstrosity.”

“Yeah. But staying in the cradle is no life at all.”

Dean hoisted the jug and turned away, still not looking in Castiel’s direction. The angel felt an unreasonable and unnatural urge to follow him, go up to his bedroom, talk some more, or just - just lay by his side to watch him fall asleep like he had two nights back, see Dean slip away from the sudden grim truth that Castiel - Castiel of all people, the one who should be making him happy and content - had painted over his world. The urge made no sense and would not be welcome in any way, so he stayed where he was, thinking. He had a lot of time for that. Nights seemed longer now that he was living at a human rhythm, and they seemed much darker than when he’d been drifting alone, up among the stars.

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Next Chapter: Pawn to King 8, Joker’s Wild
“Do you know me?”

“That I do.” The stranger nodded hugely. What Sam thought was a large toothpick in his mouth turned out to be a stick of hard candy.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so that was all a bit grim. Next chapter will obviously be a bit more chipper, seeing who’s involved - for a bit. Then it’s back to your regularly scheduled program of Shit Goes Down.
Unlike Dean, Sam had always longed for a calm, orderly life. Mostly. There were times when he felt something boil up within him, something single-minded, violent and dangerous. He thought of it as his ‘John Winchester’ side, and barricaded it behind thick walls of study, discipline and an honest desire to help people. The last time his John Winchester side had almost come out had been when they had taken Jess away. Dean had saved him from his worst instincts back then. Dean, his brother, his only family, the bedrock that had helped Sam rebuild his orderly life, his beliefs, and focus once more on advocacy and the bigger picture.

Needless to say, this past month had blown that hard-won peace and stability to kingdom come. His John Winchester side came dangerously close to boiling up a few times, especially when that angel kept strutting around the place as if he owned a controlling interest in Sam’s brother.

If it’d been a being even remotely similar to Uriel, Sam would have done something stupid and regrettable, he was sure. Fortunately Cas was... Cas. All around weird, undoubtedly sharp and dangerous in his own way, while at the very same time being confoundingly, almost endearingly boneheaded and blunt, and sort of helpless in the face of the human drama the poor sap had found himself plunged into against his will. Since Cas wasn’t hurting Dean, and had even gone to some lengths to protect him, Sam was slowly making his peace with this crazy state of affairs, a bit like the southwest city quarter around him. He had not yet re-conquered his calm and his routine, but he was pretending everything was fine for all he was worth, and waiting for reality to catch up with the illusion.

Everybody he crossed in his corner of the city seemed to be doing the same. Inis Milligan, all prim and proper in lace, asked him pointedly about Dean and Castiel as if these were any two perfectly ordinary brothers he might have. Right. All fine.

Thoughts coiled in the back of Sam’s mind. Someone had tried to murder Dean. They’d injured Cas - injured a Seraph! If the garrison had found out, good god... Then that discovery about Rufus, what a blow to the way he and Dean saw the world. To add to it all, Sam was getting strange vibes off Cas and Balthazar at times... Being an advocate meant being as suspicious of angels and their motives as the best of the railroad operators, so Sam was keeping a careful eye on all that, for all he was beginning to like them both just a bit.

But right this instant, the sun was shining, a soft breeze from beyond the wall wafted by, heavy with the scent of the Garden, he had a new letter from the League to read and everything was fine, Mrs Milligan and he had both agreed.

...Humans had a wonderful flair for self-deceit... maybe he should write a monograph about it for-
“Pssst!”

Sam stopped walking and glanced around. Then he backed up a few steps.

Two houses and a barn off of Stevens street formed a crooked little twelve-foot alley. At the end of it, a man was leaning against the wooden pales. A man Sam did not know. He was dressed in canvas trousers and a hussar-cut jacket, hanging unbuttoned and opened over a dark green cotton undershirt. A soft black hat of some foreign make partially hid his features, so he wasn’t a Sheep, and not a loafer either from the brightness of the eye that peaked briefly from beneath the brim. But Sam knew all the regular people in Lawrence, by sight if not by name; being the only advocate in Lawrence for over thirty years meant he’d met most of those who could still get into trouble. This was a stranger? Out on the street?!

Seeing he had Sam’s attention, the man beckoned him.

Sam hesitated, but only a second, then he walked quickly down the alley. “You shouldn’t be here! The garrison is still on alert after everything that’s happened last month - it’s a mess. You need to get-“

“Hi Sam,” said the man with a crooked grin.

“...You know me?”

“Huh-uh.”

“I... are you looking for Dean? I’m sorry, I can’t help you, I’m an advocate. Look, let me give you directions to somewhere safe. You need to get off the street.”

“That I do.” The stranger nodded hugely. What Sam thought was a large toothpick in his mouth turned out to be a stick of hard candy.

“Whoo, you’re a tall drink of water!” the man added. Despite his own words, he seemed to have all the time in the world to run his gaze up and down Sam. His features, which had seemed unremarkable at first, were alive, rather pleasing in final, and oddly suited to a mischievous smirk.

“Yes. Look, you-“

“When you were born, you were no bigger than a cake pan. Amazing.”

“Uh...” The man seemed to be in his thirties, but that hardly signified. “Are you- were you a friend of my parents?”

“Your daddy and I could have spent a whole year debating that question and not come to any solid conclusion, beyond the fisticuffs and the broken bottles, but I was there when you were born. Born under a bad star, they say, huh?”

Sam frowned. “Yes. That’s nonsense. There was a shooting star on the night of my birth, but-“

“It is nonsense, but it wasn’t a shooting star either, it was an angel I had to murder,” said the man - who had, fast as lightning, taken the candy out of his mouth and then touched Sam’s forehead with one of the fingers not holding the sticky treat. “Don’t worry, he was a particularly loathsome little toad. I did it to protect you - well not you specifically, I didn’t give a rat’s ass about a squalling wrinkled little pink critter, but there were greater things at stake. Still, I was there to see you pop out. I guess that makes me your fairy godmother! Or maybe your guardian angel, but we all know you don’t like those, do you, Sammy.”
The words washed around Sam. He felt caught in amber and his mind frozen between two thoughts. He was unable to move as the stranger took his fingers away from his forehead and touched his shoulder.

“Anyhoo, we should get moving. Things are about to get interesting up and down the Spheres. C’mon, kiddo. Let’s fly.”

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Just his luck, it was Melod on duty at the altar. Dean stifled a sigh. Heh, at least it wasn’t Zuriel, who’d get his order wrong on purpose. Melod would honestly try to get it right and only screw up by accident.

“Dean.” Melod seemed to come back from whatever long internal journey he was on most days. “Can I help you?”

“Yeah, need some more wood.”

They were in the building right next to the garrison, an offshoot thereof. It looked like a large warehouse, stacked with objects and various sundries that humans had asked for and had yet to pick up, with a long stone table in the center. The latter was completely useless to the ultimate process at work here, but the altar gave the humans something to focus on, and the angels a place to sit down and wait for petitioners.

Once upon a time, when God had first come to live among them as the Machine, He had answered every prayer willy nilly. You just had to sit down in your parlor and think, wow, it’d be nice to have a knickknack shelf with a row of porcelain pigs right about there and poof, there it was. The Machine was omniscient and all powerful, after all. It could do anything anytime. It was humans who were the limitation here. Dean had heard-

(It occurred to him that he could ask Rufus about it, he’d lived through it. Holy hannah, Rufus had lived through the apocalypse and the crazy decades after. Dean kept thinking of things he wanted to ask the old man, and then would ponder how badly Rufus would kick his ass for being a nosy bastard, and Dean wouldn’t blame him...)

In short, people couldn’t handle it. Plain and simple. Paradise, right? Should be great, in theory. Yet other than a few people who were already Loafers before it became a lifestyle choice, every human on the planet had had to work for everything before the big A, and it just seemed hardwired. Having one’s desires poof into existence was great for awhile, but then people started acting strange. Houses would end up full of useless things. People would start stress testing what they could imagine, what they could pray for, as if involuntarily seeking a way to break the system. Some would start strange competitions to best decorate overstuffed homes. Or would lie in bed all day conjuring food and water and bedpans and such and live like roaches in a nest of filth. Or would burn their homes to the ground and run away to live in an empty barn, and gibber when the Machine rebuilt their dwellings a day later... Not everyone was affected, or to the same degree, but even so, Paradise came dangerously close to tipping over the edge for awhile, and nobody could figure out why.

Then the angels came down like a hammer. Or so said the resistance. Dean didn’t want to feel like a traitor in his thoughts, he still believed in the cause, but the fact was, when he now visualized that
screwed up period, he did not imagine angels striding through throngs of frightened people, dictating orders and throwing their weight around. No, he’d imagine his own garrison - a few nasty pieces of work like Zach and Uriel being dicks, but the others wandering around fruitlessly, with Cas at their head wearing his puzzled and frowny ‘why are you all not making any sense?’ expression, staring around at the disaster and wondering how their precious Plan had gone awry. The end result was the same, of course, but... but it changed the way Dean felt about it, just a bit.

After a few confusing years, the altar was set up in every Paradise: a place where humans could go ask the angels to intercede on their behalf with the Machine and obtain something they needed. And to avoid it getting crowded, or the angels from being overrun, a quota and delays were set in place, and then the merit system had crept in - probably thought up by oily weasels like Jonah, but hey, they finally had a way of getting humans to behave with positive reinforcement, and they were going to use it. Heck, rumor had it that one did not actually need an angel to make the prayer for humans, as long as the petitioner was near the altar, or indeed anywhere in the garrison compound, but Dean didn’t know of anyone who had the cojones to try that out. Rebels like him might have the guts, but dissidents made it a point of pride to ask the Machine for as little as they could, and more often than not didn’t have the merit to ask for anything much anyway.

Melod looked at Dean with his big serious eyes. He seemed more focused than usual. Maybe because if Dean asked for wood, and Melod accidentally ordered up a box of melons and a taffeta dress, it wouldn’t only annoy Dean, it would also annoy the guy he was married to. Dean wasn’t sure what he felt about that on several levels.

Dean gave him a very exact description of what kind of wood he needed for his various projects. Then he cleared his throat - and felt irritated at himself for the hesitation, because this was just one more thing he was asking for, and he’d been helping out neighbors all over the place this month, he had merit to spend for once, and-

“And a beehive,” Dean said, and wondered why he felt like there were ten people around him in the empty warehouse, gawping at him and whispering amongst themselves.

Melod didn’t even look up from the hands he had open before him, cupping nothing that a human could see as he communed. “A beehive,” he repeated dutifully.

“I’ll put it in our backyard. I’m cooking more, Donna’s showing me new kinds of pastries, honey’s useful for all sorts of things anyway, and bees are good for the garden-“ and oh my god when had he become a babbling idiot? Why was he justifying himself to Melod of all angels, who wouldn’t give a flying crap if Dean intended to wear the beehive as a hat? And why was he two seconds away from adding, “and this is absolutely not because Cas thinks bees are very interesting and looked keen when I mentioned it”?

Melod looked supremely uninterested in his explanation, so Dean put it away. Angels...

Dean relinquished his spot to the next human who’d wandered in, and headed towards the far door, the one he usually avoided like the plague since it lead further into the compound and the garrison, rather than the great outdoors. Yeah, his life really had turned upside down last month...

...His thoughts touched upon a tangle of emotions and contradictions that’d knotted in his gut these past few weeks. Despite his best intentions, his feelings towards Cas were... more complicated now. The guy had taken a bullet for Dean, he’d saved Sam’s life. But oddly enough, when he touched the parts of himself that had changed recently to see what they were made of, it wasn’t only Cas shielding him with his body that popped into mind. It was Cas being stroppy, or puzzled, or putting his foot in it, or going all quiet when Dean snapped at him, or giving that faint smile of his when he discovered something out in the world that he found entertaining, often for reasons
Dean could not conceiv of. Dean wasn’t sure why these feelings kept drifting through his mind ten times a day. He did know he did not like it. The Joker had a plan, that much was obvious from that note. Dean had to be sure his feelings were clear-cut and certain so he could carry them out when those orders did arrive. And he would. He knew himself that well. He would carry them out. He just didn’t want to hate himself too much for it afterwards...

The garrison was quiet when he walked in. Zuriel was being all self-important at her station, as if she and her communing were the only thing keeping P342 from flying apart at the seams. Elizier was talking to some young lad at a far desk, handling some complaint by the looks of it. Nobody else was around. Oh, right, Cas would be in his office, he’d said, talking to Balthazar.

Dean made his way up the stairs and ran smack dab into Uriel.

“Morning, sheriff.” The brassy grin was automatic. He’d not even thought about Uriel in the past few days.

“Winchester,” Uriel said in a voice so neutral it was almost as bad as if he’d let slip some of his dislike.

“We hardly see you anymore. How’s it going? Torture any advocates lately?”

A door on the mezzanine above opened abruptly and Cas walked out with a frown on his face. Damn angel ears.

“Dean, I’m up here.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dean muttered, taking a step towards the second set of stairs.

“Go on, your betters are calling,” Uriel murmured snidely, turning towards Jonah’s office.

“Aww, you can’t break my teeth anymore, so now you have to try to hurt my feelings,” Dean chuckled after him. “That’s, hmm, that’s actually kinda sad.”

Uriel’s step wavered just a fraction, but his dignity would not let him descend into a put-down match with Dean Winchester of all people, and Cas frowning above them forbade any other retaliation. Uriel walked on.

Dean’s grin was unrepentant when he rejoined Castiel. “Your workplace is so much fun, I can’t imagine why you spend all your time stuck at home.”

Castiel’s eyes flickered to where Uriel had disappeared, as if wondering if he should weigh in - and Dean was rabidly curious to see whose side Cas would take in that case. But in the end the angel just turned and led the way into the office. Dean reaaaaally hadn’t like that in the past, when Cas had dodged his prods during the first weeks of their marriage and angelically walked away as if he was above confrontation. But then there was that day he had not walked away… everything after that blow-up, and after the attack, had shifted. Now he and Dean engaged, whether over small stuff or big. This was the first time he’d just ignored an issue since, but in this instance Dean wasn’t going to call him on it; it really had been rather petty (even if it’d felt amazing.)

“I’ll be done in a few minutes,” Cas said over his shoulder.

“Thought you’d be done already,” Dean said casually, following him into the office. “You said you’d be quick. Hi, Baz.”

“Oh, I get a nickname too, do I?” Balthazar was standing in the center of the bare room, hands out
for communion. He spoke absently without looking up.

“I apologize,” Cas said, looking displeased (not that many humans would have been able to pick up on that, but it was pretty clear to Dean who was starting to know Cas’s little tells). “I would have been done sooner, but Zachariah wished to have words with me.”

“Nothing, again?”

“Yes.”

Balthazar looked puzzled at the exchange, but then returned to what he was doing.

Dean looked around the barren space, lifeless really, not a speck of dust or spider web - then did a double take as he realized that no, his first impression notwithstanding, there was indeed decoration in Cas’s workspace.

“This really your office? Seriously?”

Castiel followed Dean’s pointed look, stared agape at the wall, and then whipped around to shoot a hot look at Balthazar.

“I thought the place could do with some jollying up!” Balthazar exclaimed, finally putting down his hands.

“Yeah, should have know that wasn’t Cas’s choice of ornaments.” Dean, grinning widely, examined the music hall poster that had been pinned to the wall. From the confused way Cas was looking at it, and from Balthazar’s quirky smile, Dean was ready to bet that poster had been up a few days already, and Cas had failed to notice.

“I don’t think that’s appropriate for—... what exactly is she doing?”

“Dancing, Cas.”

“But why is she...” Castiel started to make a vague gesture, then flinched and brought his hand to his head. He looked like he had a sudden headache.

“Cas, you okay?” Did angels get migraines? Was this related to the bullets Dean had dug out of his back like he’d been trenching weeds, for the love of god? That’d only been four days ago.

“It’s fine, Dean, he’s receiving revelations. Hey, what do you think of this picture? Think he’d mind if I put this up?” Balthazar unrolled a piece of paper with a flourish after summoning it out of empty air. A really racy piece of paper. Dean could see the chick’s knees in some sort of stockings, and she had a bustle full of large ribbons on the back and she was leaning forward so he could see her— bloody hell, just looking at this broke five decrees.

“Whoa! Where the hell did you even get that?! Holy cow, put that away, the whole garrison’ll have apoplexy.”

“Bit too risqué?”

“Dude—“

“What do you mean, Bartholomew?” said Cas loudly in a tight voice.

Balthazar’s smile slipped and vanished as quickly as the rolled-up poster.
Cas’s eyes were open and fixed on his brother as if communicating with him in parallel. “You still haven’t given me a reason for this relocation.”

There was a terse moment of silence while the word relocation bounced around the inside of Dean’s skull.

“Really? My home? Is Paradise 1 my home any more than here?” said Cas in a voice layered in irony. Dean hadn’t known he had it in him.

P1? Home?

“Shh,” Balthazar said quietly when Dean opened his mouth for a few legitimate questions. “It’s okay, we already thought of this.”

“Thought of what?”

Balthazar gave him a look like he expected Dean to be that slow and it was okay, he was only human. “Cas is a visitor. As his spouse, you should have left P342 and accompanied him back to his home, according to the rules.”

The bottom dropped out of Dean’s world.

“But you can’t, because he doesn’t have a home. Or if he does, it’s-” Balth shoved an expressive thumb towards the direction of the ceiling, and he didn’t meant the roof. “And you can’t go there unless you die first, which would be very messy.”

Dean noted those words, behind the shock and concern peppering his thoughts. The reflexes of the rebel, the planner, the linchpin, were at the fore. It was a given that the opposition was looking for an angle to work this situation, same as the Joker was, no real surprise there. Who was Bartholomew? Someone from the Word? Were they trying to get Dean and Cas to P1 to put on some show for the Lanterns? Or for something more sinister? What was interesting was that Cas and Balthazar had suspected this was coming... and were intent on keeping Dean in Lawrence, out of trouble and out of the limelight. This played right into his suspicions that these two angels might adhere to the celestial Plan - he’d no more believe Cas a traitor than he’d believe himself a collaborator - but that they had their own version of it that might not quite jive with the upper echelon of the Host’s.

“I dispute that,” Cas said calmly, hands stuffed into the pockets of his duster. “There is nowhere on earth that is closer to Heaven than any other.”

Balthazar snorted. “That’s right, let them debate philosophy and dimensional physics for a few centuries,” he whispered, whether for Dean’s benefit or Cas’s wasn’t clear.

“My spouse’s home is here, his family is here, I see no reason, in these unusual circumstances, to rip him away,” Cas concluded.

There was a short silence as presumably this Bartholomew said a few more words.

Castiel’s calm expression changed on a dime. The look on his face was the same as when Gordon had shot him: massive surprise transitioning rapidly to holy anger.

“That makes no sense. Sam is an advocate here, in Paradise 342, I have no reason to bring him to Paradise 1 anymore than I have reason to bring Dean. The visitor decree applies even less in that instance.”
Dean felt cold all the way through and Balthazar said nothing, eyes narrowed.

“Then you and Naomi are welcome to come examine the situation here. Under my supervision only.” Cas crossed his arms and looked even more stubborn and immovable than usual.

Something changed in the room. A heaviness. As if the temperature had spiked and the air suddenly weighed ten times more. Dean tensed, as did the angels.

Then Cas made a noise of pure pain and staggered, and the whole room rang like a gong. Light flickered in Dean’s peripheral vision, hot burning light that made his skin prickle and that shone even through his eyelids as he screwed his eyes shut-

Dean was picked up like a child and slammed against the wall. Balthazar! Fuck, it was so easy to forget that all angels were stronger than people by an order of magnitude. Dean found himself huddled in a corner, and Balthazar was covering him with his body and with- with something that shimmered in his vision. The cruel, devouring light ripping the air apart glinted off the empty space with little refractions that looked like the barb and quills of huge feathers. Beyond that-

“Cas!”

Castiel was on his hands and knees, and blood was pouring out of his nose and mouth- even his eyes were red rimmed.

“Dean- stay still!” Balthazar hissed. Dean realized he was struggling to get to his feet, instincts urging him to go help while his brain, having correctly estimated the danger, was apparently hiding in a corner.

“Stop!” Cas shouted, voice wrecked. “Dean is in the room with me! Draw back your presence, Michael! You’ll injure him!”

Michael?! Oh hell and damnation...

Some of the pressure in the air eased. Now it only felt like they were all going to die, instead of being an actual guaranteed thing.

“No,” Cas ground out, and then made a noise of sheer pain, a ragged croak as he swayed on his hands and knees.

“Cassie-” Balthazar’s voice was shaking. “Do what he says!”

“No!” Cas bit off- and collapsed onto the floor as the insane feeling of power rippled through the air once more.

“I need-...” Cas looked like he could barely breathe. ”- give...me...” A noise of pain again.

“What’s going on?!” Dean shouted. His voice echoed in the room; it felt as if the whole place was ringing like the inside of a church bell, yet other than Cas’s wracked breathing, the office was silent.

“Sh.”

“But- can’t you do anything?”

“No,” Balthazar said shortly.

Cas wasn’t speaking anymore - was he even still alive?!
“Balthazar, we have to do something! Is- is he-“

“They’re talking. He’s going to be okay,” Balthazar added in the way people did when their loved ones were dying and they didn’t want to face the fact, ‘he’s going to be okay’- it was damned obvious Cas wasn’t going to be fucking okay!

Then suddenly the pressure eased. The room returned to normal bar a few drifts of dust floating through the air - ash, Dean realized. Balthazar’s poster had been silently incinerated, leaving nothing but a charcoal smear on the wall.

Castiel gasped. Balthazar let go of Dean’s shoulder, and the shimmering thing - Balthazar’s wing, presumably - dipped and vanished.

Dean scrambled around the angel and rushed over.

“Shit. Shit!” Cas was bleeding from just about everywhere as Dean turned him over carefully. “Cas?! Balthazar, do something!”

Balthazar, still on his knees, was staring at a blank spot on the wall. “He’ll be fine in a minute,” he said distractedly.

Dean looked up from where Cas was choking on his own blood. “Balthazar!”

“Shh. You sure are noisy. Then again, who am I to talk, look who I work for...” Balthazar poked absently at his ear. Blood was trickling from it too. Dean was the only one in the lot who wasn’t injured, though he felt like he’d picked up a sunburn on his face.

“I’m alright, Dean.”

Dean jumped out of his skin. Cas was sitting there, blood-free and merely looking puzzled at the way Dean was holding him.

“What- what-” right. Bloody angel and their ability to- to-

“What happened? Did he actually give you his assurance?” Balthazar asked.

“Yes,” Cas said shortly. “I would not have complied otherwise.”

“Can we talk about your suicidal tendencies one of these days?”

“No.”

Balthazar made a noise of irritation.

“What- what assurance? What’s going on? Michael wants us?” With some difficulty, because his screaming instinct to help seemed to bypass his voluntary muscle control, Dean let go of Cas’s shoulders.

Cas looked both unhappy and worried. “Yes. I don’t know why. He wants you and Sam to come to Paradise 1.”

“I got that bit. Why?”

“He did not say. But I have his personal guarantee that neither of you will be harmed.”

“For what that’s worth,” muttered Balthazar, which got him a sharp look from Cas, though Dean
had been about to say the same thing.

Dean opened his mouth to ask, do we have to go? The words were stillborn. After what he’d felt here... that was... there was no saying ‘no’ to that. It was almost certainly his death sentence, but that was not the part that was bugging him.

“Why Sam?” he asked tightly.

“...I don’t know. But he was very insistent.” Cas grimaced. Yeah, Dean had seen how insistent. “But Sam is an advocate. We will take precautions, make sure the League knows where he is every step of the way.”

“Cassie--” Balthazar interrupted himself with a glance at Dean.

“I’ll fill in what Balthazar was about to say. Most angels are wary of the League, but I don’t think that extends to the Big Chief,” Dean stated.

The two angels exchanged glances.

“Can we leave Sam here?” Dean had to ask.

“I doubt that’s an option,” Balthazar said somberly.

“And I doubt Sam will let you go alone anyway, Dean. I’m sure Zachariah is receiving transfer orders for you both right now, in case you thought we could leave without telling him.” Cas added, which showed that he’d been living with the Winchester men long enough to know the code down to the ground.

“...Damn.”

“He did give me his guarantee, Dean.”

Something, perhaps a faint stress on the ‘me’, reminded Dean that Cas was a Seraph, one of the few left, and even Michael had to be careful not to dick around with them too much; they were his front-liners if the Levis decided on a full-scale attack again. That felt like a tenuous shield right now, when faced with that power that had shaken the room just because Mike had decided to drop a word in personally.

“You sure you’re okay?” Dean asked worriedly as Cas got to his feet. He looked fine, but there was still a hefty pool of blood on the floor. Castiel followed his glance, wrinkled his nose a little and made the stain vanish with a flick of his fingers.

“When do you have to go?” asked Balthazar. He had his angel face on, which meant he was unreadable for once.

“As soon as possible,” Cas answered, but there was something in his tone, as if the words were hiding other words behind them.

Balthazar gave a nod and cracked his knuckles; Dean caught Cas giving the human gesture a curious look. “Okay, that gives me a day or two to work. Three days maybe, if you can make some excuse to Bartholomew to delay your leaving. Dean, got any family members about to have a birthday, baptism or burial?”

“You know the answer is no,” Dean said shortly.
“Pity, but we’ll think of something. That will give the League plenty of time to spread the word far and wide, and mobilize all the people here who might like you.” A veiled reference, Dean supposed, to the resistance, not that he could involve them in this mess.

“Let’s go find Sam,” Castiel said calmly. “Where is he? You said he was eating lunch with a friend earlier.”

“He’s been with Marcus Olson since this morning, Sam’s helping him with a small Penance Uriel was getting sweaty about.” Dean rubbed his forehead. His tiff with Uriel felt like it’d happened days ago.

“I’ll find him, tell him to go home as quickly as he can. If that’s alright with you? Would you prefer to be with Bobby and Ellen?” Cas asked him as if Dean was the guy who needed to be cosseted right now.

“M’fine. I’ll make my way home in a minute.”

Cas vanished. Dean turned to Balthazar, who’d lifted his hands to commune. “Spill. What’s really going on?”

Balthazar looked at him in surprise. “Why would I tell you? You don’t have me wrapped around your little finger now, do you.”

Dean’s eyes narrowed. “Cut the crap. And don’t worry, I’ll be asking Cas the same question, but specifically I want to know why you’re helping us.”

“Oh, I like to tweak the noses of powerful entities that could crush this entire continent like it was a-“

There was a soft whoosh that made Dean jump. Cas materialized with a look on his face.

“I can’t find Sam.”

“What?”

“What do you mean?” Balthazar asked a bit more calmly.

“I can’t find him anywhere,” Cas repeated tightly. “I know him, his aura- unless for some reason he’s hidden in one of your warded off areas, Dean?”

“No! He steers clear of those! Michael?!”

Cas shook his head firmly. “He’s expecting us to come of our own free will, why send angels here to pick up Sam without informing us?”

“Still worth checking,” Balthazar said tightly, hands now gripping thin air like claws. “I’ll get on my sources. Cassie, you go look again-“

Dean didn’t wait, he was out the door and thundering down the stairs.
One frantic hour later, Dean had retraced Sam’s route. His brother had never made it to the Olson homestead, nobody had seen him since he’d walked down Stevens street. That was over six hours ago. Dean had checked every warded area from there on out, stopped briefly at the Roadhouse - ignoring the dirty looks from some of the patrons - to tell Ellen what was up and check the basement, then ran on some more.

Finally he went home. Cas had said he’d looked there first when they’d briefly met on Adirondack street where Dean had been checking the well exit. But Dean had to see it with his own eyes. And it gave him a short-term goal, something to focus on and avoid going crazy.

He yelled for his brother upstairs and downstairs, briefly rifled through the papers on Sam’s desk looking for clues, glanced into the bedroom just in case-

There was a note on Sam’s pillow, on the neatly made bed.

For the briefest flash, Dean thought it’d be Sam confessing to running away, maybe going off to find Jess after more than a decade or something typically stupid from his wonderfully complicated and big-hearted brother who could think himself into knots. But it wasn’t Sam’s handwriting that shaped the word Dean on the folded half of the note.

‘You are cordially invited to the witch’s cottage where your brother is waiting for you, hale and unharmed. Make a wish where you almost fell, but hurry, or the four and twenty blackbirds will eat all the breadcrumbs.
Oh, and bring the missus.’

Dean sank onto Sam’s bed, staring at the note. Then he closed his eyes hard and brought his hands together (only collaborators prayed -)

“Castiel, I- it’s Dean, I need your-“

A flutter.

“Did you find him?” Cas and Balthazar both had shown up in the doorway.

“The resistance has him.”

Castiel’s eyes went as hard and sharp as an angel blade. “That man? The one who tried to kill you?”

“No. No, somebody else. I... he left me a message.”

The paper was picked from his hands. Dean’s fingers twitched, an abortive reflex to keep it, burn it- his mind was blank, echoing vastness.

“What... does this say? This is nonsense.”

“Must be in code,” suggested Balthazar, reading over Castiel’s shoulder.

“Not exactly, but the Jo-...the person who-”

“The Joker,” Balthazar put in. “We’ve heard the name in Intelligence, Dean.”

“Fine. The Joker wrote this, and he always uses this sort of- of way of talking, he knows it confuses you. You angels I mean.”

Balthazar snorted, but didn’t exactly object.
Cas hadn’t looked up from the note. “He says Sam is unharmed.”

“Yeah.” Dean clung to that. However, there was an implicit threat, not in the message but in Sam’s very disappearance. Not only did the resistance - probably all warded and ready for angel trouble - have a seven hour head start, but if Cas and the garrison ran after them and *did* find them...

“Where is the witch’s cottage?” Cas asked.

“No idea. But there’s going to be a track to follow. We just have to hurry, because otherwise it’ll be gone. The resistance won’t leave it for the angels to find.”

“Who’s the... missus?”

“That’d be you, Cassie,” Balthazar snorted.

Castiel frowned. “This person *wants* me to come?”

Dean sunk his head into his hands. “Yeah. Seems that way.”

“Absolutely out of the question,” Balthazar stated. “This is obviously a trap.”

“They have Sam.”

“Well- well yes, but-... but you can’t just go waltzing into the secret lair of the human resistance. They’ll kill you!”

Dean looked up slowly when Cas didn’t say anything. Cas seemed to be re-reading the note once more, as if he could figure something out from it.

“Cassie? Please tell me you’re not going to do something stupid?” Balthazar asked tightly.

“... Balthazar, can we keep this between us?”

“Goddamn it!” Balthazar yelled - Sam’s bottle of lavender water shattered on its small shelf near the basin, sending waves of scent wafting over and causing Dean’s stomach, already churning, to catch and heave.

“I have to do something.”

“Yes! The smart something! We’ll go together - or we should involve Rachel - or better yet-“

“No. Any attempt to corner these people could put Sam’s life in danger. Dean and I are going to go alone. We’ll follow this trail they’re leaving. If I need you-“

“Cassie,” said Balthazar in a warning tone

“We’ll find him,” Castiel said to Dean.

Dean swallowed. “Thanks, Cas.”

“Castiel!” Balthazar said loudly, stepping between them, “Michael is going to lose his nut! He’s going to kill you!”

“Why would he do that? He wants Sam to come too, he was very insistent. Sam has been kidnapped, I am in pursuit with Dean who, as a one-time member of the resistance, knows the Wilds and the enemy.”
“You think he’ll buy that?! He’ll think you’re both running! Especially you! A Seraph! Damn it! Don’t be like Annael!”

“I am not abandoning Sam.” Cas gave Dean a solemn look over Balthazar’s shoulder. ”I did give my word.”

Dean felt himself ripped in two, relief tugging one way, guilt the other. “Cas... Balthazar is right, this has to be a trap.”

“To catch and hold me, it will have to be a very good one,” Cas pointed out mildly.

“Indeed, I’m more concerned about Michael and the rest of the Host,” Balthazar ground out.

“Dean,” said Cas, ignoring his friend, “do you know where this trail starts? There’s no indication.”

“At the well. The one where you caught me. It’s one of three ways out of town, so makes sense for the trail to start there.”

Cas frowned at him and then at the message, then at Dean again-

“Trust me, that’s what it says. C’mon. First we need to tell Bobby, he’ll get the message around, and take steps to cover for me in town as long as he can. I’ll grab a few supplies and we’ll go.”

Castiel nodded, and then looked at his brother. “Balthazar, can you keep this quiet for a few hours?”

“Yes.” Balthazar heaved a sigh as he stepped away. “Yes, I can. And since I would like you to be able to come back one day, I’ll create a masterpiece of reporting that’s going to make it sound like you really had no other choice but to do as the abductors ordered, rather-”

“Don’t take any risks.”

“Why?” asked Balthazar, tone dead. “What more can they do to me? Tell me.”

“I would rather not find out.”

“Yes, well, tough,” Balthazar said, turning around and making his way towards the door. “If you’re going to risk your life on this insane venture, it’s my right to risk my life trying to help. Get over it and get going. Both of you.”

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Next Chapter: Into the Woods

“You two are a pair of idjits, know that?”

Chapter End Notes

Honeymoon’s over, boys... get your walking boots on.
Into the Woods

Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing at the center of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. The Lamb had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven spirits of God sent out into all the earth.
-- Revelation 5:6

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Bobby listened to the tumbled-out explanation - Sam! Kidnapped! By the Joker! Wants me to come! With Cas! - and he read the note twice, and then he listened to Cas suggest giving Dean a few supplies so they could leave right away.

At which point Bobby put down the note on the table and said what needed to be said.

“You two are a pair of idjits, know that?”

Dean looked up from his pacing of the parlor. “Wh-what?”

“You want to leave now?”

“Yes!”

“Using a railroad escape tunnel in the middle of the afternoon with an angel in tow and half the garrison looking over your shoulder and wondering what the hell you’re doing?”

“Uh...”

Bobby slipped the note into his breast pocket and walked over to the hat stand. The way he pulled on his pork pie was reminiscent of a knight donning his helm. “Ellen is at the Roadhouse, so is Jo, but we’re not talking about this shit here. Follow me. Castiel, tell Balthazar to collect Rufus and come too. By the sound of it, we’re going to need all the help- shut up,” he advised as Dean opened his mouth. “We are not talking about this here, in my house, you loon. Come on out to the ol’ barn. There’s liquor in there. Hows about you both have a glass, decrees be damned, and calm down while we get all our ducks in a row.”

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The old barn dated back to the earliest settlement in the one-time Missouri Territory, it might even predate the apocalypse. A ramshackle wooden structure that conveniently belonged to no one, it should have collapsed centuries ago. But the Machine considered it a part of the town and so rewrote its wooden structure every few days, from the dusty rafters down to every rusty nail and splinter, even the hay bales, though it’d been long since any domesticated animal needed them. The only parts it did not rewrite were the heavily warded areas inside, particularly the old tack room. The human resistance managed the upkeep of that part.
It was the scene for the weirdest pseudo-railroad meeting ever. Weird because Bobby didn’t normally invite a couple of angels to this kind of do. Not alongside Rufus who, Dean suspected, was now either the new station master or linchpin, or at the very least a temporary organizer trying to get the Lawrence relay back on its feet under new management.

Rufus, sitting low on an old milking stool, read the note, then looked straight up at Dean. “I had no idea this was coming.”

“I know, Rufus,” Dean said gruffly. This would have come straight from the Joker himself. There was an odd kind of divide between railroad and resistance, a flimsy gray area that would completely befuddle angels. The three men gathered here were railroad, the Joker was resistance. He helped them out, gave them all their mojo tricks and regularly used their services to get his people around, but they were not part of the same organization per se. Even if they had been, Rufus had seen Sam and Dean grow up and had been friends with John, as much as anyone could be said to be friends with the difficult bastard. He would not have let anyone put Sam in danger.

Sam was in danger. But Dean had had a ten minute pause and two shots - ignoring the stricken ‘don’t you know what you’re doing to yourself?!’ looks from his better half, who knew enough at least not to lecture out about it. Dean had had time to think, and he almost wished he hadn’t, almost wished he’d thrown himself down that well without talking to anybody.

Dean put his glass down on the straw-strewn dirt floor, with a shake of his head when Bobby proffered the booze again. He crossed his arms as he sat on the bale, eyes blindly going over one of the sigils scratched into an inner partitions. The place was warded up the hoooha. Cas had staggered like a drunk when crossing the threshold of the building, and they’d had to scratch out at least one warding for Balthazar to get in at all. This was their alternative meeting place outside the Roadhouse basement, and the fact that they’d let in two angels, even these two, was already at the heart of the problem Dean was now facing.

“Bobby, Rufus.” Dean could hear how hard his voice sounded to his two old friends, but he could no longer afford to care about it, and about a lot of other things. “I need to go get my brother. And I need Cas to come with, apparently. But I’m laying ten to one odds that we’re headed out into the Wilds, and we’ll have angels on our trail unless Baz can pull a miracle outta his ass, and all in all, I can’t wear kid gloves anymore. Know what I mean?”

Bobby and Rufus exchanged a look. Then Rufus waved the message about. “The Joker has to know that, kid. He can’t have slapped this on you and expect you to waltz into the wood with nothing but good intentions to defend you. Unless he’s got an escort somewhere nearby - but then I don’t see why he’d be leaving a trail.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Cas, visibly puzzled.

“Ways and means, angel, ways and means. Resistance and railroad secrets of which you are going to get an eyeful,” Rufus declared.

“... You mean that I will be getting a unique view of how you operate, the magic you use. I cannot promise I will not use that knowledge in the future,” Cas added, straight shooter that he was.

“That’ll be the Joker’s outlook,” said Rufus without much surprise.

“No, it won’t be,” Dean said sharply. “Not only. We use those means too. Are you sure- maybe I can take the well exit tonight and Cas can join me outside? He can leave at any time. Like that I won’t have to scratch out sigils in the tunnel.”
“You can do that, sure. I doubt all your choices will be that easy.” Bobby looked vaguely at the note in Rufus’s hands - now getting worn with folding and unfolding. Then his gaze was sharp again. “But I don’t want you to think about that. The Joker could have left a message with me or Rufus if he needed you to be coy about anything. He didn’t. We’ll check the dead drops and our sources, but unless something comes up in the next two hours, when dusk falls, all bets are off. He took Sam. We’re not... we’re not like some other fighters. We don’t target family. You do what you need to do to get yourself and your brother back safe. If this puts a dent in the Joker’s magic arsenal, well, he should have bloody well thought of that before putting an innocent man in danger and asking us to deal with the fallout.”

“Hm. That’s actually an interesting point.”

The interjection came from Balthazar of all people. They’d almost forgotten he was there, he’d been so quiet.

Balthazar’s face was unreadable again, the angel poker face. Bobby looked at him as if he’d never seen the guy before, even though Balthazar had been in P342 for well over a decade. He didn’t usually show that side of himself. The celestial being’s eyes flickered up to Castiel and there was a moment of silence.

Cas spun around and took three hard strides to the barn’s entrance. Dean thought he was going to walk out, but he just stood there, staring out at Lawrence, shoulders tight and a look like thunder on his face. Both Bobby and Rufus were visibly just as startled by this as by Balthazar’s lack of expression. They’d never seen this side of Cas before.

“What is it?” Dean asked.

“Think, Dean.” Balthazar had apparently been given leave to speak by Cas’s silence. “You were there - though I can’t blame you for forgetting about it in the last hour. But Bobby and Rufus don’t know this. The Joker has kidnapped Sam and almost certainly put him in danger, but he might have also extracted him from a greater one-”

“Fuck,” Dean whispered, eyes flickering shut.

”- and I, for one, would give my left wing to find out if the Joker knew more than Castiel and I did, or if the timing of Sam’s disappearance is just a massive coincidence, because the answer would be very interesting all around,” Balthazar concluded, staring off in the middle distance.

“What are you talking about? Dean, what is the pillock talking about?” Bobby groused.

“Michael.”

The perpetually sunny day stayed as obnoxiously bright as always outside, but the temperature in the barn plummeted over the next minute of explanations.

“Jiminy,” said Bobby quietly, staring at much the same empty spot as Balthazar.

Rufus made a rusty noise in his throat. “Don’t this change everything? Beg pardon for asking two obvious questions. First off, if you two leave, will the town be okay?”

“Oh of course.” Balthazar looked surprised. “We in the garrison might get our feathers plucked, but Michael and his cadre, um... sorry, but put it this way: if dangerous fugitives escaped from our garrison, do you think we would stop and ask the bugs for directions and what they knew of matters?”
“Thank god for insignificance,” Rufus muttered.

“Not saying things won’t get agitated, but no humans should be harmed. Not here in town.” His eyes had flickered briefly to Dean’s when he’d said that. Dean didn’t care. Let Big Mike take his shot. Dean knew how to be as insignificant as a bug when it came to hiding from angels.

Except when he had one in tow.

“Was your second objection going to be about Mike getting a bead on Cas?” he asked Rufus tightly.

“Yup.”

Cas finally stirred. Dean had tucked his frenzy about Sam away deep where it burned like a red hot iron across his soul but wouldn’t distract him from thinking, and it crossed his mind to wonder what Cas thought of that whole angle. They’d not had time to discuss it.

“I am a Seraph,” Cas said without turning.

“That didn’t help, Cassie,” Balthazar dropped into the dense silence of humans glancing at each other in puzzled incomprehension.

Cas looked around at them and seemed to come back to his usual steadfast persona. “Sorry. As a Seraph, my Grace and power are not dependent on the host. I don’t need to be in constant contact with them.”

“If you went strolling out with me, you’d be better off walking around with a bulls-eye over your head,” Balthazar put in with a grin.

“I can cut myself off from Heaven and the Machine. If I do that, then Michael cannot communicate with me, nobody can find me. For awhile. Unless I use an excessive amount of power.”

“Or he blankets the countryside with trackers looking for you,” Balthazar added in a way that was meant to be flip and did not fool Dean for one second, not after that scene in Sam’s room earlier.

“He can send every tracker he has left,” Dean said calmly. “I’ve spent most of my life learning how to jimmy their searches.”

“Cassie himself can help a bit in that regard, but...” Balthazar’s hands tightened on the arms he’d crossed. “You’re going to have to tie your wings behind your back, brother. Think about where you’re going. Are you-“

“He’ll be fine,” Dean said in the same tone. “I’ve also been out to the Wilds a number of times and came back in one piece, and I’m only human.”

“Between the two of us, we should manage,” Castiel affirmed.

“Yes. I gathered that. Maybe that’s what this Joker is counting on.” Balthazar leaned forward, picked the much rumpled note from Rufus’ hand and read it one more time. “Which is strange... Nobody in their right mind would expect the two of you to cooperate well enough to- unless... But I might be overthinking it. I just hope he really is as clever as we’ve been led to believe, or he will be putting you both in considerable danger, and Sam as well.”

“We’re talking about the guy who covered Naomi in honey.”

“Right, he almost made me like him that day,” Balthazar said dreamily. “Well, let me and Cassie
work on our end to cover your tracks as well we can. Meet here in two hours?”

Castiel stepped outside the barn and was gone without a word. Balthazar followed, politely letting the humans discuss how to limit the damage, if possible. When he did find the Joker, even if Sam was alright (and he’d better be) Dean was going to have a talk with the motherless bastard about putting the railroad at risk for his little ploys.

Unless… unless there was a good reason why the Joker thought it wasn’t at risk; because he didn’t expect Cas to be able to tell the Host what he’d seen. Not if he never made it back. The humans didn’t discuss it, they didn’t need to. It was lodged in Dean’s mind like a bullet in his body, working its way deeper with every mental step across the map towards whatever the Joker had planned for Cas…

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“He’ll join you outside, just drop him a prayer,” Balthazar said in lieu of any other greeting. He stayed standing in the gathering twilight outside the barn, where the wards had been reset.

“Okay.” Dean shouldered the pack he and Bobby had prepared. Bobby looked almost his age tonight, worry he would not admit to carving his cheeks and taking the light out of his eyes.

“I conveniently put myself on patrol around the southwest section of the wall,” Balthazar added. “So you should have a clear run of it. Maybe keep to your usual ploys anyway, just to be safe.”

Dean snorted, he didn’t need no angel to tell him that. He gave Bobby a clap on the shoulder and a brief “take care of Jo and Ellen, ‘kay?” Rufus was already gone, he had railroad damage to manage now.

Bobby looked up slowly. “Bring him back, boy, do you hear? And come back yourself.”

“Yeah…”

Dean left him sitting on one of the hay bales, fiddling with his hat. He hoped he would see him again…

A touch on his arm stopped him as he took a few steps away from the barn. Balthazar’s face was unreadable as he stared at Dean.

“Yeah?”

Balthazar stayed still for another five seconds, then he put his hand to the back of his city-slicker suit and drew out a knife. Not an angel blade, a regular hunting knife.

“Here. Take this. One could say it rightfully belongs to you anyway.”

“I got a knife, Baz.”

“Not one like this, no.”

Dean took it and examined it. It was serrated with a curved blade, and had carvings up and down the metal, not Enochian though. Looked ordinary enough. “What is it?”
“A knife, obviously,” said Balthazar with a humorless grin. “It was originally from--... a place you won’t have heard of, you uneducated oik. It was found on a demon some thirty years ago, and you’ll be glad to know she’s dead.”

“I’m never unhappy to hear a demon bit it, but why would I care?”

“Because she was Azazel’s last surviving lieutenant, and unless I hear to the contrary, she took that knife from your mother’s--... she’ll have taken this from your mother after Azazel’s retaliation laid the Campbell camp to waste.”

Dean stood staring at the blade for a long time.

“Yeah. Now that I look at it...”

“Recognize it?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s one of the heirlooms of the Campbell clan. This blade’s got a long and storied history. If you come back alive, I’ll give you a recap. What matters now is that it will kill any demon, Croatoan, hellhound or demonic being with one stab.”

Dean looked up quickly. “Kill? As in, dead? Real dead?”

“Indeed.”

“Holy Moses...”

“The rest of Mary’s belongings were returned to John, but this stayed in storage for ages, because—dear me, the Word, right? Weapons are forbidden, and there’s no way in hell that’ll pass for a butter knife, so it was gathering dust in a locker in the garrison. I got it out, and I’ve put a charm on it, a little thing I cooked up myself when scouting the edges of Purgatory. It should last a few months. In that time, it’ll do for monsters too. Not quite as good as a silver blade, but it will at least slow them down so you can get one of those out of your bags and stab them again. It won’t hurt Leviathans, though. I’m not that good. But you shouldn’t run into those unless the Joker is utterly demented.”

His words washed over Dean as he stared. This was all good information and this was an amazing weapon he’d been handed, but all he could think of was his mother’s expression as she stepped out their door the last time, in those tough canvas clothes, gaze forward, not back. He could almost feel her fingers on it, as he held it, and he didn’t know how to feel about that.

“There’s only one thing it can’t kill, really.”

Dean looked up after a few seconds to see if Balthazar was going to finish that sentence.

Balthazar was looking straight into his eyes. “It won’t kill angels.”

Dean’s fingers convulsed on the hilt. “He’s helping me find my brother, Balthazar, I’m not about to harm him.”

“You’ve been nothing but harm to him since the day he met you.”

Balthazar shifted his gaze away from Dean’s stare and seemed to struggle to regain his debonair mask. It resisted him. His mouth was tight; the spontaneous words had sounded both fierce and
It occurred to Dean that Balthazar could have done a number of things differently today, starting with dragging Dean to P1, warning his bosses, stopping Cas the hard way, or the gentle way, or any old way, including stabbing Dean through the heart with the knife he’d just been handed.

“You two are close,” Dean said quietly.

Balthazar was still staring blindly at the barn twenty feet away. “We’re all brothers, Winchester. But some of us are more brothers than others. Cassie and I have been through some pretty tight spots together, we’re some of the only survivors of our group. I—... I’m the one who brought him here. To save Sam from Uriel. I bypassed—never mind.”

The thick silence that settled gave Dean plenty of time to figure out who Balthazar was really blaming for Cas’s present predicament, and it wasn’t really Dean... Balthazar seemed to realize it at the same time, and his expression became once more a parody of good humor - eyes still worried and hurt - while he tossed a deliberately dismissive, “Good luck, I guess, and all that,” over his shoulder.

Dean watched Balthazar stroll off in a southwesterly direction. There’d been something awake in the angel these past few weeks, he only realized it now when he saw it gone. Like the color had been drained out of him now. Dean hesitated... but what could he say? I’ll keep him safe? I’ll bring him back? Dean Winchester had done a lot of dubious things in his life, but he was not deliberately going to make a promise he could in no way be sure to keep.

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Dean made his way through the warrens and warded passages of Lawrence, riding the inevitable memory of doing this a month ago, and the crazy consequences since. This time he didn’t light blood fuses and rockets, though. And Cas wasn’t chasing him; the angel was, as Dean understood the plan, at the garrison laying down his own escape plan that would hopefully give them both a day or two of head-start before the forces of Heaven and Earth came after them.

... Yeah, this was nuts.

There was no bloody Seraph to drag him out of the well this time. Dean let himself down via the rope and winch. He lowered himself down to the aquifer tunnel, took two steps away from the well shaft in utter darkness before cracking a match and looking for the dark lantern they kept down there.

It took him a minute to find it because something was obscuring it. The dark shape turned out to be his long-lost cavalry hat, with a note stuck through the acorn band.

Dean took the paper, tossed away his farmer’s hat, put his old familiar one back on, carefully lit the lantern and then checked out the first breadcrumb.

The lantern’s light danced over the note, and Dean felt something in his chest untangle a bit. The letter was in code with a passphrase at the top. Specifically, the passphrase that was in effect the last week Dean had been officially part of the railroad. Because Dean, being a suspicious bastard of a human, had been thinking that there was just the slimmest possibility that all of this was a trap by the Host, rather than the resistance. A trap for Dean and ultimately the railroad. He did not
believe Cas was involved. Everything in him told him that Cas might try to play a long con if he really really had to, but would hate every minute of it and not be very good at it. Balthazar, however, was an entirely different set of shoes. Dean didn’t think it likely at all, or he would have made different plans, but it could not be excluded. And if not Balthazar, somebody else in Intelligence could be behind this, manipulating them all.

But if they were infiltrated so deep into the resistance that they could fake this particular note, then they wouldn’t need Dean in the first place. A fact made clear when the first part of the coded message read, ‘Reassured?’

‘Next breadcrumb is over the hills, where your daddy took you fishing,’ the note concluded.

Dean frowned. He knew instantly where that was; as it had only ever happened once, there wouldn’t be cause for confusion. He was just surprised the Joker knew where one of the members of his cell had taken his eighteen year old son fishing that one time. John and Dean had not even caught anything. They’d shared a large bottle of home brewed beer, complained about Sam’s stubbornness a bit, sat in sunshine. It was one of the best days of Dean’s life, two years before John’s death.

The tunnel echoed with the sound of his footsteps. His mind churned over plans and speculations while his feet took him forward automatically. He’d been down this road dozens of times in the past two decades. Two hundred yards out, the tunnel opened upon a carefully concealed and thoroughly warded ravine. Away from dank rock, Dean breathed in the night air, rich with the sound of crickets. It was night-time, but a half moon was out, the stars were shining, sprinkling silver light over the landscape of the Garden.

Dean loved Lawrence. It’d be a damn sight better without angels, naturally, but it was still his hometown, his family’s roots in the world, his birthplace. The Garden, now… The Garden was something else. Peace. Beauty in every flowering bush, ever gracefully nodding grass stem, every swoop of bird. It was… innocent. Dean didn’t think he was subject to whimsy, yet every time he came out of the tunnel to see the oaks and beeches, the dogwood and the oleander, the grass and the moss quietly covering the untouched stones, he would always have a feeling, for a brief moment, that the walls around P342 were not there for the defence of New Jerusalem, or to lock humans in a cage… they were there to protect the Garden from them, from the harsh geometries of their box-like houses, their rows of planted crops, their boots brushing through dry dust, from their complex emotions and anger and habit of building and shaping and changing the world around them, when it was already perfect as it was. A thought he’d never had before drifted through the back of his mind… that this was perhaps how an angel saw the world...

Dean gave his head a brisk shake, dismissing thoughts and feelings for the practical and the immediate. He walked on without fear. He had camouflage sigils painted about his person, and this was the Garden. Nothing dangerous here, not even the pumas, not unless one jumped on him in the hope he had a carrot about his person. The only thing dangerous was in the garrison somewhere at his back, beneath the luminous sparkle of the Machine, as small as a twinkling diamond from this distance. Talking of which...

Dean hesitated. He knew where to go next, he could just… leave? The Joker wanted Cas, but surely he would deal with Dean alone if need be.

But maybe he wouldn’t, and there was Sam to consider. Besides, if Dean didn’t make the call, then Cas himself would come after him, and warded or not, Dean wasn’t sure he would be able to get away from that particular force of nature any better than the first time, not now that Cas knew him as well as he did. He just hoped… he just hoped he wasn’t condemning the angel to one of the
several deaths that seemed to be looming around him.

*Castiel, it’s Dean, I pray to-

“I’m right here.”

“So you are,” said Dean without looking around. “Come on, let’s walk a few hours while the moon is high.”

“I can fly us,” Castiel informed him. “Until I reach the edge of the Garden, it will not raise any alarm or be followed.”

“Really? That’ll shave off a day. The place we need to go is almost exactly north-east of here. Get us a couple miles from the edge of the Garden, we’ll find a place to stop and make camp, wait for daylight and make our way into the Wilds.”

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Dean found a deep dell in which he could make a small fire and not be spotted. He’d eaten before leaving, and the garden was warm enough if he wrapped himself in his blanket, a fire was unnecessary. But tonight the darkness of Eden felt more stifling than peaceful. Paradise 342 was only a day behind them, yet Dean felt as if they’d been gone a long time. It occurred to him that it wasn’t only Cas who might never make it back...

Castiel sat on the ground, eyes on the fire. He didn’t seem worried in the slightest. Dean’s faint irritation at that was entirely born of reflex.

“Thanks for coming with me,” he said gruffly. “I owe you one.” His voice sounded alien in the darkness full of the chirr of insects and the distant *who-oo* of an owl out hunting nuts and berries.

Cas gave him an inquisitive look rather than say anything, as if coming with Dean was so natural that it was thanking him for it that was the oddity here.

“You...” The fire crackled. Dean fed it a few twigs. “Aren’t you worried that this could be a trap? I mean, a trap *I* set up?”

Cas cocked his head.

*What are you saying shut up shut up shut up* gibbered a part of Dean’s noggin, but he shook it severely and stared at the angel. “I said I wouldn’t stab you in the back, but I never said I wouldn’t do this, trick you and hand you over to the resistance.”

“You wouldn’t use your brother as bait,” Castiel said easily without any trace of doubt or hesitation.

“Yeah? Maybe Sam and I planned it together.”

“You would not drag him into a conspiracy now, when you refused to do it ten years ago, back when there was considerably less risk.” Cas sounded very rational. And he was completely right of course. But...
“But you can’t know that. Not for sure.”

“I’m sure,” Cas said. Then that faint smile touched his mouth, making the corner of his eyes crinkle. “Or maybe I am just incredibly naive.”

Dean stared at him. A complicated ball of unidentifiable feelings writhed up from his chest and stuck in his throat.

“It doesn’t matter in final,” Cas continued calmly. “Your brother is not where he is supposed to be. As his guardian, I need to remedy that. Sam is a good man. I don’t think he’ll ever get, ah, our boot off your neck, as you say, but I think he’ll make important strides into an arrangement that can allow both sides to coexist better. Besides, I gave you my word he would not be harmed,” the angel added. “If there’s one person I need to be able to keep a promise to, it would be my spouse. You. Right?”

“... You...”

Cas looked up inquisitively.

“This...er, thing. Union. You really believe in it.” They’d never really talked about this aspect of things, because the politics of their marriage had predominated it. But Dean came face to face with the fact that this wasn’t just something political to Cas, something to work around, or play up for the crowds and the Word to show the saved souls that all was hunky dory in Paradise. No, Castiel was well and truly married to him.

“... You...”

Cas opened his mouth and had no clue what to say, he was just simply and suddenly very aware that there wasn’t another human being for miles around and that they were alone together in a way they had never been in the entire time they’d known each other.

Cas hadn’t noticed his expression, he was looking serenely into the fire. “Our union is decreed by the wisdom of my Father. I have faith. It is not onerous for me to believe, it is natural. In His equal wisdom, He gave you free will,” Cas added wryly, “so I know you won’t necessarily feel the same way. But it is what it is in either case.”

Those feelings stuck in his chest writhed and tangled into more knots, making his throat ache. He couldn’t even say which particular thought had stuck there: the simple grace of Castiel’s explanation, his willingness to help Sam regardless of Dean’s thoughts on the matter, or the fact that when it came down to it, his attachment to Dean was only because it’d been ordained. Not that it— not that it would be anything else. Because angels were angels and followed orders, and Dean was Dean and as lovable as a porcupine with anger issues.

... There was an opening here to talk about some really deep shit, so of course Dean dodged it for dear life and went back to the politics of it all. “This decision of yours is putting you in direct conflict with the Host.”

“Of course not. I am fully intending to go back,” Cas said firmly. “I am being a bit loose in my interpretation of my orders, but as a Seraph, I do have that leeway to maneuver within the confines of my mission. Once I am back with Sam safe and sound, I will explain my reasons.”

“But what if Mike doesn’t see it your way and kills you?”

“Don’t let Balthazar alarm you. Oh, you are probably thinking of what happened earlier today. Michael does not always control his strength as he should. But that is—... there are reasons for that.
He won’t harm me without cause. If I can-..."

“Yeah?” Dean asked, as Cas’s words trailed off and the angel stared out into the darkness, as if suddenly struck by a thought.

Castiel continued quietly: “If I can bring you and your brother back safely, there will be no cause.”

“Right. I hope my side lets that happen.”

“I imagine the resistance will have conditions. If this Joker is as intelligent as you say, he will know which compromises I might be able to make and which I cannot. I’m less concerned that he wants me, and more concerned that he wants you too.”

“Me?!?”

Castiel’s mouth pinched, and then he said softly: “Dean... maybe I shouldn’t be telling you this, but you need to know. In truth, it’s part of the reason I am following you this way rather than involving other angels or telling anyone.”

Over the next few minutes, Cas unpackaged a lot of disjointed information about odd stuff going on in Paradise. Angels disappearing, human rebels packed together on purpose, Balthazar’s theories, some weird shit about that star when Sam had been born, what the hell- it didn’t seem to make much sense to Dean. Sure, it sounded strange and ominous when gathered together and laid end to end like that, but all of these events had been spread out over most of Dean’s life, and they could all still be some weird coincidence. He was being dicked with by the resistance because he’d gotten accidentally hitched to Cas, a Seraph, not because some weird conspiracy was hanging over him like a shadow for the past forty some years, that just didn’t-...

And if that wasn’t enough, Cas dropped the other bit on him. There was something unreal about hearing those words, ‘your father’s body’, out loud. Dean’s expression didn’t change, but a strange pulse went through him, as if a thirty year old scar had pulled against a sudden movement.

This was when he realized that in all his careful packing, he’d forgotten one essential. A bottle of some of Ellen’s best booze...

“And you alright?” Cas asked gently.

“I already knew he was dead. The resistance told me.” It had come in a package attached to a coded message, but the information itself was conveyed in a plain letter, presumably so Sam could read it too. A grim Bobby had brought it over when it came through a dead-drop. The letter of condolence was in the same old-world handwriting as the note on Sam’s bed and the note in the tunnel; a personal note from the Joker. Considering who it came from, the style had been unusually curt and sober, which Dean appreciated all the more now that he knew the way the Joker usually wrote his letters.

“But...” Dean didn’t know why his mouth was still moving. The Winchester Code dictated that his previous sentence was all that was required and nothing further should be said; nothing more needed now other than booze and repression.

“But I didn’t have any details. All I knew was that he was part of a taskforce against the remains of the demon army. Old Yellow Eyes was attacking resistance outposts at the time, trying to rebuild his troops by corrupting those he could, and infecting the others with the Croatoan plague. The angels and the Hunters were licking their wounds, the trackers couldn’t get a bead on that demony bastard. The resistance had to defend themselves. They managed to terminate the threat, and a lot
of resistance fighters died doing it, as well as getting rid of other high profile targets. I… I suspected Dad might have volunteered for the worst one, though. Because of mom. But I didn’t know for sure and I didn’t want to believe it for the past thirty years because it was fucking unfair.” The scar tissue gave another tug. “She was our mother too. If he was going after Azazel, he should have brought us. We should have had the choice at least. It wasn’t only his revenge.”

“Then you and Sam would also be dead.”

“That was our right to choose.”

“I’m glad your father decided not to give you that right,” Cas said steadily, harking back to other arguments between them. Yeah, it was a-OK in Cas’s books for a dad to take away his children’s freedoms in order to keep them safe.

Then again, how hypocritical could Dean get? If John had taken him, Dean would have opted to die to bring Azazel down if need be, but he’d have kept Sam out of it if at all possible. There was what was right, and then there was what the heart dictated, a greater tyrant than any angel.

“The root of this tragedy, however, was our bad decision.” Cas glowered at the fire. “Mary should not have been there to die at Azazel’s hands in the first place, John should not have had to die to avenge her. I can understand why he assigned a good portion of the blame to the Host. We should never have taken Mary away from you. For that, I can only beg your forgiveness.”

Dean gave him an owlish look. “You’ve stood proud and strong behind some of the craziest shit you guys and the Machine dished out, but for this you apologize?”

Cas blinked in complete surprise at his tone. “I- yes. We shouldn’t have made her leave-“

“You didn’t make her do nothin’. And for the record, Dad hated you guys and the Machine long before he met Mom, he was in the resistance for almost fifty years by the time they got married. Well, he reined back on that for awhile. Until she started going to war, and then all bets were off. But that-… see, my folks, they were complicated. You guys didn’t help, but it wasn’t only your fault. Mom left. She never stopped leaving. Even when she was there, part of her was gone, and dad too.”

Cas’s look was one of incomprehension. “She didn’t have a choice, we didn’t give her one,” he persisted, reminding Dean of that conversation the angel had had with Sam, about guilt being easier to handle than acceptance.

“Yes, she did.” The fire crackled and ate another twig, some sap fusing along the branch. “The same way Dad was in the resistance, Mom was with the Hunters back before she met him. When you guys reenlisted her, she could have said no. Some angels who’d had her in their squad would have probably backed her up, and if they hadn’t, then Dad would have taken us all off to the hills the minute she gave her okay. But she never gave it. She didn’t like angels all that much, and she hated not having more freedom same as dad; she never blamed him for being in the resistance and she never asked him to stop. But she saw monsters and demons as the greater threat. The Campbells were monster hunters long before the apocalypse, they’ve been killing monsters since the Mayflower, and some of our roots go back even further, to the Oneida people hunting werewolves when all that fancy eastern side of Paradise was still a swamp full of bugs. Mom thought humans and angels should present a united front against Hell and Purgatory. Beat ’em once and for all, and maybe the angels would respect us. We could earn our freedom. Dad said the opposite would happen, and I think he’s right, but she said even then, we’d still be better off with angels as the boss rather than letting Eve’s mutts and the hellions kill everyone.
“But at the end of the day, I also think she liked to fight, to act.” Dean knew what that felt like. “She had a choice. She chose. She left.”

A branch burst and sent sparks spiraling up towards the stars. Dean rolled one of the rocks he’d gathered closer to the firepit, and tossed some dirt on it. Had to keep a light from showing too far in case some tracker was around. His father had shown him these tricks, during the years he’d taken Dean on some of his safer resistance runs, and Sam too before the latter got confrontational about this and so many other things. Bobby and Ellen had been horrified. Taking kids out in the woods, teaching them survival skills and mind-foiling technique, showing them how to fight and kill... But John had known his sons would never be ones for a quiet life, not with their parentage. When they would fight - be it with words or with weapons - they would be ready. They would survive. Or at least go down swinging.

But that was after Mary was dead. She had never offered to teach them anything before she left, though she had encouraged them both to read, and think. But she’d wanted them to live in the peace and comfort that appeared to be stifling her.

“Dad... he left too. Even when they were both here, they were kind of gone. It’s... these two strong personalities. Both too strong, too independent, too sure they were right.”

His mind dwelled on very distant memories, of cold hard words spoken downstairs when he was supposed to be in bed, hot looks swapped over his head, the way friends would suddenly excuse themselves and leave the room on some pretext as John and Mary stood looking at each other with eyes hard... There’d been love, too; Dean could only recognize now, as an adult, how much love there had also been, but it’d almost acted like two magnets of same polarity, the very strength of it making them too desperate, too intransigent, and pushing the other away. Until one was gone for good, and then that love had dragged John to his own death, leaving his children behind. However hard it had been to be in love with Mary at times, it would have been so much harder to have lost her...

There was not an ounce of Dean that stopped to wonder why he was unwrapping all this crap for an angel. Specifically, though, it was for this angel. Cas hadn’t actually asked Dean what he thought of their marriage. Now Dean was telling him. Just because people were compatible in the eyes of God did not mean it’d work out.

He took a long drink - only water, unfortunately - and then sighed, putting a final conclusion to the story in the same way he capped his canteen. “Yeah, their different views on Paradise set the wedge, and then the people they were just kept them apart.” Like me and you.

“Hmm, like you and Sam.”

Dean blinked and looked up abruptly. “What? No- where did you get that from?”

Cas was looking thoughtfully into the darkness of the night beyond the dell. “It sounds as if your initial interaction with Sam was very similar. Like your parents, you both wanted to act, to fight, but you chose very different, almost opposite ways, Sam staying in the system and you outside. From what I saw of his memories, and from what you’ve both told me these past few weeks, the two of you fought over this for considerably longer than your parents were actually married before finding your peace.” His expression changed, he frowned deeply, a look almost like pain as his eyes dropped to the fire. “It is truly to our shame that we interfered. Given time, maybe John and Mary would have found the balance that you and Sam found, the root of the love that united them, the things that linked them.” Like their children, the quick glance he gave Dean seemed to suggest.

Dean finally remembered to close his mouth. “You can’t know that.”
“No. I never knew Mary. But Balthazar talked to Duma, who knew your mother well.”

“Duma? Oh, yeah, I remember him, he was in the Azazel search-and-destroy group. Towering red-bearded fella.”

“He has changed vessel since, he was a small brunette last time I saw him,” Cas mentioned, because he obviously did not realize how weird it was when he said shit like that. “Duma said Mary’s prime focus was winning the war against Azazel. Maybe it was ambition, or because she loved to use her skills, but... maybe she really did just want to win the war, so she could come back home.”

Dean’s throat closed.

“Yeah, or maybe she just felt free out there, and didn’t mean to come back,” he finally suggested. His dad might have known. But the Winchester code... It would have changed everything for his sons if John had told them for sure, yeah, she left because she wanted to fight for you, or else, she left because she couldn’t stand not doing anything... Now he would never know.

And they’d wandered into loaded territory despite his best intentions. Damn it. Dean shook himself. “Time for bed.”

“Go ahead, I’ll keep watch.”

“We shouldn’t have any angels after us yet.”

“There could be other dangers out here.”

“Like what? It’s the Garden. The worst that can happen is that I wake up with a puma tucked up against me for warmth.” This had actually happened once.

“I don’t need sleep,” Cas pointed out - correctly, of course. Which meant he was going to stay sitting there instead of... uh, right. He didn’t need to lie down and rest anyway. Dean decided he desperately needed respite from his thoughts - all this thoughts, including worry for Sammy - and rolled up in his blanket with his back turned towards the angel.

It didn’t make a difference. Even with his eyes closed, he knew where Cas was. He could feel every inch of the space between them, he could measure the distance in his mind. As he felt himself drifting off with the ability of the soldier to sleep at any time, anywhere, that ball of feelings deep inside him ached subtly as if reminded him that this was not the distance at which he’d gone to sleep a few days ago after the attack, when Cas had been lying at his side, breathing softly and watching him in silence....

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Next Chapter: By Hook or by Crook

...If humans were the sheep and God was the shepherd, then the angels were the trusty ol’ sheepdogs, obeying every order eagerly and without question. Dean could not imagine living like that, but then again, he imagined many an angel could not conceive of living like a human either.
For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall be their shepherd, and shall guide them unto fountains of waters of life: and God shall wipe away every tear from their eyes.—

Revelations 7:17

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“Your turn,” Dean declared.

Castiel contemplated that for a few seconds while he angled his way past a gorse bush. “The decree on blasphemy,” he finally said.

Dean blinked. “Really? That’s one of ours?”

“Yes. We would rather you not curse out your maker and ours, it lacks respect—“

“Hmf.”

“But that would not constitute a sin in our books.”

“I’ll be goddamned,” said Dean with some relish, and enjoyed the way it made Cas snort.

“Oh, my turn. Hmm.” Dean negotiated a sharp slope, pulling himself up with the help of a jutting tree root. Then a hand appeared in front of his face. He looked up. “I thought you can’t fly anymore, now that someone might miss us.”

“That’s not flying,” said Cas, referring to the ten foot distance from the bottom of the scree to the top. “That’s just a long step.”

“Uh-uh. Okay, coffee.”

“That’s the same as alcohol, Dean.”

“Really?”

“Yes, we banned all addictive and toxic substances that could damage you.”

“Coffee can’t damage you.”

“Actually it can, a little. And it is addictive. It was the principle of the thing. It went the way of tobacco, coca, opium and the rest.”

“What are tobacco-ah and those other things?”

“Bad for your health. We were more successful in removing those from Paradise.”

“Hmf.”

Dean strode along. It was early morning, they had a long day’s walk ahead of them, they were still
in the relative safety of the Garden... Nothing like whiling away the miles with a game of ‘who
thought up that stupid decree’.

“You know, I still can’t believe so many of them were requested by humans, and not angels.
Decrees, I mean,” Dean said, shouldering his pack so it settled more comfortably. After some
arguing, they’d split it so that Cas was carrying the heavier lot of food, water canteen, bedroll and
such, and Dean was managing the spare clothes. Dean’s human (and possibly male) pride was
prickling, but he had to be smart here. The angel could carry all that and a cart and not tire, while
Dean would need all his reserves.

“Your brother didn’t mention it?”

“Dude, when Sammy gets his advocacy hat on, I run for the hills. He can’t make it this
interesting.” That made him feel a bit guilty, particularly in the present circumstances with Sam
kidnapped, possibly terrified. Even when he was safely sitting in his parlor, though, well, Sam just
made all this decree stuff so boring. Talking it over with Cas was somehow more fun; he had all
these little tidbits about the whens and the whys, and his occasional puzzled incomprehension
about human customs and mores was always amusing. Plus he’d actually been there when most of
these decrees had been made. That just made the whole thing feel more alive, more real.

“It was a confusing time,” Castiel sighed. ‘I’m glad to say I avoided most of that, I was in battle
during those early decades. Lucifer’s destruction barely gave us soldiers a moment of respite
before other contenders tried to take his place. We didn’t think we had to worry about the humans,
we thought it obvious that-...”

“What, that we’d roll over and follow your each and every law? Yeah, that must have been a
shock.”

“No- I mean, yes, we were naive about some things, but Dean, you don’t understand.” Cas looked
like he had a headache. “People were opposing our rules in the name of religion. Our rules. God’s
rules- stop laughing.”

“Nope! Hah!”

“At first we did not want to create decrees to satisfy these human religious customs. But it caused,
well, trauma when we explained that many of their faiths’ dearly held rules were not God-given,
but had been created by men much like themselves in previous epochs, often with socio-political
agendas in mind. They couldn’t accept it. There were riots. A rabbi threw a brick at me during one
of the protests I was called in for.”

Dean gave him a startled look. “Bloody hell, to call in a seraph, it must have been a bad blow-up.”

“It was,” Cas said morosely, the trudge of his boots through grass reinforcing the two short words.
“And what was worse, these were the most law-abiding religious people- in fact that was part of
the problem, many were furious because we were saving everybody. They had been following all
these strictures their whole lives, and were now cheek by jowl with people they considered
sinners.”

“What did you do? When the rabbi heaved a brick at you?”

Cas shrugged. “Told him to accept it. But first I caught the brick and turned it to dust,” he added in
his usual serious and literal-minded way.

“Yeah...” Dean couldn’t help a grin. In his mind’s eye, he was seeing the rabbi - he imagined him a
lot like Pastor Matt from the northeast of P342, all holy and righteous and on-you-knees-sinners-facing a puzzled and faintly irritated Castiel affirming simply that this was The Way It Was Going To Be. “Did he buy it?”

“I do not know, I had to leave and deal with another situation. I hope he made his peace with our law. What he and the others were protesting that day was not something we could give in on.”

“Oh? What was it?”

“Homosexuality.”

“Heh?”

“The act of loving someone of the same-“

“Dude, I know what that is. I should damn well know. But what, that was forbidden?”

“Oh yes, throughout pretty much all religions at the time. People were imprisoned, abused, even put to death.”

Dean scrutinized his expression as he walked. “Are you serious? Yeah, of course you are.”

“Unfortunately.” Cas shook his head as if his ears were ringing slightly, which was how Dean felt right this second. “Not only did this attitude not make sense to angels, but we’d already seen evidence that the Machine was bringing together soulmates, regardless of gender or the ability to procreate. We couldn’t let opposition to those unions stand.”

“... Okay, I’ll say it just this once: I’m with you feathered goons on that one.”

“Thank you,” said Cas a bit ironically.

“How about adultery then?” Dean asked. This was not in the spirit of the game up to now, it was only the lighter or sillier decrees they’d been tossing around. Dean had learned that the Sabbath (whether Sunday or Saturday or Friday depended on the region, apparently) was human-made, so was mandatory temple attendance and the notion of decency of dress. While the kibosh on building clockwork innovations, eating meat, boozing, caffeine and commerce was all angel.

Maybe Dean shouldn’t throw adultery into the same ring as that lot, but this one mattered. It’d torn people apart. Jess and Sam, for instance. Many humans made out like bunnies and were sometimes even secretly married, though they had to be careful about it. But Jess and Sam had been advocates, they couldn’t afford clandestine relationships. It’d been painful to watch... It still hurt Dean deep inside that his brother hadn’t even been allowed to have that (never mind that the guy was a going-on-fifty year old virgin.) Others in the League had tried to get exemptions going for that, but they had not had any success yet.

“We forbid bachelors from becoming involved, because their soulmates could be out there,” said Cas, a faint sadness in his tone hinting that he was also thinking of Sam. “So we cannot allow relationships and attachments.”

“Yeah, that don’t work, though, we get attached anyway. Even if we don’t commit adultery or anything, people fall for each other, it’s human nature.”

“I can see that now,” Cas admitted, “but wouldn’t it have been even worse if your brother and Jessica Moore had started a relationship, and then her soulmate had appeared?”
“Then Jess should have been free to make a choice.”

“But the unions are decreed by our Father,” Castiel pointed out.

“Yeah, but humans have free will,” Dean countered.

That got him a wince. “It’s not supposed to-...”

“Oh, we should have the free will to want what the machine wants us to want, is that it?”

Cas heaved a harassed sigh. “We do not understand why all these details do not conform to the Plan.”

“I bet,” Dean said with a snort (but damn if he wasn’t smiling a little on the inside like, despite everything, because that was surely the closest he’d ever gotten to hearing his husband whine, and it was kind of funny.)

“For your brother... I wish we could tell ahead of time who might have a match out there and who does not. It would avoid some of the heartbreak.”

“Avoid getting paraded out like prized vegetables on Visiting day too.” Then Dean frowned. “Come to think of it... why can’t you? Tell? The Machine is omniscient.”

“It does give us indications,” Castiel informed him as he made a wide step over a marshy spot in the ground that the Garden had set up for the sole purpose, it appeared, of hosting a whole burst of bluebells. “The destination where we take Visitors is not random, it is dictated by the Machine.”

“So why can’t it tell you to bring so-and-so to meet so-and-so at this address when they both turn eighteen or whatever, and bang, no more uncertainty? Actually, let’s start with the cellar before we build the roof here: why doesn’t it, I dunno, tell you everything? Why didn’t it tell you angels the Joker’s home address, and the list of every operator on the planet?” This was an subject of a century long debate among humans of all political stripe, actually. If the Machine was all-powerful and omniscient, why were there still some deaths, some disasters, why were there still railroad and resistance operators, and angels behaving badly, and demons and monsters about? Dean knew for a fact that humans had asked this question of the angels before, but he was curious to see what Cas would say, because the two of them had a line of communication like no others had had before.

“We don’t know.”

There, that was progress! Because as far as Dean knew, all the other angels queried up until now had answered, “It’s a mystery beyond human ken, now shut up.”

“You seriously don’t know?”

“We don’t know,” Cas repeated and then added in his deadpan way, “seriously.” Because he could be funny like that.

“I personally believe it’s related to the free will of humans,” he elaborated when he caught Dean’s half-suspicious half-surprised glance. “Humans have a capacity for amazing change, for redemption, for making life-altering decisions with nothing more than their intuition. I believe our Father did not want to interfere too much in that. He wanted to keep a light touch.”

“He interfered in my love life. That’s as heavy as it goes.”

“Perhaps.”
“You don’t see this as a contradiction?”

“No.”

“You really don’t have any- any basic question about this whole setup?”

“It’s not ours to question.”

“Bunch of angels...”

“Yes,” Cas agreed serenely, and Dean was just absolutely sure he did that on purpose.

That was the way of their new world. If humans were the sheep and God was the shepherd, then the angels were the trusty ol’ sheepdogs, obeying every order eagerly and without question. Dean could not imagine living like that, but then again, he imagined many an angel could not conceive of living like a human either, always questioning and doubting and poking.

“Oh, we’re here.” Dean’s feet slowed of their own accord.

The peaceful sun-dappled forest gave way to a meadow. Halfway across, something changed. The grass was less verdant, the trees on the far edge were scraggy and full of dead twigs and branches, broken birds nests, windswept debris.

The edge of the Garden. They were a few steps away from the immediate and total control of the God Machine. The sooner the better, Dean thought, remembering Michael hammering down on Cas yesterday. He shouldered his pack and walked quickly towards the edge.

Ten steps along, Dean realized he was walking on his own. Cas had half turned back and was looking the way they’d come, back towards P342, New Jerusalem and the Machine.

... Did he want to go back? Was he giving up? Dean would be hard put to blame him. But he knew that wasn’t what Cas was doing. He was just looking through the clear pure air of the Garden, gazing in the direction of his Father, maybe for the last time. The complicated tangle of feeling in Dean’s gut gave another jerk.

It only took a few seconds. Dean would have waited for longer, but Cas turned around and walked swiftly after him. “Do you know the way?”

“Yeah, I know where we are. The river’s not far, you can already hear it, and the fishing hole we’re looking for is maybe half an hour away from here.”

“Then let’s go.”

They made their way across the edge of the Garden and into the Wilds in silence.

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The note was wrapped in water-proofed oilcloth, stuck in the dead log Dean and John had sat on to fish so many years ago. Dean felt a knot of worry loosen. He didn’t know how long the resistance was going to leave each clue to be found, he’d been having unreasoned anxieties that they wouldn’t find anything.
‘Head south. Keep a sharp look-out along the trail until you see some rocks,’ was all it said.

“At least this one makes sense,” Castiel grunted. “Head south until we see some rocks. Not very exact-“

“Except it’s asking us to go north.”

“No, it’s not.”

“It’s in code, Cas.” To Dean, the few words were as clear as a map. The pass-phrase at the top indicated that the first direction of the instructions had to be reversed. The mention of a trail was not random, it was referring to one of the safe routes taken by runners away from Paradise, a trail full of switchbacks through dense forests and canyons for cover. Dean had accompanied them on this very path before, when the engine driver of the ‘train’ needed extra muscle. There were little warded areas here and there, known as ‘look-out points’, where humans could duck into shelter and keep an eye out for trackers. One of those would be flagged by an inukshuk near the entrance - an indication that Dean was to keep Cas out of the others. He was going to have to keep this all under his hat and take a circuitous route anyway, because compromising this trail would put railroad operators in danger, people like Benny and Charlie who relied on its safety.

“Trust me on this,” he said briskly. “I know where this is sending us.”

Cas, angel that he was, didn’t look like he had a problem taking Dean on faith, but he was still directing a frowny face at the note. “Why do they have to make this so complicated?”

Dean’s eyebrows twitched up. “Because if an angel got a hold of this note - an angel who didn’t give a wooden ha’penny about Sam - he’d be able to find them. Obviously.”

“I mean, why these stages? Each one could be a broken link that would leave us stranded. Why not meet us here? Once out of the Garden, I am the same here as I would be anywhere else. Why is this Joker not meeting us here by the river? Or some other spot where he could set up an ambush? That ravine right over there for instance.”

Dean ripped up the note, trying not to give the ravine a suspicious scrutiny. “I don’t rightly know. He’ll have his reasons.”

“Have you met this man?”

“Nope. Don’t even know for sure it’s a man, actually, could be a gal. My dad knew him - or her - decades ago, but he never said anything. Come on.”

Cas caught up in three quick steps and gave Dean a look of concentration. “Dean, I wanted to ask, what warding do you have on you?”

Dean glanced at him in surprise. “Can’t you feel it?”

“I can’t sense you, no, but how good is it? Last month, your wards were painted on. Is it the same?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Isn’t that dangerously impermanent? What if you fell in the river?” Cas added, tilting his head towards the water dancing beneath the sunlight ten feet away. The river here was deep, running strong across its thirty feet in width, they were going to have to hike for a bit before they could find a spot to cross over.
Dean opened his mouth to say it’d always been okay before... then remembered these were not ordinary circumstances by a long stretch.

“If you would allow me,” Cas said, his slow and unusually formal words suggesting Dean brace himself for what was undoubtedly going to be a doozy of a suggestion, “I might have a solution. A permanent solution.”

“Oh? What-” Dean’s mouth stayed open and his question went clean out of his mind.

“Are you alright?” Cas stopped to see why Dean was suddenly crouched.

“Shh.”

Cas stood there a few seconds, then knelt next to him with the air of one willing to oblige some human whim. “Are you tired? What are you looking at?”

Dean carefully parted the grasses with a stick he’d picked up. “See?”

Cas cocked his head. “A footprint?”

“Yes.” The ground was hard, it never rained here after all, but humidity from the nearby river had left a loamy spot where a foot was clearly imprinted. A bare foot. Most monsters - those with normal feet - wore shoes, so did demons.

Dean looked around. “Croatoan.”

There was a pause, then the curt “Yes” was from Cas the soldier. “I can smell sulfur.”

“You can?”

“It is faint.” Cas crouched, eyes half closed. “But it’s there.”

“I’d give it a couple of days since they’ve been by - or at least since this one put his foot there.” The print was large. But the Croats were... they weren’t all burly men one could feel fine taking out. Dean had... Dean had had to kill women and children. The fact that they were trying to rip his guts out, or spread the plague to him, didn’t help how he felt about the act. It was one of those things that woke him at night, bathed in sweat and struggling with his sheets, teeth clenched so hard he sometimes had to go to the medical room near the altar the next day to help with the headache, or a crack in the enamel.

Cas was looking around, eyes narrowed dangerously. “I didn’t think we would see any. There are not that many left since the fall of the last Prince.”

“Yeah, word has it that they’re finally dying out, little by little. But the ones that are out here, they tend to group around the border. Dumb instinct. They know there are people in the Garden, and they don’t realize they can’t get in.” The presence of the God Machine kept them away like smoke kept away mosquitoes. “Shoula asked this before, but Balthazar said you’d have to clip your own wings out here. How bad is it exactly? Can’t fly, I know that much. Can you smite?”

“It would be better not to. I am not afraid of plagued humans for my own sake,” Cas added. “They cannot harm me, and I can kill them with my blade. You, on the other hand-“

“I can kill ‘em.” Dean drew back his jacket and jerked a thumb at the blade Balthazar had given him, slipped into the scabbard sewn into the cloth.
“Yes, but if you come into contact with their blood, you need to tell me right away - and it will still be dangerous, I am not of the Hands of Mercy, I—”

“Dude, fifteen years on the front line, I know the score.”

“Most of those years were spent fighting the denizens of Purgatory,” Cas pointed out.

“Not the first few. Lotta Croats. I know the rules.” He also knew the Croatoans scared him worse than Eve’s bastards and even Leviathans ever could. The smallest cut could doom him to becoming a ravening beast until Cas or someone put him down... On the battlefield, the Rit Zien could heal the start of plague in a man if it was caught soon enough, but Cas was more of the ‘blasting things’ school, so Dean would rather avoid finding out how good a healer he was.

“We should avoid them,” Cas said.

“Fancy that. I can see why they put you Seraphim in charge of armies. Great strategy.”

“Sarcasm is unnecessary.”

“Huh-uh.” The back and forth was pretty much automatic, they were scanning their surroundings. The sun piercing the leaves, warm and green, above their heads, the grass and the moss, the river gurgling nearby, it all gave an impression of serenity, of gentle nature, but this was not the Garden. The Wilds were not quite the deathtrap the Word made it out to be, but in this untamed wilderness, where humans had been forcefully removed and nature and the unnatural were both allowed to run rampant, danger abounded. The very few towns and outposts that had flourished here once, and the native tribes who’d lived here, were all gone. Without the Machine to rewrite them, their structures had been reclaimed by the land. This was not civilisation by any stretch. “We are going to avoid them, certainly, and anything else lurking around the edge of the Garden. A few Croatoans are dangerous enough, but sometimes they have minders.”

Cas looked back at him swiftly, eyes narrowed. “There could be demons? This close to New Jerusalem?”

“I’ve seen things, Cas, let’s just put it that way.” Still in a crouch, Dean followed the footsteps until they stopped on harder ground. He looked around carefully, then remembered he had extra resources available now. “Can you smell anything with that bloodhound nose of yours? Sulfur on the breeze, smoke, blood, rot, anything?”

Castiel turned on himself several times. “Traces of sulfur here. Not much beyond. I can only boost the vessel’s ability to analyze molecules, and it has a human olfactory range, so I am in no way comparable to a dog,” he added with sincere regret in his voice, the goof. “I would think- what are you doing?”

“Dousing. Shh.”

Dean stayed kneeling for two minutes, letting the pendulum swing.

“I think they’ve wandered off,” he finally concluded. “We’ll need to be careful for a day or two, but they don’t tend to be further off from the edge of the Garden unless herded by a demon. We just need to keep them off our tracks until we’re far enough away, and we should be good.”

“How do we do that?”

Dean smirked. “Watch and learn, angel, watch and learn.”
Their relationship had changed a lot since their first meeting, to say the least. Which was a good thing, naturally. It was mostly due to Castiel’s help in finding Sam, of course, though for some reason Castiel found that latter consideration oddly unsatisfying.
From the time that it goeth forth it shall take you: for morning by morning shall it pass over, by day and by night: and it shall be a vexation only to understand the report.

For the bed is shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it: and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it.

For the Lord shall rise up as in mount Perazim, he shall be wroth as in the valley of Gibeon, that he may do his work, his strange work; and bring to pass his act, his strange act.

-- Isaiah 28:21

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The trek continued for days through rough arroyo and rocky stretches, through forests untouched by human hands for centuries, through plains that had a long time ago harbored the fields of a few frontier farmers. The human and the angel followed an odd itinerary, going east for a day, then west another in what felt almost like doubling back, and a huge waste of time. If this was meant to confuse trackers, then it assumed Castiel was being very obedient to the resistance’s orders and not involving other angels, as it would be easy to leave signs only his kind could see and follow otherwise. Castiel could not piece together how this Joker thought.

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Libertad was not a pleasant campfire topic after a long tiring day. But at the end of this mad zigzag path was the human resistance, and assuming they could catch Castiel alive and hold him, they might put him on trial for what they saw as his crimes. Castiel wanted Dean to have the truth first, before it was brought up in the worst light by humans who had not been there. He recounted events simply, clinically, without apology or attempt to hide or exaggerate the sins of the community he’d purged.

“So what did you do with the kid you spared?” Dean finally asked after a full minute of silence in which Castiel felt more tense by the second, though he was hard-pressed to say why exactly; he was fully expecting Dean to be angry, to be disgusted, to be horrified. He expected to lose that thin sense of connection that had arisen out here, after five days of roughing it together in the Wilds.

He’d not expected that question to be the first thing out of Dean’s mouth.

“I left her with a childless couple in New Jerusalem. Paradise 89 to be exact.”

”... Who goes on the run when they have a young kid to think about?” Dean was staring at the fire.

“I don’t know,” Castiel said, rather than the obvious answer - ‘irredeemable and possibly insane believers in freedom who preferred living in a nest of filth and human vices like Libertad rather..."
than in Paradise.’ That’d have been the answer he’d have given a bare blink of time ago, two months. But ‘I don’t know’ really was the answer now.

“Why P89? Why not P1 or- or anywhere?” Dean looked at him curiously. Castiel still felt off balance from the lack of all the negative reactions he’d been expecting.

“I took her to Paradise 1 first, to the Rit Zien - to have her checked out medically.” He’d added that last very quickly, but Dean’s expression hadn’t twitched. “I asked the Machine for her antecedents and any family she might have, but He only said she was of slavic origin, and that I should do what I think best. Paradise 89-“

“Wait, the Machine didn’t tell you? Like, why? Wait, don’t tell me, you don’t know and you don’t question.” Dean rolled his eyes. He was annoyed at Castiel’s unquestioning obedience to his Father’s manifest Will rather than furious at his elimination of over three hundred people. Castiel wondered briefly if this would make sense if he, too, were human.

“That Paradise was fairly close to where she had probably been born, or one of her parents, and it was the one in eastern Europe with the most children. I decided to leave her there. Maya. That was her name, according to the Rit Zien who helped her with the rickets and the trauma. She didn’t talk to me, naturally. Or any angel. Ephraim only found out her name when he was helping her mind get over the worst of the shock.”

“Why’d you leave her where there was the most kids? Why not somewhere where they don’t have any? They’d have been even happier to have her,” asked the confounding human, once more completely sidestepping all the legitimate causes for being appalled in Castiel’s statement and going for the most irrelevant detail.

Castiel shoved aside his confusion, a feeling he’d become very familiar with these past few weeks living among his Father’s final creations, and tried to remember his reasoning at the time. All this had happened almost twenty years ago. Maya might have children of her own by now if she was one of the chosen.

“I thought she would be able to recapture what was left of her childhood better among other children. Isolated among adults would have been too much like Libertad. This gave her a chance at siblings. It was the best I could do.” He’d not intended at any time to make an apology for his actions, much less put the onus of acceptance or understanding of his decisions on Dean, yet that last had come out much closer to a request for reassurance than he’d meant it to.

“It was probably for the best,” Dean confirmed, poking the fire.

He fell silent for a full minute. The logs crackled, highlighting the silence of the night around them.

Eventually, without looking up, Dean asked: “If you had to do it again, the attack, would you?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah.” And he smiled faintly. Confusing human.

“But I might do it differently,” Castiel found himself admitting. “It would not have been too difficult to incapacitate them. Eliminate any who showed signs of resistance, but give the others a chance at surrender. They might have been executed later in judgment, but if there were those who had committed no sin other than fleeing Paradise, they might have accepted penance in order to return to the ranks of the Saved after living in the filth of their so-called freedom for awhile.”

Dean didn’t seem to mark that with any more emotion than the initial confession. “Why didn’t you
do it that way?” was all he asked quietly.

The question was not, why not take a shortcut and send them all to their Eternal Reward however undeserved, but rather, why would his approach be different now? Castiel did not know the full answer to that question.

“It would have been riskier,” he said, answering the actual question and not the ancillary. “I was alone, and they had wards and magic. I did not judge it prudent to take chances. I was an important resource in the war which was raging back then.”

“Yeah, I was there.”

“You aren’t reacting like I thought you would,” Castiel finally said, grabbing the bull by the horns. Dean looked away, out into the night. “Let’s just say, there are things in my past that I’d have done differently too… I’d heard that lot down there had gone loco. Didn’t think it was as bad as you described, but if you say that’s what they got up to, I believe you. What you did, though? That was terrible too. I don’t know as much as I thought I did, turns out, but I do know one thing: that’s what war tends to be about. Both sides doing terrible things because they think the other side’s worse.”

“I don’t want to be at war with humans,” Castiel said despondently. “That is entirely the opposite of how it should be.”

“I know, Cas. I’m calling it a night.”

Castiel stood watch as he had since they’d left Paradise, not needing to sleep, while Dean curled up near their small fire. This day’s clue had been located in a ‘safe spot’, a warded area of stone walls in a hidden dell that’d been a refuge for one of the indigenous tribes living here at one point, well before the railroad had used it. The flickering light warmed stones that had seen much misery even before the apocalypse. At one point, the Seraph Castiel would have let those relics tell him a righteous story of mankind’s betterment and protection. Now though, he wondered if the last few surviving Ponka and other tribes, relocated into Paradise alongside the people who had initially brought them disease and land wars in the first place, might feel the same way as Rufus did. Kind chains… Castiel’s thoughts kept returning unbidden to the old man’s words, as well as the look on Dean’s face when he said he’d rather have never been born. That defiance of both Heaven and common sense did not seem rational to an angel, but Castiel was starting to see how maybe, just maybe it could make sense to a human...

Dean was already asleep, with the proficiency of a soldier used to a decade and a half of campaigns. Normally he slept on his back, snoring faintly; tonight he’d turned on his side, facing away from the angel and the fire. Maybe it was significant, maybe it wasn’t, but Castiel did not think he was imagining the small distance there, a bit of a breach. Yet they hadn’t entirely lost the connection that’d arisen between them for all that. It was a bond he was having a hard time defining, woven from the danger they faced, the isolation, the silences and the occasional talks, as well as from Castiel’s sincere admiration for Dean’s abilities to hide his trail from anything supernatural and natural. This bond was made up of earlier memories too: Dean laughing, building a table for their family, trying to get him to taste pie ‘because who the hell can’t like pie, man!’ This link between them… sometimes Castiel had the rather blasphemous notion that the Machine had only just slapped its benediction onto something that was already there. These past few days of seeing Dean at his savage best, eyes keen, easily riding the tension as if evading angels and the damned alike was a vicious game…it reminded him of the elusive man he’d chased through the streets of Paradise. Those were his very first memories of Dean; colored by a blend of irritation and faint admiration, crystalizing in fierce satisfaction when Dean Winchester almost slipped through his fingers but Castiel’s hand had fastened on his arm as he caught him, and pulled him up into the
light of the pinned sun and into their combined destiny.

Their relationship had changed a lot since then, to say the least, though he was still confounded by Dean’s forbearance tonight. Gratitude, maybe, for his help in finding Sam. That should be a good thing. Yet Castiel didn’t like that thought and he could not determine why. He just knew he wanted Dean to forgi- understand him for- for the sake of- of what he’d said, for the being he was, for the link between them, even at its most antagonistic. Not simply because he was risking his life helping Dean get his brother back.

I’ve spent too long among humans, Castiel reflected. I’m getting confusing too. If- that is, when I get back, I need to have words with someone about many, many things, but among others, we need to re-think garrisons. If I can get this confused after barely two months stuck with one of these humans, what must the garrisons be like after two centuries...? It’s a wonder they’re not all like the lot at Paradise 342.

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Dean didn’t sit down to rest and eat, he stared out over the water sparkling under the midday sunshine.

“Hmm. Maybe I should wash off. Or the trackers will be able to follow me by smell alone.”

Castiel looked at him, perplexed, opened his mouth-

“Joke, Cas.”

“I knew that,” Castiel said, mostly truthfully. “I was going to suggest that I could...” He lifted a hand, two fingers extended in the direction of Dean’s forehead to illustrate.

Dean shrugged into the movement of pulling off his jacket. “Sure you could, but hell, I could do with a bit of a break from all this walking.”

That suggestion got the entirety of Castiel’s approval and then some. Dean’s walking rhythm this past week was a masterwork of pushing himself to the limit while keeping himself fit enough to fight, but Castiel could still feel his spouse’s stamina ebb. Castiel could heal injuries, but addressing a slow grinding wear and loss of energy over a matter of days was too subtle a stress for his abilities, and it was not an area in which he wished to experiment via trial and error, not unless things got a good deal more desperate than they were. A rest was a much better approach. As Dean slipped off his shirt, Castiel nodded in firm agreement and turned around to scrutinize the sparse forest of ash and elm trees around them.

There was a small puff of air behind him, like an embryonic laugh. “Sorry, did I shock you?”

“Shock?” Castiel cocked his head without turning around.

“You said the decency decree was a human one. Didn’t think you’d be a prude, angel.”

Prude? Castiel frowned at a nearby bush, then finally glanced over his shoulder. Dean looked startled that he’d turned around, fingers slipping as they grasped the edge of his undershirt. “I’m keeping watch.”
“...Oh.” Dean looked at him silently. Then he shrugged - a larger gesture than before - and drew off his undershirt (which Castiel was going to whisk free of sweat in awhile, since that small service he could perform safely.)

The stark dark ink of the tattoo stood out against Dean’s skin as he dropped the undershirt on his pack. “Can’t keep watch looking this way?” he asked lazily.

“I could if I had to,” Castiel was thoroughly puzzled. “But it’s not optimal. My vessel’s eyes are still essential adjuncts in an area where we could run into resistance fighters warded against my celestial senses.”

“Huh-uh.” He had the oddest feeling Dean wasn’t really listening to him. He’d given his shoulders a stretch and was now unfastening his belt slowly. Then he turned. The anti-possession tattoo was replaced by the march down his vertebra of the little jaws tallying his Leviathan kills. Dean leaned over, muscles rippling, to undo his bootlaces. The sunlight, dappled by clouds overhead, played over his skin. He wasn’t hurrying with those laces. Normally he sat down on the ground and yanked his boots right off.

...Dean had taken baths back in Paradise 342, because of course the fact that the Machine kept every one of its human charges clean did not signify in the slightest. The last time that’d happened when Castiel had been around, about a week before the angel had been shot, Dean and Sam had hauled in the tin tub from the shed into the kitchen. They had boiled water on the stove, Dean had started to undo his buttons with a brusque gesture, given Castiel a pointed stare, that eventually transcended into a order to get the hell out of there.

So obviously today was different, since it featured a river, and Castiel could not get the hell out of there. It was different, yet something deep inside him, a strange intuition, told him that those differences were entirely superficial and that there was something about this scene now, when compared to that memory, that was entirely and utterly different. He couldn’t put his finger on what it was, though.

- now that he thought of it, when he’d offered to clean Dean with a quick application of Grace, first off, he’d forgotten somehow that this was never welcome, and also, the way Dean had declined had shown no repulsion at the notion.

The trees shook gently in the breeze. Dean straightened up and slid his hands beneath his waistband of his trousers. Castiel watched him, unsure, from their earlier conversation, if he was supposed to or not. Why was there a strange sense of tension here? In the quiet, in the rustle of clothes, in the breeze-

Castiel stiffened and he turned quickly to the left.

“What?” Dean asked tightly, that odd moment between them bursting like a soap bubble.

“I smell smoke. Faint.”

“Out here?” Dean looked in the same direction. “Far off?”

“No. I don’t think so. It’s faint because it’s old. I also smell ash.” Molecules danced through the air, carried by the breeze.

Dean was already stuffing his feet back into his boots, eyes narrowed and wary as he examined their surroundings.

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They found the old campfire thirty minutes later. It was in the lee of a collapsed building, half invaded by vegetation now, the remains of an old fort perhaps, groundworks fighting against nature's reclaim long after the wooden pales of its fences had surrendered to it. The embers were cold, the camp was maybe a day or two old according to Dean. He also said there was evidence of several people lying down around it. He went hunting through bushes and brambles and grass, looking for signs that Castiel could have seen with his celestial vision, but not interpreted in any way.

“Couple people camped here. Three at most.” Dean was crouched, looking around after a very thorough inspection. “And I can’t find a scrap of food.”

“Food?” Castiel cocked his head. Dean had said that as if it was significant.

“It’s an easy way to see what we’re dealin’ with.” Dean stared blindly at the remains of an old grain bin, rusted, collapsed and half buried in loam. “Find an apple core, biscuit crumbs, some potato peels... that’s fine. What kind o’ folk do you reckon travel around without anything to eat at all? Or more specifically, nothing of what I just named?”

“I’m not sure-... ” Castiel fell silent in sudden comprehension.

“Yeah, you got it. Eve’s sons don’t eat no grits.”

“What do you think it is?”

“Smell blood?”

Castiel scented the air. “No.”

“Hmm. Vamps wouldn’t travel without their cattle - god help the poor buggers. Werewolves eat meat as well as the occasional deer heart, and there’s no gnawed bones. Shifters eat normal, for the most part, so wouldn’t be them, we’d find traces. Could be wraiths or djinn or some of the weirder varmints. Stuff that don’t need to eat people all that regular, but can’t eat human food. This... is not good.”

Castiel looked at him curiously. “Why? You said there’s no more than two or three. We have nothing to fear from them.”

“Unless they track us, and find ways of communicatin’ with others. The critters, they often have means. You know that.”

Castiel did know that, it just didn’t usually apply to such as him. He left the mongrels to his brethren in the ranks or to the Hunters, and if there were messages sent to and from one of the Alphas about him, it was usually, ‘keep the hell away from the Seraphim!’

“This fire is at least a day or two old,” he said, not in any objection - he had more than enough faith in Dean’s skills by now - but to try to get the parameter of their problem outlined.

“Yeah, but depending on what kind of beastie we’re dealin’ with and why they’re travelin’ way out here, they could double back or have others come along after them. If they catch my scent, they’ll be on our rears. Damn it. I don’t want to waste the time it’d take to do the safe thing. Which is track them down, find out what they know and kill them. Hmm.” Dean stood up and looked carefully around.

“This is what we’re going to do,” he finally announced. “Let’s get out of this river valley to start with. There’s only two ways out of here if I don’t want to go cliff-scaling, so they’ll figure out easy
enough where to pick up our scent if they lose us here. After we get out, I got some tricks I can use, herbs and stuff that can mask us.”

“There’s something I can try as well, to cover out scent until now.”

“Mojo our tracks? Didn’t know you could do that.” Dean walked off at a fast pace, attention on the landscape around them, searching for traces of other monster migration as he advanced.

“Not as such, but today...” Castiel looked searchingly up at the clouds as he walked. The humidity was high, the clouds thick and fluffy. He didn’t tell Dean what he was going to try, to avoid distracting him. He was far from sure of his success, anyway; he had to severely restrain his use of power to pass unnoticed, though in truth the Machine’s overwatch here was almost nonexistent, so far from the Garden. Still, no need to take chances.

Oddly enough, he’d barely started to seed a few clouds and nudge a few currents around, that some sort of feedback loop in the weather occurred and activity picked up on its own quite readily.

Dean’s step faltered as he glanced around at the darkening landscape, then up. “Whoa, lotta clouds.”

“Yes. Let’s make it past the lip of the valley, then find shelter.”

“Shelter from what?”

Castiel glanced up at the sky. “Run,” he advised.

Dean broke into a fast jog without a single question, like the soldier he was. The knife he’d gotten from Balthazar, Mary Campbell’s weapon, was clutched in his hands. Castiel almost told him that he was not worried about a physical threat, but the monsters could be following them right now, so might as well have weapons ready.

Thirty minutes of jogging and fast march got them past the lip of the valley, the rise of which led to steep embankments on the other side. Looking back, Castiel spotted a deep overhang. He caught Dean by the shoulder and pulled him towards it.

“Are they after us?” Dean craned his neck, tense. “What’s going on with the sky?”

“No, I don’t think they are, and they won’t be able to follow us soon. But we might as well get in out of the rain.”

“Th-“

Castiel was halfway to the make-do shelter when he realized Dean wasn’t following. His spouse was standing still and staring straight up at the sky.

“Dean?”

“Whoa!” Dean jerked back and felt at his cheek.

“Let’s get under here. It shouldn’t last too long, and by the time the rain’s done, it will have wiped our scent clean. What means did you have to stop them from picking up our tracks again? ...Dean? Come over here, you’ll get wet.”

Dean unfroze and came to life like the mechanical soldier he’d built for his young friend Jesse, walking towards the overhang with his free hand out, staring at the drops of water landing in his
palm.

“You... did you do this? Is it safe for you to- to-“

“Yes, the Machine doesn’t bother to control the weather this far out all that much. Storms are infrequent, but they do occur naturally. And I doubt an angel would think I have cause to create one.” Castiel had a good grasp on how his brethren thought, after all. The idea of washing away their scent from monsters an angel could easily smite would not occur to them.

“Storm?” Dean said breathlessly as he stopped, stunned and still, next to Castiel.

“Yes. Do you want me to dry you?”

His hand hovered over Dean’s shoulder, but Dean did not give him permission, he was staring at the rain splattering the dry dust outside their overhang.

“Jesus Christ!”

Castiel tensed, blade instinctively slipping into his palm, eyes scrutinizing the gathering gloom for what had made Dean jump and swear like that, before realizing it had been the rumble of thunder.

“I’m sorry, is this distressing you?” Castiel felt like an idiot. Sometimes he forgot how sheltered Dean was.

Dean hurled off his pack, stuffed his knife in its scabbard, and darted out of the overhang’s shelter.

“Dean?”

His spouse strode straight out into the rain which had started sheeting down, arms out, face upturned. He walked forward, then spun around on himself a few times. His eyes were closed and he was smiling as fiercely as the day they’d first met by that well.

Castiel’s mouth stood open around several possible objections to this behavior without putting any into words.

“There’s so much of it!” Dean exclaimed.

“...Yes. It’s a thunderstorm. It-“

A flicker interrupted him. Dean twisted on himself, staring up at the clouds. It hadn’t been much of a discharge, but his eyes were round. Three seconds later, thunder rumbled.

“Did- did you do that?!“

“Me? No, it’s a storm, I don’t have to do anything. It’s natural.”

Dean stood stock still, staring, until lightning forked again to their right.

“YES!”

Dean whooped louder than the thunder that followed. He spun around, the rain thoroughly soaking him as he laughed and yelled back at the faint after-rumble.

You’ll get wet and cold, there are unknown monsters about, and there is a very good reason you shouldn’t run around in a thunderstorm, were all very valid objections to this behavior that stayed lodged in Castiel’s throat where they twisted, almost solid as they lay there, something that both
hurt and tingled pleasurably as he watched his husband laugh in the rain. That feeling... it seemed to start in his vessel and spear right into his higher being as if they were both pinned by the sensation, a good/bad ache he didn’t understand.

Lightning arced across the sky. Dean laughed in time with the thunder that shook something deep inside the angel watching him.

An invisible sweep of his wings dispersed the positive charge that had been building, just in case. Castiel did not do anything else but watch Dean watch the storm, rivulets running down the latter’s face, from his hair, down into his clothes. Even when he started clutching himself from the chill that would be working its way through him, Castiel let him stand outside in the rain, watching him breathlessly.

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*Next Chapter: Dead Drop*

“That’s a thing? Grace is different from angel to angel? Or were you just being poetic.”

“Our grace is as different as a human’s face is distinctive. I don’t think I can be poetic,” Castiel added after a couple of seconds of consideration.
To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.

-- Isaiah 61:1-3

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“The next message should be around here somewhere,” Dean muttered, looking around. “Man, come on, where is it … I want to sleep…”

We could look for it tomorrow, Castiel could have suggested, but he didn’t. Nine days they’d been on their bizarre scavenger hunt through the Wilds. Like Dean, Castiel wanted to find Sam sooner rather than later. He strode around, checking the boles of trees and under any rock that looked piled artificially against another.

“You’re quiet.” Dean’s voice was grumpy, almost reluctant.

Castiel wasn’t sure what to answer to that. Yes, he was quiet. He wasn’t one to talk aimlessly unless prompted. Neither was Dean. Though their isolation and shared hardship on this strange pilgrimage had led to more conversations in the past few days than in the entire month that had preceded it. They had talked of serious things, and less serious things. Odd things and normal things. On some things they had agreed, on others, not. Of a common accord, the only thing they had not talked about was the future, what would happen after they found Sam. Castiel, with the discipline of the soldier, did not even think beyond the accomplishment of their mission, squashing methodically any traitorous tendril of regret at the thought that the most likely scenario, assuming he was even still alive, was that they would be returning to their old status quo.

“Ah, found it,” Dean threw over his shoulder, kneeling near a fallen log.

“I’ll start looking around for a place to camp then.” Castiel judged that he had mastered a fair amount of woodsman craft these past days of following Dean. He was starting to know what to look for in places where a human could put down a bedroll and rest. A lack of ant nests was a starter.

A whiff of sulfur made Castiel spin around in alarm, before registering the strike of a match that’d preceded it.

“Dean? Should you be showing a light?”

Dean didn’t answer. He was sitting on the log, the match illuminating the note. Castiel thought there’d been enough of the fading light of day to read it. “Dean? Do you need assistance?”

“I… I don’t…”

Castiel was at his side in an instant. “What? What is it?” Dean didn’t normally hesitate like that, never had that faint quaver in his voice- what had happened? What had those humans done to
“Cas, I don’t know what this says. I have no idea where this is sending us next.” The match guttered, he dropped it absently and brought his hand to rub his mouth, staring at the note. The hand was shaking. Castiel felt something clench deep inside, anger and concern. Dean was exhausted from this- this insane carnival of clues sending them hiking for days across the Wilds with anxiety for his brother dogging his every step. It was amazing that he’d held out so well so far, a testament to his resilience and the physique he’d cultivated during the war, but Castiel knew, deep within his being, that Dean was clinging on desperately to his calm. And this note may have pushed him over the edge.

“What does it say?” Castiel asked, voice steady. He could never make sense of the demented ramblings of the madman who’d taken Sam, but talking about it might help.

“A sister- I don’t have a sister. ‘Fly to the tree and lay a flower on your sister’s grave’- that makes no sense. It makes no sense, Cas. What do we do if we lose the trail?’” Dean took in a ragged breath and caught himself on the edge of hysteria before Castiel could say anything. “The code here is straightforward, a passphrase, the one that was active the week we met, and- there’s this bit here, though, I can’t read it. It’s not code, it-...” He craned his neck and tilted the note to better catch the last bit of light. Then he blinked and looked up with an unreadable expression. “...Looks like Enochian.”

He handed the note to Castiel’s waiting hand.

The single word there was indeed Enochian and it burned in Castiel’s mind, along with the message it instantly decoded.

“This is for me.”

“What?”

“This message is for me.”

“What’s it say?”

“The part in Enochian? Nothing, it’s just my name.”

“Your-...” Dean stared at him then at the note. “But the bit about the sister...?”

Castiel glanced around, quite needlessly; angels never got lost on the planet their Father had created. “It’s a good five days walk from here.”

“You have a sister?”

Castiel examined the wide-eyed expression. “...Yes, I have many.”

“But you always call each other brother.”

“Yes. I suppose. The gender distinction is not-... but Annael was in a female vessel when she passed. She’d had it a long time. She... she was an angel who thought differently. It’s hard to explain.”

“Oh. So you know where to go?”

Castiel was silent until Dean prompted him again, voice tightening with tension.
“I know where to go. But Dean, this man, this Joker... how does he know all this?”

Dean blew out his breath. “He’s got means, man, I told you. Why, is your, uh, sister’s grave, is it a secret or something?”

Castiel tilted his head, trying to think of it in this new light. “It’s... not secret, however I do not know how a human could have heard of this. It is a matter of angels.”

“Another interesting question is why is he sending us there. And also, why is this message for you?”

“What do you mean?”

Dean’s eyes were narrowed, those quicksilver thoughts of his darting ahead. “It’s like he’s checking that you’re still with me. And also telling us that it’s fine you’re still with me. He’s expecting you. And that he’s okay with us knowing that. And... and he’s telling us to fly. But we can’t. Can we?”

“No. It could attract attention.”

“But he’s telling us to.” Dean grabbed the note and stared. “And also... sorry, but how did she die? Annael?”

“Why do you ask?” Castiel extemporized.

“I remember you mentioning that name - not you, Balthazar. When he said Michael might kill you. Did she...”

“Michael did not kill her. But...” Oh dear, this was not something Castiel was comfortable explaining. “Anna... Annael, I mean, she loved this planet, loved humans. She saw so much potential in them. I do not know--... The death toll of the apocalypse, it hurt her deeply. She felt responsible - that we were all responsible for it, for not doing more. She even-” She’d blamed their Father for the Plan, but Castiel was not going to say that. He was already saying more than he’d initially planned, yet the words still came as if Dean’s steady green eyes were drawing them out - Dean, who loved his brother more than his life, despite different beliefs and methods and values. “She had different ideas on how New Jerusalem should be managed, which led her to being marginalized. She lost her position as the head of the Seraphim and was given tasks not related to helping humans...”

“The host thought her loyalty might be compromised?” Dean guessed, voice hard.

“I don’t know,” Castiel said, mostly honestly - he truly didn’t know, but he had his suspicions. “I wish I hadn’t been so busy. That she could have come to me for help, or just to... to talk. We are... Angels are very focused on our duties. We exist for that. But the apocalypse changed so much. For some, they could no longer recognize their role, their place in the spheres. If our... if our leaders told them to change too much, to think too differently, some could not do that, so they...”

“Were killed?”

“No. I’m sorry, there’s no easy way to explain this... Released from their responsibility to exist, might be close. Encouraged not to. In a way.”

“Oh.”

Once again, his spouse did not react like he’d expected. He thought Dean would be all over this
example of the angels’ more intransigent side. He’d plucked Castiel’s feathers enough over instances of angels merely trying their best, or even things which Castiel knew were right. But what was the reaction he got when he let slip this glimpse of the Host’s unpleasant underbelly? Dean’s mouth turned down at the corners and he gave Castiel a furtive glance that was... what? Angry? Protective? A mixture of both perhaps - concerned...? For him? Castiel wished distractedly that he was better at reading humans in general and Dean in particular.

He shut away confusion, along with memories of the past and of long-gone brethren, and focused on the immediate. “Anna chose to join the earth. She fell a few day’s walk from here. As to how we are going to get there... I need information. I am going to see if Balthazar left me a message.”

“What?! Isn’t that dangerous?”

“No. It shouldn’t be. It’s a tiny risk. I can’t talk to him directly, but he agreed to leave any news in a tiny corner of the Machine’s memory related to the function of binary stars. Nobody goes there.”

Dean reached for the note with a hard grin. “A dead drop. You guys set up a dead drop.”

“I suppose? Any touch to the Machine in the Ether carries a small risk, however.”

Dean looked at the note. “Do it,” he said decidedly.

“We need to set up wards. Just in case.”

“Fine.”

“Should we do this tomorrow? Are you tired?”

“Exhausted, but I ain’t gonna get no sleep until we get this sorted,” said Dean with a caricature of a smile.

Castiel was careful, but he drew the wards as quickly as he could manage, aware that Dean’s reserves were running low and he needed his rest.

“Why is getting information going to help?” Dean asked, drawing a sigil in blood on a nearby stone.

“I need to know how seriously they are looking for us. I can fly short distances without connecting to the Machine, but if Asmodel and his trackers are anywhere within this regions, they will note the disruption in the ether.”

“Yeah?”

“Let me see what Balthazar has to say.”

Castiel aligned his thoughts, concentrated, and then reached out, quick and light.

There was a message, fairly recent, to his relief; he’d been worried about Balthazar left behind in Paradise 342.

The message itself, though...

“What?” Dean asked tightly - though Castiel had been sure the only trace of surprise he’d betrayed was in the tensing of his wings, which Dean could surely not see.

_Cassie. It’s insane, Naomi is here but she says everything is under control. I don’t know if she’s_
lying or if she believes it - but reports are coming in daily - reports from YOU, but I’ll be damned if they really are, style’s not quite right and I know you’re not actually taking a crack at the resistance like these say you are, you’re just trying to find Sam. There’s a corroborative report from a scout who say he’s seen traces of you in the Wilds to the southwest too, but I found reasons to doubt they’re real too. I wish you could contact me but don’t, I’m sure they have watchdogs on me. I don’t know what’s going on but I hope you’re safe. If the guys you’re chasing have this deep an access to the Machine then it is bad for all of us but I can’t see another explanation. Naomi seems to be buying it and nobody is actively looking for you as far as I can tell but I don’t think they trust me anymore so I can’t be sure. I need to go. Be safe.

“What does that all mean?” Dean asked slowly when Castiel had relayed the hurried run-on message.

“I am not sure. The Joker cannot have this level of access. If he did, he would... he would use it in a hundred different ways.”

“I tend to agree, but who is doing this then? You said weird shit was going on before I even heard of you, think this is more of it?” Dean scratched his head with an air of frustration.

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps? Wasn’t this what Baz was getting all excited about?”

“Yes. Balthazar.” Castiel hesitated - and he thoroughly hated the words that he was about to say, the very thought that he needed to express. “I… think that… ”

Dean examined him. There was something softer and full of understanding in his demeanor that indicated he understood what Castiel meant without having to elaborate.

“You think maybe he’s seeing more than is there,” Dean said quietly, which was a much nicer way than Castiel had ever hoped to put it. “He cares about you. A lot,” he added, as if that was an important point that could excuse many a failing in his books.

“I know.” Though the knowledge still left them a bit at sea, trying to decide which parts of the message to believe, which to attribute to some nebulous cover-up and which to assign to Balthazar’s possible paranoia.

“At any rate, Balthazar can read data ten times better than I ever could,” Castiel finally concluded. “The thrust of his message that we can rely on is that the Host think we are southwest of your Paradise rather than northwest, and that there are not that many troops, if any, after us.”

“Yeah. So, do angels gamble? Feel like taking a shortcut?” Dean had a lopsided humorless grin in place. He was staring at the note, his eyes tracing the message, or at least part of the message. The way his thumb was bending the note, he would not be able to see the full message about Annael. He was examining either the pass-phrase or the name in Enochian.

“We’ll take this chance,” Castiel decided. “If we don’t, we could lose the trail.”

“Right.”

“You need sleep, Dean.” Castiel stood up and moved towards the sheltered spot he’d found. Dean was slipping the note into his breast pocket when Castiel glanced back. Which was odd, up until now all the notes had been assiduously shredded or burned the instant they were read. Castiel did not know why Dean was keeping that one, it seemed an odd departure from the norm, but he didn’t question it. If the past fortnight had proven anything, it was that Dean knew what he was doing.
They rose at dawn. Dean put away his hard tack biscuit only half eaten.

“Aren’t you hungry?”

“We’re running low on supplies,” Dean admitted reluctantly.

“Oh. Oh,” Castiel repeated with a frown as the import sunk in. Humans needed to eat, particularly when they were expending this amount of energy on a daily basis. But Castiel could not call forth food from the Machine without linking to it. “Is there anything to eat out here?”

“Lots, if you know how to look,” Dean said shortly. “But I ain’t gonna waste time on foraging. I’d rather go hungry.”

“Dean, you need—”

“I’ll be fine.”

“You—”

“Fine. Are we doing this?”

“Yes.” But once he’d flown them to their destination, Castiel was going to spend the next few hours of this irritating slow walking to think of ways of providing for Dean. Not needing to sleep, he could forage around their campsite at night. He was not going to let his companion jeopardize his health or their mission by running himself ragged. Humans could no longer thrive on protein and animal products, unfortunately, as that would be an easy way to get a large amount of calories into his husband, decrees against animal cruelty be disregarded.

“Come on, then.” Dean ate the last of the small apples he’d found on a tree a few days back in five big bites, hurled the core away and strode up to Castiel, shouldering his pack. “Let’s do this.”

Castiel drew his blade, just in case, put a hand on Dean’s shoulder and focused. His wings swept up and out on the higher spheres, feeling the subtle currents of time and space rush around them. It was normally fast and instinctive, but today he was going to be as slow and cautious as possible.

Dean made a half-noise of query in his throat at the delay - and staggered.

“We here?” he asked, looking around the new landscape. a pleasantly green wooded area, trees rich in foliage, thicker than the sparse growth of their previous campsite. “Where are we? Looks just like the Garden.”

“Yes,” said Castiel softly. “It’s Annael.”

“What is?”

“Follow me. I suppose they left the note on the tree itself.”

“Which tree?” Dean was starting to sound crabby as he followed Castiel through the flourishing grounds.

The massive oak was at the top of a small hill, in the center of a clearing of its own making from the shadow of its thick canopy. Smaller plants still thrived within its perimeter, creepers and morning glories on the side of the hill that’d catch the sunrise, and blooming bushes.

“Whoa... that’s the tree,” Dean concluded, steps slowing as his gaze wandered higher and higher. There were a dozen bird’s nests in the mighty branches above their heads; a riot of birdsong greeted
them as they approached.

Castiel walked up to the massive trunk, several meters in circumference. He’d not been here in many a decade. There was even more vegetation now, but the effect was that of richness and beauty rather than wild growth and chaos. The only thing out of place was a rock of pale granite, foreign to the area, right on the spot where Akobel, who’d been with Castiel that day, had buried her blade. The weapon would have returned to the earth along with the rest of her Grace by now; it’d been some hundred and twenty years since her fall.

Beneath the rock was the message, hidden in oiled linen like the previous ones, to protect it from dew and the rare rains.

Dean snatched it from him and scanned it quickly. “Code, regular stuff- okay, this is easy and straightforward. Day’s walk northwest we should see a river fork and a stone mound. Next fucking message will be there, I guess. What are you doing?”

Castiel was rummaging in an oleander bush nearby, its blooms sending up sweetness and tiny bursts of pollen onto his hands when he plucked a few twigs. He put them where the granite stone had been, poking them straight up in the dirt.

“They didn’t mean for you to literally put down flowers—...” Dean interrupted his curt words and rubbed his face. “Shit. I’m sorry. I... I didn’t meant that. I’m... take your time.”

“I’ll be just a minute,” Castiel said.

“I mean it, Cas, take your time. We-“

He stuttered to a stop as the oleander twigs started to sprout, tiny hopeful buds pushing through among the leaves and flowers, tendrils of pale roots creeping into the rich soil.

Castiel got up and shook his hands clean of dirt. “I think she would approve of you,” he said apropos of nothing. “She liked humans. But we need to go quickly now. We could have trackers on our trail.”

“Hopefully not,” Dean said in a low voice. “Has to be some reason why we walked for a bloody fortnight before the Joker made us fly.”

“Yes, it expanded the search circle,” said Castiel seriously. “I’m sure they’re monitoring the ether, but there are too few of us left to do it that effectively over such a wide area, particularly if they are being misdirected. But we should walk to the next stage, unless the note indicates otherwise.”

“Right.” But he stood still.

“Dean?”

“Did you want to stay here, Cas? For a bit?”

“No, I would prefer to get moving.”

Dean didn’t say anything, he was staring at the huge tree.

“Is everything alright?” Castiel asked. “Did you need a rest?” he added, wondering if Dean’s offer to stop here was in fact a way of saying Dean himself needed a break. His sleep last night had been short and restless.
Dean was silent for what felt like a long time, too long for someone who usually said something harsh rather than linger in thought. Then he said, soft and steady: “I was the one who was supposed to watch out for him. When my parents left, that was my job. If one of us had to go down, it should have been me. If Sam dies, Cas, then I can’t do this anymore. That’s not something I’ll walk away from and carry on.”

“You have to,” were the words out of Castiel’s mouth, worried and appalled.

From the way Dean’s face tightened, they had not been the right thing to say. But surely Dean had to be used to Castiel stumbling over basic human communication by now.

Castiel stood there - better to be silent than to say the wrong thing, as he should have remembered five seconds ago - and watched Dean, face turned away from him, struggle with something. An odd feeling ripped through his being; that he should go up to his spouse, rather than stay planted here like the proverbial pillar of salt, and- and enfold Dean in his wings and protect him. A nonsensical urge, it wouldn't help with the possibility that Dean might still lose his brother.

Finally Dean sighed, having worked through alone what the angel could not help him with.

“Did you want to stay here a bit?” he suggested, calm and in control once more. “We can, I don’t know, clean up her grave site?”

“No need. This is not her grave. This is her.”

“... What?”

“We don’t bury angels. Her vessel turned to ash when she fell, what is here is her. Her Grace.”

“Oh.” Dean looked around with new eyes. Then he said softly, “Your sister’s resting place is beautiful.”

“Thank you. She was a beautiful being.” Castiel’s eyes traveled over the oak, the verdure, the blooming oleander and the small shrub that would soon sprout. “Her grace was like sunshine. Rippled through with quite a bit of fire,” he added with a grudging smile.

“Oh?” Dean turned and walked towards him, gesturing in the direction of the next leg of their journey with his chin. “That’s a thing? Grace is different from angel to angel? Or were you just being poetic.”

“Our grace is as different as a human’s face is distinctive. I don’t think I can be poetic,” Castiel added after a couple of seconds of consideration.

Dean snickered, which loosened something in Castiel in turn.

“What’s your grace like?”

“Boring, according to Balthazar.”

“Yeah, I’m sure his is like a popinjay.”

“No, he-... actually, that is not entirely inaccurate.”

“Seriously, what’s your grace like?”

“I can’t describe it.”
“Why not?”

“It would be like asking you to describe your face.”

“Ruggedly handsome,” Dean promptly answered with a grin. “Kinda square-ish, green eyes and lips to die for, according to some. Your turn.”

“Your language doesn’t work as well for me as it does for you,” Castiel said in a way that he hoped made it clear that this tit-for-tat was unfair. “My grace is.... solid. I suppose. Clear cut and defined.”

“Hah,” Dean said, as if that’d been what he’d expected. Then his small smile turned sly, and Castiel noticed his spouse giving him a devious sideways glance. “What color?”

“Co- it’s a ray of Divine Grace and wavelengths-... are you trying to be amusing?”

“Is it pink? Or purple? Please say it’s purple.”

“It’s not purple.”

“So? What color is it? C’mon, don’t be shy.” He drew the last word out, shyyyyy, his grin crooked and his tired eyes dancing.

Castiel felt a wash of- of exasperated affection. As contradictory as anything a human ever felt, surely.

“At nightfall, do you know how the north star shines first, hard and clear?” he asked after a moment’s thought.

“Uh, yeah?”

“That color.”

”...Well played.”

“Thank you.”

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Next Chapter: Tombstones and Guns

“At least we’re arriving at our destination soon,” Castiel said philosophically

“Yeah.” That worried Dean. Fuck, what were the resistance going to do to Cas?
Tombstones and Guns

Because ye have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with hell are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves:

Isaiah 28:15

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The next note simply said, ‘Nearly there. Walk straight north, we’ll find you.’

Dean ripped it up, glancing around pointlessly. “Hmf, like that they can watch us from afar for awhile. Easy way to make sure we don’t bring uninvited guests.”

“Not really,” Cas said wonderingly as he also looked around. “All of these precautions would be for nothing if I extended my mind and called for help. It would be here in seconds.”

“...Yeah. I know.” And that worried Dean. The Joker was expecting to deal with an angel and was too smart to overlook something that obvious.

“At least we’re arriving at our destination soon,” Castiel added philosophically

“Yeah.” That worried Dean too. Fuck, what were the resistance going to do to Cas?

Dean Winchester was mighty good at avoiding thinking about shit that would just slow him down and stop him from doing what needed to be done. And what needed to be done here was to save Sam. Sure, Dean would try his best to weasel, fight or bargain his way out of letting any harm befall Cas. Almost more out of a sense of fair play than anything else, after the angel had accepted to follow him out trustingly for Sam’s sake. But Dean also knew he might not succeed. If that was what was written in the stars, if he managed to get Sam out of this mess alive but not Cas, well, that was the consequence of the choice he’d made when he let Cas come with him in the first place. He knew, deep down, that Castiel himself understood this, accepted this possible outcome and would not hold a grudge when he went to wherever angels ended up when they died... Not that Dean deserved that forgiveness in any way, not after leading them both knowingly into this bear trap. Still, no use denying the truth. Dean accepted that this could happen, same as Cas did.

But since he was not looking forward to an immortal lifetime with Cas’s blood on his conscience, tormented by the memory of his husband’s faint smile as he said his grace was the color of the north star, or any of those thousands of other moments that had seemingly multiplied like miraculous loaves and fishes in the scant two months they’d known each other, Dean was gonna make damn sure he brought both Sam and Cas back. The resistance had gone and pissed him off now, kidnapping a guy’s brother like that and hauling him and his spouse over hill and vale. He wasn’t going to blow the whistle on them, but the Joker better not push either Dean or Cas too far, because the resistance was built to withstand the loss of any one person, same as the railroad.

The crooked itinerary they’d taken up until now made more sense to Dean than it probably did to Cas. The railroad paths didn’t lead out into the Wilds for the excitement of it all, they were there to
bring runners to free human colonies out past the Garden. The doglegs they’d taken had gotten the pair of them around at least one area Dean was acquainted with that would have shown traces of habitation; outlying fields and pastures, a small dam, smoke in the distance. All signposts to a small comune filled with humans, many of whom had been escorted out of Paradise by one or the other of the Winchesters over the decades. Dean was happy at that reason for a detour. Those folks had it hard enough, between Croatoans, monsters and the halo brigade occasionally looking for them behind their wards. They had nothing to do with this mess of the Joker’s, and Dean was glad Cas hadn’t figured out some of the secrets hidden out in the Wilds.

But this last section made no sense whatsoever. Three days since they’d left Annael’s resting place and they’d gone northwest, straight as an arrow, with no railroad markings or safe havens whatsoever. As he walked, Dean looked around the unwelcoming landscape. The countryside had changed dramatically only a few hours after leaving the shade of the grace-born oak. They were traveling through dry plains, rocks, gullies, arroyos, scraggly bushes, Joshuah trees rearing up like damned souls clawing their way up from the Pit, everything dry and dusty and depressing. Why were they all the way out here? Nobody would live around abouts-

As if to call him a liar, someone walked into sight some hundred yards up ahead. Their escort?

Castiel’s blade sang as it fell into his hand.

“Wait, Cas, it might be-” But then Dean’s gut rang the alarm. There was something wrong about the way that stranger walked.

Up ahead, the thin figure - could be a woman or a young man, hair long and ragged like a beast’s - froze at the sight of them. And then started making that sound, the scream of a jaguar scenting blood.

Croatoan.

A second later, Cas’s weapon, whirring hilt over blade, struck the creature in the throat, sending it crashing into the dust. The Croat flailed, the scream now a gurgle. Cas was there three heartbeats later, yanking his blade free and looking around. He turned towards Dean -

His eyes widened in alarm. At the same time, Dean heard the pounding of feet on earth, behind him and to his left.

“Run!” Dean snapped, taking off down the arroyo. He passed Cas who followed a few feet behind him to protect Dean’s back. Which made sense, him not being prone to the plague and all, Dean snarled at his instincts that were trying to go all dumb and protective and insist Cas go on ahead.

As it turned out, ‘ahead’ was no more safer than the rear. The echoes of running feet, of snarling, and that weird throaty chuckle the Croats made were bouncing off the surrounding rocks, so both the human and the angel were taken by surprised when they rounded a grey outcropping and found themselves practically nose to nose with two ragged figures, clothes hanging off them, hair long, eyes those of animals, mouths springing open into rapacious grins.

Dean didn’t break stride, barely deviated. He slipped beneath the hands of one of the figures - a woman, salt-and-pepper hair ragged like a wolf’s pelt - and slammed his mother’s knife right into her heart. Then jerked it out with the practiced ease of one who knew the blood of his kills was as dangerous as the creatures themselves. He spun on himself, letting the woman fall to the ground between him and the other wretch, readying another strike- because he’d momentarily managed to forget he had an angel on his tail, in the better sense of the term for once. The second Croat was rigid like a scarecrow, arms out, shaking a bit and a brilliant white light seemed to glow briefly
from his pores, his mouth and nose and eyes beneath the palm pressed to his forehead. Cas didn’t even look back as the creature collapsed limply, he grabbed Dean’s arm in passing and hustled him on.

Dean took stock as he ran. He angled away to a slant out of the arroyo, and up the sides of a small mesa. It slowed him down - wild hoots and snarls rang out behind him as the main pack spotted their prey - but now he had more terrain to play with. And a better view of the problem. A dust cloud further up the arroyo indicated a bunch more Croats coming that way, attracted by the noise and that eerie sixth sense they had for blood.

The mesa crumbled along one side, forcing Dean to take a tack in their direction before aiming himself towards a section of rock, screen and sparse dry trees up ahead. But a dirty figure, hampered by a visibly broken ankle, swollen and suppurating, tumbled out from behind one of the rocks. Another followed. Who knew how many more. Dean could take them, but it’d slow him down, and then the main pack would be on them. Dean changed course abruptly and threw himself back to the safety of the mesa, where the crumbled section and the rising rock protected two of his sides. Cas followed without a word, running with his weapon ready and looking over his shoulder.

“I can fly us out,” he said tersely.

“Yeah.” Six short words, one unspoken understanding. I can fly us out, Cas had said, not I’m gonna right this minute. Because flying would be taking a risk; of attracting celestial attention, and also of losing their way to the resistance and to Sam. It was a risk they’d have to take, perhaps, but only if the risk of getting ripped apart by these uncoming assholes was greater.

The two critters shambling towards him were joined by three more. The main pack, Dean counted six, was a hundred feet behind, swarming out of the arroyo like vermin out of a rotten log. Fuck! What were they doing out here?! Dean had not seen this many in one place since the war. This was the middle of nowhere! What-

Cas had hung back, and the two shamblers died on his blade within a couple of seconds each, but that let the three others get past him, aiming themselves at Dean. One was a bit ahead of the others; Dean threw himself sideways and sliced through the critter’s neck in passing. Then he turned to face the others. Cas was close by but was angling to put himself between Dean and the rest of the -

A loud report made him jump and the Croatoan that’d been walking straight towards him staggered. Red light flashed through it as if seeping out of its skin, and then it fell down dead.

Crack. Crack. Gunshots. Dean hunkered down - then had to knife one of the maniacs who still came for him even though she had to step over three bodies to do so. A stranger had come out from behind the other side of the mesa, striding towards them and firing. Pilot jacket, a black cap-

“Benny!”

Castiel moved like- like the lightning Dean had only just found out about, here one instant, there the next, yet oddly graceful and connected movements as he stabbed one Croat, slit the throat of the next, and ended up in front of Dean like a rampart of the holy city.

Oh right. “Cas, relax, Benny’s a vampire, but he’s on our side.”

“He has one of those revolvers,” Cas said tightly.

...So he did.

Benny shot the two remaining Croatoans, the diseased critters falling like thunderstruck in pulses
of red light. Then the weapon pointed straight at Cas.

“Benny! Put that goddamn thing down!” Dean barked. “You guys did not have me haul him out here just to shoot him!”

“Jus’ makin’ sure, brother.” Benny said. He sounded as relaxed as always, but the gun was still trained on the angel. “Are you a’right, Dean?”

“I’m fine, they didn’t get me.”

“Not what I meant.”

“...What-“ Dean measured the unfriendly look in Benny’s eyes and the gun still on Cas. “It’s fine. He’s with me.”

“And ah’m sure tha’s entirely of your own free will,” Benny stated with a lazy drawl that made the hairs stand up on the back of Dean’s neck. One of the reasons Benny did what he did for the railroad was because he had a history with lack of free will, his maker having inducted him into a fanged cult back at the start of his life as a vamp.

“The fact that we’re both out here? No, that’d be the Joker’s fault. The fact that we’re married isn’t my say-so either, but that’s not on Cas. Put the goddamned gun away, Benny, I’m telling you.”

Benny kept the gun on Cas but his eyes flitted towards Dean’s, measuring the growl in that last order, and his lips quirked. “Y’know, y’r brother’s got the same temper when poked.”

“Sam? Is he alright?”

“He’s fine. And furious. And worried ‘bout you. He’s not far. Is your angel gonna be rational?”

“Yes,” said Cas, though the thunderous look he was giving Benny wasn’t very promising.

“All good then.” Benny uncocked the hammer and slipped the gun in his belt. “C’mon then, follow me. We got a bit of a walk ahead of us.”

Dean glanced over at Cas, to find the angel giving him the same look of askance. But they’d come this far… they looked away again in shared resignation.

“Didn’t think to find you mixed up in this, Benny,” Dean said, walking forward with Cas shadowing his steps in a ready-to-smite way that was going to get a trifle nerve-wracking sooner or later.

“Then you didn’t think very hard,” Benny drawled, taking the lead. “Who else knows your scent like I do, to find you out here? And who can tell if there’s other men or angels ‘bout? Not to mention, not gettin’ bothered by the Croats who congregate in these here parts.”

”...Right.”

“But I didn’t know about Sam.” Benny stopped in his tracks and turned around and faced them square. “I swear, Dean. I only met him a week ago, when they summoned me here. I didn’t know the resistance had designs on him.”

“A week?”

Dean glanced at Cas, surprised at the edge to the question.
“How could Sam have gotten here a week ago? This place is hundreds of miles away from Paradise 342, we travelled for over twelve days and we flew part of the way to get here.”

“They could have taken a shortcut,” Dean suggested. “We hardly took to the fastest route.”

“They couldn’t have saved that much time.”

They could have if they’d been on horseback despite all decrees to the contrary, but Dean wasn’t about to reveal that trick of the trade to an angel. Because his loyalties were a bunch of jagged sharp-edged things that cut both ways these days, and gave him a headache... “Don’t worry about it.”

Cas’s hand was on his arm, a gentle pressure not so much holding him back as transmitting a warning. “Dean, we don’t know for sure if Sam is even here-”

“I trust Benny. If he said he saw Sam this morning, he did.”

“Indeed, my apologies, angel, I din’ think I had to bring a lock of his hair,” Benny said with a toothy grin. The look he got in return was, to say the least, stony.

“Trust me, Cas. C’mon.”

Cas came on with nothing more than a faint sigh of concern. Dean saw Benny’s eyes flicker between the human and the angel, but he didn’t comment.

They walked for a bit more than half an hour before they saw something in the desolate landscape. Two stone pillars, the posterns of a long fence of wicked black iron spikes. As they walked closer, the sight beyond revealed itself bit by bit. Old tombstones.

“You said Sam was alive.” Cas’s voice was as menacing as Dean had ever heard it.

“Ain’t the human supposed to be the doubting Thomas? Brother Sam is fine. This is... well, angel, you’ll see in a minute why we’re here. You ain’t gon’ like it. I ain’t gon’ care. You’ll follow if you want to see his brother, that’s all I have to say.”

“We’re following,” Dean said, resigned, while Cas just gave Benny’s broad back a look. If circumstances were different- Dean realized his thoughts were heading towards ‘I bet if they got to know each other, they’d get along’, and shut that notion down. He hated to see Benny mixed up in this, just as much as Cas, because this was probably not going to end well...

They paused at the entrance to the old cemetery, its name above the stone posts long erased by age and weather. The stone pillars looked more recent and repaired, though, as did the iron fence around the place. When Benny stopped near one of the posts, Dean saw them engraved with all manners of symbols and sigils. Benny hunted around, fingers resting on a few marks in turn, until Cas silently reached out and pointed to one in particular, up near the top. Benny grunted, and scored that ward with his bowie knife. High level angel warding, Dean recognized now.

“What are the others?” he asked curiously.

“Mainly to keep the Croats out. This place’d draw ‘em otherwise. They still know it’s here, dumb instinct, but not where precisely,” Benny added and walked off before Dean could ask why the Croatoans would be interested in dusty old bones.

They strode through tumbled down tombstones, the rotten remains of crosses and a few shattered crypts. Then they drew up in front of one of those still remaining upright in surprisingly good
“Seraph, I need to draw my gun now, so don’t drill my back with anythin’ more sharp than that there scowl on your face,” Benny announced without turning around.

“Why?” Cas asked suspiciously.

“cause it’s a key. Here, you’ll see in a second.”

Benny inserted the cannon of the gun into a small hole in the stone door. Sections of what had looked like carved decorated stone began to move like puzzle pieces realigning themselves with nothing more than a faint rocky murmur. There was a very heavy *clack*. Benny withdrew the gun and the door swung open with the proverbial creak of doom. As if it needed to be more dramatic.

“Awesome,” Dean muttered in his ‘unimpressed’ voice- and gasped as he was jerked backwards.

“We are not going in there!”

“Uh, Cas-“ Dean blinked down at the arm pressing him against Cas’s side, holding him back from the opening and Benny.

“Pretty sure I said you would. Also pretty sure I said you weren’t gon’ like it.” Benny seemed utterly unfazed.

“Cas, what is it?”

“Hell, Dean. That is a gate to hell.”

Dean gaped at the ordinary stone posts and lintel, and the darkness beyond. “... For real? Like, the real deal?”

“Yes. Oh.” Cas looked like someone had dropped a hammer on his head. A hammer of understanding.

“...Oh? What ‘Oh’?” Dean prodded, temper fraying. Then on second though, he lifted Cas’s arm away and took a step to the side.

“That’s how your leader is going to cut me from any possible reinforcement from the Host, is it?” Cas turned his glare from the crypt’s entrance to Benny.

“You got it, angel. As I understand it, while you’re down there, you’re weaker and can’t bring in the cavalry. Can’t fly out, can’t call for help, can’t even use your full powers. Still wanna come?”

Dean stared. “Seriously. You took my brother down to hell.”

“I didn’t, brother, but the Joker did. Don’t worry, he’s fine. You have my word.”

“Jesus...”

“That notable ain’t around here, though there’s a few others you might not expect.”

“What does that mean?”

“Follow me and find out. You comin’, angel?”

Cas was silent. His eyes flickered to Dean, then back to Benny.
“I am going to make one thing very clear,” he finally said in the kind of voice in which God had dictated commandments one through ten. “Feel free to run ahead and tell your masters. If any harm comes to Sam or Dean, I will lay waste to any and all I find down there, regardless of whether they consider themselves friends or not.”

Yup, Cas diplomacy was still going strong.

If anything, Benny seemed amused as he strode through the door. “I hear you loud n’ clear, chicken hawk, loud n’ clear. Come on, then. Oh- Sam? That wasn’t the plan—”

“Dean!” Cas made a grab at him, but Dean had already shot forward, elbowed past Benny and was down in hell or whatever this place was.

The stairs led down to a flagstone corridor rather than a tomb. It wound away into the darkness. Sam was nowhere to be seen, instead, some old codger was waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs, leaning against the rough hewn wall. He had his hands stuffed into the pockets of a dark caballero duster over a dusty, discolored waistcoat, and a sour expression beneath a straw hat.

“Do these jokers have my gun?” was all he said in lieu of greeting.

“Nah, Samuel - sorry, brother, didn’t mean to get your hopes up, your Sam’s further down. But jus’ as live and grumpy as this one.” Benny nodded at the ol’ codger with an outward air of weary irritation, and easy familiarity and affection lurking beneath.

“Do they know who has my gun?” the geezer insisted, still looking just as sour despite Benny’s greeting.

“Nobody knows who has your gun, you batty old bastard, and I didn’t ask,” Benny growled. “Forget your damn gun already. Here, you can have this one back, though.”

The man gave the revolver Benny was handing him an unimpressed glance. He took it and his eyes narrowed dangerously.

“There’s a single unshot angel at the top of the stairs, so why’s there five bullets missing from this here weapon, fanger?”

“’cause it works on Croats too,” Benny tossed back, apparently unsurprised the man had known how many shots had been fired without looking. From the weight perhaps?

“Did you get the bullets back?”

“No, I ain’t carvin’ up defiled humans to get your damned bullets.”

“You know how hard them slugs are to make, you pissant?”

“Hey!” Dean clapped his hands hard, sending echoes running like rats into the darkness of the hallway beyond. “I see my brother in the next five minutes or I let the angel at the top of the stairs lose his temper!”

The man gave him an unimpressed look. “Hold your horses, Dean. We’ll get you there, but it’ll take longer than five minutes. More like a few hours.”

“...Do I know you?”

“Yup.”
“That was me being polite,” Dean ground out. “What I meant is, I don’t know you from a fucking hole in the ground, old man, don’t be so generous with my name.”

“See what you did with your apocalypse?” the grump tossed over Dean’s head to Cas who had finally trailed after them, looking very unhappy. “Back in my days, young ’uns used to be polite.”

“No we weren’t,” Benny stated. “This is Dean Winchester and he don’t know where your gun is either, Samuel. Dean, this here is Samuel Colt. The head of the railroad. And this here is... what’s your name again, angel?”

“Castiel,” said Cas, “and I know who this is.”

Benny cocked an eyebrow. “Yeah, ‘cause I just said.”

“I know who he is better than you do, vampire,” said Cas in an odd, flat, dangerous voice. “He’s the man who started the apocalypse. The gun he is looking for is the Colt, his Colt, the one that allowed Azazel to move forward with his plans and trigger the war before we were ready. One of the most powerful weapons in existence, a weight that could tip almost any scale, and are you saying that you lost it?” Cas’s tone had been rising and the final words sparked deadly echoes up and down the dank corridor.

Benny had finally lost that unflappable attitude, and Dean could have been using him for a mirror. The only one that didn’t seemed bothered was Colt, who looked slightly less grouchy. “Finally someone who knows what I’m talkin’ about. You seen it, angel?”

“No!” Cas snapped.

“Pity. Or maybe not. You seen it, Dean?”

“Why the hell would I have seen it?”

“’cause last time I laid eyes on that cursed six-iron, I’d handed it to your pappy.”

Dean stared at him, mouth open.

“Shouldn’t have,” Colt mulled in the sudden silence. “But he was going after Azazel. So... at least I gave him a chance.”

“A chance?! Your chance got him killed!” Castiel snarled.

“Yup.”

“Yes?!! That’s all you have to say? To Dean?!” The angel was clearly incensed, more so than Dean, who was just stunned.

“Yup. The kid knew John better than you did, Seraph.”

So did this old bastard, it seemed. Dean knew what hadn’t been said. That it didn’t matter that John knew he was going to die, if he could take mom’s killer with him. He’d left his sons safe in Paradise, with Dean watching over his lil’ brother. He’d brought them up to be tough, to fight - either the straight way like Dean, or the brainy way like Sam. He would have gone after Azazel with or without a magic gun. There’d have been no stopping him.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Colt sighed, rubbing the back of his neck, making the grizzled short hairs go scratch-scratch beneath callused fingers. “I’d give what’s left of my soul to never see that piece
again. But I’m the one that created it. I ain’t happy havin’ it waltzing around creation, bringing more death about…"

“John used the Colt to kill Azazel?” Cas asked after a moment of silence. He had the look of a guy doing math in his head.

“Yup. There were a bunch of them resistance folk going after Yellow Eyes. Most of ‘em died takin’ him down, but some made it out alive, and one of ‘em picked up the Colt as he ran. The Colt and something that Azazel had on him. They split forces to lose any demon, monster or angel that could be following. That bloody stone book the Joker wanted off of Azazel’s corpse made it back here, but not the guys carrying my gun. We never found them.”

“Then a demon has it.” Cas looked pissy. “We don’t.”

“You know that for a fact, chicken hawk?”

“Yes,” said Cas, with a strong Y and a faint falling off of uncertainty on the -es.

Silence again. Then Colt made a crude noise and spat on the stone floor of the corridor. “Feh, hope it brings its bad luck to whoever has it. Now c’mon, Joker wants to talk to you all. You too, Benny.”

“Me? I was gonna-“

“We might need you down there. C’mon. Oh,” the old man added as he shuffled off, “welcome to hell and all that.”

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Next Chapter: The Past Is a Long Road Going Straight Off a Cliff

Hell was dark and dank and smelled of mushrooms.
Chapter Notes

I tweaked the triggers to the Apocalypse a little, though less than I’d initially planned to. This is where it’s a AU, not a what-if fic, though there are still similarities to SPN.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“And I saw an angel coming down out of heaven, having the key to the Abyss and holding in his hand a great chain. He seized the dragon, that ancient serpent, who is the devil, or Satan, and bound him for a thousand years. He threw him into the Abyss, and locked and sealed it over him, to keep him from deceiving the nations anymore until the thousand years were ended. After that, he must be set free for a short time.”

--- Revelation 20:1-6

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Hell was dark and dank and smelled of mushrooms.

“Can’t say I’m all impressed with- Cas? You okay?” Dean shelved the sarcastic ‘not what I expected’ comment when he saw the look of pain on the angel’s face, pale in the gloom fitfully illuminated by lanterns their escort had brought.

“I’ll be fine.”

Dean couldn’t tell how bad his husband was lying. Cas looked like he’d been knifed in the gut.

“Yeah,” said Colt up ahead, “he’ll be in a piss-poor mood for a few hours-“

“Damn me, that’ll be entertainin’,” murmured Benny from where he was walking behind them.

”- then he should be okay.”

“I will be. I’ve been down here before,” Castiel said darkly, looking around the frankly boring rough-hewn corridor as if there were bodies hanging on butcher hooks instead of the occasional empty sconce and cobweb.

“Ah yes, you boys laid siege to the place so Michael could bust out the Righteous Soul, but only after the first seal was already gone and broken. Well done,” said Samuel snidely.

Dean looked around. “We really are down in hell? Why’s it feel like the root cellar?”

“The spheres have shifted,” Cas answered. “All the barriers have opened. It’s what allowed angels and demons and Leviathans to freely roam the earth.”

“Yeah.” Then Dean did a double take as what Cas said sunk in and matched up with fairy tales
from The World Before. “You mean, it wasn’t always like that?”

“No. Demons and Eve’s monsters had to break out of their spheres with great difficulty, and angels could only descend to earth when given permission from on high.”

‘Now that sounds like Paradise’, was what Dean would have said once upon a time, or more specifically, two months ago and before he’d gotten married to an angel who’d willingly followed him down to hell to save his brother.

“Lemme guess, the Apocalypse brought the whole thing crashing down, huh?” he asked instead.

Cas was silent for a short spell, a very busy silence that had Dean glance at him with surprise. Cas was eyeing the others. When he spoke, it was softly and for Dean’s ears alone.

“No, the spheres were intact during the Apocalypse, by the mercy of our Father, otherwise we would have had to fight a war on two fronts: all the demons of hell and the Leviathans as well. Many demons escaped during the Apocalypse, but not the entirety of the Pit. No, this current situation is not part of the Plan. It happened on the last day of the Apocalypse, the day Lucifer fell. He somehow shattered the spheres. We believe it was a last attempt to get his entire army to earth to join the battle at his side and turn the tide. It was too late for him, but the damage was done. The barrier between the spheres has been destroyed. Non-mortal beings can freely move about. Fortunately the Leviathan and Eve’s faction were too busy infighting to invade out of Purgatory right away, but the massive force Azazel led out of the Pit after the Adversary’s defeat taxed us enough on its own that we-”

Cas kept on talking while Dean’s mind echoed with ‘not part of the Plan, not part of the Plan.’ He’d never really thought about it, the God Machine had been this- this monolithic controlling presence dominating him and his own his entire life. If the war he’d fought, that’d claimed his parents, was not part of the Plan… what other parts might not be…?

“Earth and all the planes are now open to us, we no longer have to break in at heavy cost. Hell is further weakened for being all but empty. But in each other’s sphere, we are cut off from our own. I cannot connect to the Host, and my powers are lessened. Don’t fool yourselves, however,” Cas added, raising his voice to address the others. “I have been down in Hell before. I have slaughtered countless of its inhabitants, I have led armies down here. If you hoped the Pit would make me an easy target, you are mistaken.” His tone sounded all the more dangerous for being flat and matter-of-fact.

“We know, Seraph,” chuckled Colt. “Trust me, we have bigger fish than you down here.”

Cas’s footsteps faltered. “What do you mean?”

“You’ll see… oh don’t worry, we don’t have him anymore. Lucifer is dead and gone and good fucking riddance. You know what’s worse than a pecker-head who wants to kill everyone everywhere? A pecker-head who wants to do all that, but still convince you he’s hard done by if you give him half a chance to talk about it.” Samuel horked up and spat on the flagstone floor. It seemed to be a bona fide means of expression in his books. “The only good thing Michael ever did was shove a blade through that asshole.”

...The way he talked, it sounded like he had personal experience. There’d been mention of a gun-...

“Look, I really don’t give a fucking bent penny,” Dean said, words tight through clenched jaw. “Keep your war stories, both of you. I just want to find my brother.”
“We’ll find him, Dean,” Cas said softly, not taking the reprimand for anything beyond badly expressed worry (unlike Samuel, who spent the next ten boring minutes of climbing down stairs and across cavernous spaces muttering about the young generation of spoiled rude Paradisers.)

The corridor snaked back and forth, a lazy stone river with other hallways joining and splitting away like tributaries. Dean tried to keep a sense of their path in case he had to take the reverse course at a dead run, but was not sure he’d succeed. The damp and the cold and the darkness worked their way straight through him; his clothes were meant for eternal summer, not this. He trudged on mulishly, but his shivers must have been visible, to celestial vision if nothing else, because a touch on his back made him jump; Cas, laying the blanket from the backpack the angel had been carrying, across Dean’s shoulders. Dean almost said he didn’t need it out of typical bulldog reflex, then decided not to be stupid. He did tuck the cover in such a way he could draw his weapon unimpeded, then nodded his thanks. A faint fleeting pressure on his shoulder was his ‘you’re welcome’, but Cas kept his eyes on the darkness around them. It occurred to Dean that Cas’s angelic memory could find the way back, and that thought warmed him more than the blanket. Another ace up his sleeve, another imperative reason to keep Cas safe; even John Winchester would have agreed, it was self-preservation, really...

After a full two hours of walking, the party took a break for the sake of the humans. Colt produced a bottle of moonshine, which Cas looked ready to smite on principle. Dean declined the silent offer to share, needing to stay sharp.

“So... head of the railroad, huh?” he finally asked, maybe as an olive branch, maybe just to avoid going crazy with concern as he imagined Sam stuck down here for days.

“That’s right.” Samuel took a long swig that would have put any citizen of New Jerusalem under the table right then and there.

“You knew my dad.”

“As ornery as a porcupine with a hangover.”

“Was he ever down here?” Dean asked, glancing around at the overbearing darkness.

“Yeah, few times. Both resistance and railroad use hell as a hideaway when we have to. The place where we stow away people the Host really, really want.”

“So it’s a secret, like the rest of our railway trails.”

“People ‘ve died to defend it. Yup.”

“...And you saw no problem with me bringing an angel along.”

Cas was up ahead a bit, glowering out into the darkness as if he expected an assault at any moment.

“It wasn’t my idea. It was the Joker’s,” Samuel grunted.

“But the railroad.”

“Kid,” Samuel said softly and seriously into the rim of his bottle, “everything you’re about to say to me, I’ve said to myself every day for the past fortnight and more. Trust me. You being here with your, ah... what’s the term used these days? Where two fellas are concerned? ‘cause back in my day, lemme tell you.”

Dean’s eye roll told the term to take a hike. “Just say ‘Cas’. Me being here what?”
“You being here with your Cas is a sign, a portent of how very, very fouled up things are about to get. The Joker will explain. He’s convinced me the danger is real. And he’s given me his word that my operation will not be compromised any more than it need be.”

Dean did not like the sound of this at all. “This about my dad? Azazel? That gun of yours? What?”

“It’s a long story, kid. So long, that I’ll be starting it, and the Joker will give you the middle, and... and you and the angel may be tellin’ us the ending one day,” Samuel concluded thoughtfully.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Means it’s a bloody long story.”

“Then why don’t you start talking?” Dean suggested darkly.

“Cause it’ll take awhile and I thought you were in a hurry to see your brother,” Samuel shot back. “Besides, halfway through my explanation, your angel is going to try to jump down my craw, and I’m too old to be Israel. I’ll explain downstairs where there’ll be help at hand if he gets too agitated for his own good.”

Dean could almost feel the ire rise like a heatwave from his husband, still capable of angel-sharp hearing even in hell. Samuel Colt visibly didn’t care.

“If the Joker’s the one who took Sam, and he’s the one who’s gonna explain the big picture, why are you here?” Seemed risky to have a head of the resistance and the head of the railroad in one place, even if that place was the last place an angel would think to look.

Samuel stoppered up his earthenware bottle. “Because humanity is on the brink and we need to take chances. Or because I knew your daddy and he was a good man, and the alternative to bringing you and the angel here was to kill you both, so I wanted to make sure you got brought. It's one or t'other o' those two, take your pick. Good enough?”

“Guess it is,” said Dean with a shrug.

“Then let’s get moving.”

“We likely to find any demons down here?” Dean finally thought to ask, though he’d felt more in danger outside with the Croatoans roaming around.

“Fuck yes. Oh, you mean dangerous ones. No, not really, just annoying pissers. You’ll see.”

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It was hard to tell the passage of time underground, and the light from the lanterns proved too poor for Dean's pocket watch, but he thought it’d been a further hour of walking that had brought them here, to a bronze door inset into rock. Cas was looking better. Dean felt worse. Whether it was hell, or the unrelenting musty darkness, or his raging concerns for Sam and Cas, he couldn’t tell, but it felt like someone was trying to drag his soul out through his boots. He soldiered on, following Samuel and Benny’s footsteps, stubbornly refusing to even acknowledge the feeling.

He expected caves of doom beyond the dread portal, and was rather surprised to find a tidy space
the size of a large barn, a typical looking railroad waystation with benches, blankets, camp beds in a corner for potential refugees, a cheerful fire crackling in an open hearth in the center - because it turned out, it was a cold day in hell, as well as dank and dark. The only furniture that looked out of place was a long table along one side of the room covered in untidy stacks of books. Someone was sitting there, almost hidden by tomes and volumes, the only other soul present bar their group. He didn’t lift his head as the party trooped in, but Dean recognized him with a start. Kevin Tran? The package from what felt like two years ago? Dean headed that way, intending to find out what the hey hell.

A small door on the far side of the room opened, and a very familiar voice sternly stated: “I got you some food, Kevin, so help me, you better—... Dean!”

Oh thank god, Dean thought, and didn’t even mean that ironically.

He reached Sam in three long strides. Sam had been moving towards them with his freakishly long legs too. Dean grabbed him and checked him up and down, starting with the eyes - clear, no sign of trauma, pain, mojo-

“You’re unharmed.” Cas’s voice was warm with relief right beside Dean, his hand also on Sam’s shoulder and giving him the same once-over.

“I’m okay, Dean. Cas- I can’t believe it, they said you’d come too but- I’m okay, I’m okay. God- I’m so sorry they dragged you here and all. It’s a mess, a huge mess.”

“It’s going to be fine,” Dean said, not even caring what the mess was and how big it’d turn out to be. If the mess got between them and the door, he’d knife it in the groin, clear and simple. Dean looked around at Benny, standing idly nearby - but not between them and the exit - and Samuel Colt who’d sat down on the bench by the fire with a grunt and was looking at the percolator on the tripod’s grill with a thoughtful air. There was nobody else around.

“Can we just leave?” Dean whispered.

Cas looked around, making the same tally. “Colt is armed, but his weapon only has the one bullet left. He-”

“We can’t leave.” Sam’s face, tired and worn, tightened. “Dean... it’s complicated. But... but we can’t go outside. Not yet.”

“Why?”

“...Didn’t Colt tell you?”

“No. Is Colt the one who brought you here?”

Sam’s face went both sour and oddly red, a weird mix of flustered and irritated. “No, it wasn’t. It was—... it was, uh, someone else. The, uh, the Joker himself. He’ll, ah, explain what the problem is. Though maybe Colt can start.”

“We really can’t walk out of here? How are they holding you?”

“It’s what’s outside we need to worry about.” Sam sighed, short and sharp. “Come on, Dean. Let’s go talk to Colt for now. Kevin, eat this or I’ll stuff it down your throat.”

Kevin made a vague huh-uh sound and didn’t even twitch or look at the tin plate of sandwiches Sam deposited at his elbow. He seemed to be staring at a piece of flat stone as if it’d put a
whammy on him.

Colt was pouring coffee that smelled burnt to hell and back (appropriately) into a beaten tin mug. “Hey, Sam. Who wants coffee?”

“I’ll have some,” Dean muttered, sinking down on the second bench at an angle from Colt’s. The two week hike out into the middle of nowhere ending in a fight and a trip to the basement of existence had drained him.

Colt put the percolator back on the grill and handed Dean the pot-holder without a change of expression, cementing Dean’s opinion of him as a curdled old cuss. There wasn’t even any other mugs around. Dean tossed down the pot holder. “Explain.”

Colt took a drag of coffee. Then he put it on the bench, poured in a bit of moonshine, and capped the jerry again.

“Now,” Castiel suggested in a certain tone of voice that sparked sharp echoes off the walls.

“So much for the patience of angels. Fine. In 1835, I got very drunk, and-“

“Samuel, short version, please.” Sam, who’d taken a seat right next to Dean on the bench, rubbed his forehead.

Colt took a sip. Then he said, “In the autumn of 1835, I got very drunk one night, and I warn you varmints, any interruptions and I start all over again. That especially goes for you, angel. You’re gonna figure things out halfway through, and if you start jumping all over the place, I’m gonna stop. The boys here are in deep trouble, like, the deepest. We all are. And it’s in part my own doing. It’s my story to start with, so I get to tell it my way.”

Dean opened his mouth- Sam touched his hand and shook his head frantically. Benny was doing much the same thing over Colt’s shoulder. Said all that needed to be said about this man’s character. Fine. Dean was warm, he was off his feet, nobody was trying to kill him right this minute, and they were already in the enemy- that is, they were already in the resistance’s stronghold. A minute of explanation or an hour, what difference did it make?

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It was the autumn of 1835.

“Tarnation, this place stinks like a cat-house spittoon.”

Samuel Colt came awake with a wheezy gulp. He blinked blearily, wondering why his face felt like it did.

“Is the fool still alive?” someone asked.

“If he is,” answered a woman’s voice, “it’s only because he pickled himself.”

His face felt like that because it was smushed against the unvarnished wood of a table.

Colt blinked back the world around him. His crude cabin, his hunting equipment dangling from walls and ceiling, the remains of something congealed rotting in a plate nearby, among a mess of
metal filings, tools, droplets of molten lead that had scorched the wood of the table and-
- and the gun right in the middle of it all.

“Damn me, I thought I dreamed it,” Colt croaked.

Off to one side and out of his line of sight, his two ‘guests’ jumped a mile. Colt heard the rustles of
weapons being drawn and the creak of hammers being thumbed. He instinctively analyzed each
tiny noise with the precise ear of a connoisseur. A Derringer - that’d be Charles then - and a
Lefaucheux. Ah, Henrietta. Both weapons had been heavily modified and retrofitted with Colt’s
new mechanically-rotating cylinder system, and they never left their owners’ sides.

Colt straightened up a tad, focused slowly on the new arrivals, and then slumped in his chair. “You
two. What do you want now? Ugh, my head... get me water instead of standing around all useless
like...”

The Miller siblings stared at him as if still not entirely sure he was not something they should be
hunting rather than helping. Then Charles went to pump some water outside while Henrietta made
increasingly acrid remarks about Colt’s lifestyle as she fished around the cracked and dirty
kitchenware for a mug he could use.

Eventually they got food and fluids down him, and Henrietta asked him about the gun he’d made.
That was where it all started.

“You built a gun, one of your new revolving designs, with all this heathen mumbo jumbo carved
on it.”

“It’s Latin. And this symbol here is Enochian,” Charles interrupted his sister. He was the better
read of the two. Henrietta usually stuck to shooting or stabbing things. This was not a fault, though,
because Henrietta was so very, very, very good at it.

“You did this last night - the night of Samhain - during what now?”

“A comet’s passage,” said Colt, negotiating the words with considerable difficulty. He’d only
recently turned twenty one, he usually recovered from benders faster than this. He felt drained...

“Why?”

”...Seemed like a good idea at the time.” In truth, he’d had some kind of revelation, like a blinding
light. He’d worked on the gun like a man possessed, he’d known. In the cold light of day, he
couldn’t remember what he’d known so overwhelmingly anymore. “Mesquite whiskey from ol’
Ma Stanton,” he added as explanation to both himself and the Millers.

“Ah,” they both said at once. Since they’d lost their parents - lost them bloody, the way most
hunters had lost someone before they embarked on this path - the two were like peas in a pod.
Always stuck together, finishing each other’s sentences, and they could carry out a complicated
plan of attack on a nest of nasty critters with barely three words of planning and a ‘don’t wally it
up, bro/sis’ as parting words. They were excellent hunters. More than that, they were good people.
Charles was the quieter one, but he had a mind as sharp and brilliant as a diamond; it was a true
crime it could not be better employed than in their grim task. A fine man in his prime, at twenty
seven he had to beat the opposite sex away with a stick. Same for his sister, two years older and
face weather beaten, but nobody noticed, what with her open grin and dancing green eyes. Colt
would have done something about that grin and those eyes if he’d been a few years older, a bit
more brave, a little less drunk, and a different, better man altogether. Hell, he’d have done
something about it in any case, but Henny thought he was a snot-nosed brat who was only good at building weird, if highly effective, weapons and who needed protecting and feeding like he was her own boy or somethin’.

“Does it even work?” Charles asked, looking down at the new colt revolver with an unimpressed air.

“One way to find out!” Henrietta declared, picking it up and fishing out some bullets and powder charges from her bandoleer. She ignored her brother’s legitimate objections to firing a gun built by a drunkard.

The gun worked. Nobody was more surprised than Colt. All three empty bottles that’d been abandoned near the bench where Colt had worked last night, under the light of a comet, were smashed in quick succession with a precision that shut even Charles up.

“Take it, Hen,” Colt said, shooing it away when she offered it back with a longing look. “Try it out on something or other. I’ll get you some ammunition, paper cartridges, I made them too. They need to be special.”

“I just used regulars.”

“I mean, if you want to kill stuff with it. Real stuff. Our kind of stuff. At least that’s what I thought I was doing last night. Tell me if it works or not. What are you guys after this time?”

“Vampires,” the twins said together. “But also, Jackson put us on the trail of something weird. A demon,” Henrietta added, eyes gleaming. The siblings had a good reason to hate demons, but then again, nobody had any good reason to actually like ‘em.

“Jackson’s as drunk as Samuel here,” Charles sniffed. “He thinks he’s got a lead on, get this, a Prince of Hell. And even better-”

“The mother of sin!” Henrietta looked more eager than skeptical.

“What’s that?”

“Dunno. He called her Lilith.” Henny cocked the hammer. “Think this thing here could kill her?”

“Probably not,” declared Colt, and went to see if he had anything left to drink, or if he was going to haul his hump into town.

---

*It kills all variety of stuff.*

That was the note he got from Charles (Henrietta could never be bothered to write).

He sent a large box of cartridges to one of their bases of operation via a common hunting buddy who was heading that way, and then forgot about it once more.

In April of 1836, Colt had settled himself in another remote shack in the south of the Wyoming Territories. He’d heard stuff about this place. Rumors of a gate to hell. He was doing research (with the help of a jerry of something wicked) when a guy blew into his hovel. Literally.
Colt had a weapon - design 5B, with silver slugs - trained on the intruder while the door was still swinging wildly on its hinges beneath the blast of wind that had seemed to carry the man in on the heels of a loud flapping noise.

“Who the devil are you?” Colt started, then decided he didn’t like the angry look the guy was giving him, or the way dust rose in wild swoops all around him as if Colt’s indifferent housekeeping was rising up in his defence. Colt lowered his gun and fired into the bastard’s left patent leather boot. This was Wyoming, not Connecticut. The law was on the side of the man with the fastest draw.

The dude didn’t even blink. “You! Colt! Where are those walking disasters?! The Millers?!”

Colt examined the gun carefully. “No idea.”

“You have to have an idea! Stop doing that,” the man added distractedly when Colt fired into the other foot (just in case the first shot had gone astray).

“I really have no idea,” said Colt carefully. He still had a survival instinct back then, and he’d just re-evaluated the danger he was apparently in.

The stranger said something that would have caused Colt’s mother to faint dead away. Then he said something equally vile in a language that Colt had only ever seen written down, and never used in anger.

“Who... are you?”

“Gabriel,” the man answered shortly. “Do you have any lead? Think, man! The future of your species is in the balance!”

“My... uh...”

“Michael!” The man was staring at a corner of Colt’s shack and apparently talking to the willow-twig besom gathering cobwebs there. “No! We need to stop this! This is insane! This cannot be the plan!”

“Uh...” Was this a lunatic, or a monster? A lunatic monster? Was there such a thing? If there were, then of course they’d end up crashing into Colt’s hovel when he had a hangover...

“You really have no clue?” The man asked tightly. “Or the name of someone else I could ask? They’ve warded themselves. I can’t find them.”

“No clue,” said Colt, who did have a few ideas but wasn’t about to hand them out to this dark horse.

The man groaned, buried his face in his hands, and appeared to be thinking

“What’s up with the Millers?” Colt asked, his hand fishing around in a drawer for iron slugs (just in case).

“The Millers!” The man huffed from behind his fingers. “Oh, they’re slaughtering demons left and right.”

Colt had heard rumors. He hated them. This went beyond the occasional exorcism, it sounded serious. Hell, he’d even heard that Henrietta had bought the farm at the start of the year, but that was fudge and nonsense since Perez had seen both siblings alive and well no less than two months
back. One more odd and contorted rumor floating around; like a whole town getting wiped off the map, or a massacre of hundreds off in some gulch somewhere, or dangerous horsemen riding into town and people dying...Demons were getting uppity too, hunters were running into more and more of them, hence Colt’s efforts to locate a possible leak out of hell. He regretted like blazes that the siblings had gotten mixed up in all that stuff, but he wasn’t about to admit his worries to this kook.

“So they’re killing demons. Are you a demon?”

The man took his hands away from his face and gave Colt a Look that suggested the gunsmith had the brains of a slug and the physique to boot.

“So if you’re not a demon, you should be all behind their efforts.”

Gabriel made a garbled sound in his throat. “They’re going to kill Lilith!”

“...Good?”

“Not good! Her blood is the final seal to the cage! I-...”

The ground trembled ever so slightly. Colt frowned at the various empty bottles and other objects around his shack that went *ching*.

The intruder blanched, spun around and rushed outside. Far, far away on the horizon, a strange sight: a pillar of light rising up like a distant water fountain.

“Too late,” Gabriel said in a dead voice. “They did it. *He* is free.”

The world had ended. It just didn’t know it yet.

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In 1837, Colt got his gun back. He got it from Henrietta, who was not Henrietta anymore. The green eyes that looked at him had seen the birth of the stars, they’d watched millions die, they cared not a whit. The thing that now wore Henrietta’s skin said it was the Archangel Michael, and that Colt could have his gun back if he insisted, since it couldn’t kill The Adversary.

Michael was the kind of prick who could speak in capitals. Colt would learn that this was true of most angels.

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In 1838 - not that dates mattered anymore - Colt was leading a few dozen refugees to safety. Or that was the plan, though safety was a very relative term these days.

He was sitting by a campfire that he’d lit for both warmth and light. It was noon according to his old pocket-watch, but it was as dark as soot. One of the many weird things that had happened in the past two years. So many weird things occurred on a daily basis that one hardly even took much
not of them anymore, once categorized as fatal or non-fatal. A man appearing next to Colt out of thin air barely raised an eyebrow from the tired people around them, though a few shuffled away just in case smiting was in the offing.

“Colt. You’re still alive. Congratulations.”

Colt was heartily sick of angels right now, even Gabriel, though the latter had been more helpful than others these past two years of chaos, hell and murder.

Gabriel tallied the number of refugees with a sweeping look before dismissing them. He never seemed surprised that Colt always had people who trusted him with their lives in tow, even though it surprised Colt each and every time. Then the archangel’s eyes dipped to Colt’s right. “Who’s this?”

Colt glanced down at the four year old boy at his side, staring out across the fields of corn choked with ash and blackened by disease.

“That’s Henri-“

Henrietta’s son, the one she had out of wedlock a couple of years before the world went to hell. Not being motherly for a bent penny, she left him with her best friend, who is now dead along with most of Christendom, while two people who used to be Charles and Henrietta tear each other and the world apart.


“Henry, is it?” Gabe concluded brightly.

“That’s right.”

Henry (not his given name this morning, but it was now) stared blankly at nothing. The child had seen the person he thought was his mother ripped apart by Croatoans two days ago, before Colt could intervene. He’d not said a word since.

“Henry... Colt?” Gabe asked, tilting his head like a bird to look at first one, then the other of the humans.

“Do I look like daddy material to you?” Colt said before he could reflect that this would be an easy way out of more dangerous questions.

“Not really, no. So? Henry who?”

“Winchester,” said Colt, who admittedly had a one-track mind.

Gabe’s mouth twitched. “Riiiight. Hey, kid-“

There was a click behind him as Gabe reached for Henry’s small face.

“I see you found your Colt again,” said Gabriel, motionless with his hand outstretched.

“Yes.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I am going to shoot you if you touch that child.”
“I’m not going to hurt him.”

“Forgive me if I fail to trust an angel.”

“That’s understandable, but I’m not gonna hurt the lil’ nipper.”

Gabriel reached out his hand very slowly and touched Henry lightly on the head. Henry blinked at him a few times, and something about him... changed.

“What did you do?” Colt asked. He hadn’t pulled the trigger in final.

“Made sure the name of his soul matches the name you just made up - sorry, the name you gave me in perfect good faith, I’m sure. That way, if anybody comes a-lookin’, they’ll just see a Henry Winchester who’s going to have a good sleep right now,” Henry yawned on cue, “and forget what he’s seen this last week.”

Gabriel straightened up and looked around blindly (the refugees had all vanished as if by their own version of magic as soon as Colt drew his weapon). “So, where you headed?”

“New Orleans.” Colt slipped the gun back into its holster. Henry was already fast asleep against Colt’s saddlebag.

“Why on earth would you go there?”

“We heard it’s safe.”

“You heard wrong. They had an outbreak.”

“Yellow fever?”

“Oh, if only.”

“...I see.”

“Want me to take you to Jerusalem? You and the kid?”

“Jerusalem?” Colt rubbed his face. He couldn’t adequately think without liquor, and that was in short supply these days. “Why?”

“God has transcended into a Machine that protects all humans there.”

“Uhhhh... what?”

“And you’re immortal now.”

“Oh Lord, no.” Colt staring at him in something like horror.

“Sorry, everyone is.” Gabriel had the decency to look embarrassed. “That is, age and decay no longer hold sway over you, though you can still get killed if your body suffers serious injury. The Plan was unclear on that last, but we thought it better to give humans an out if something truly nasty gets a hold of them. Immortality stops being fun when red hot irons get daily involved, see what I mean? The Change swept through you all two weeks ago, after that uncomfortable moment when everybody got floated up in the air. Sorry again, that was my idea. Not my best, but I thought it’d be nice if everyone stopped fighting for a few hours.”

“Immortal?”
“Yes, your minds will determine the age you’re most comfortable with. It’s meant to keep people hale, young and hearty, but I have a feeling you’ll end up a cantankerous sixty year ol’ kook before the week is out. Make sure Henry here lands somewhere safe and far away from you before then, ‘kay?” Gabriel added with a steady stare. “I do suggest Jerusalem. Big town. Lot of good people there who might have lost wee ones in the shuffle and who’d give Henry here a good home, if you see what I mean.”

“Isn’t that in, I dunno, the caribbean or somewhere?”

Gabriel rolled his eyes. “Samuel J. Colt, why do you pretend to be some drunken caballero tosser who has never held a book? You and I both know that’s horseshit. You were well brought up, well educated, and if your childhood sweetheart hadn’t been killed by a - sorry, sensitive subject, do put that piece away. Fine, so you’re a hunter. But a hunter can be sober, educated and refined.”

“No the best one I ever knew,” Colt said quietly, putting away the six-iron that had ended the world by killing Lilith in a church in Maryland. “What’s this you said about God?”

“Ah yes. Dear Dad.” Gabriel’s mouth twisted into something like a grin, one that’d been dragged dead and decaying from a grave. “I suppose he got tired of two of his kids squabbling. He... there’s no word in any human language for what happened. He left, but he stayed. He’s gone, but he’s here, in the form of a Machine that has all his powers, that is Him. And he’s living among you now. I guess you always were his favorites... If you don’t like Israel this time of year, there’s a place on the east coast where the seed of a new Machine has sprouted, it’ll be a safe haven too in a few weeks. Other places will follow.”

“God is... he’s turned into a machine? Why?”

“He’s staying out of the family drama.”

“By which you mean, he’s not going to stop Hen-... he’s not going to stop Michael and Lucifer from fighting and taking the planet down with them?”

“No. But don’t worry, it’s all part of the Plan. That’s why He’s in Jerusalem. It’s officially New Jerusalem now, the city of God. He’s going to protect humanity - well, what’s left of it - from all this nasty violence. Us angels can go and fuck off, apparently.” Gabriel looked away.

“You angels can go and fuck off in my books too, two of you are destroying the damn place and the rest are either hapless, or are actively hunting down humans in order to send them all to their Eternal Reward.” Which was how Colt had learned that his gun could also kill angels.

“Yeah, that’s been stopped. Sorry, bad lines of communication. Another reason maybe why God did what He did, it strengthened His rapport with us, avoid getting garbled commands.” Gabe was still looking away. “Michael and Lucifer, though, that’s ongoing. There’s a few more years left to that fight, I’d judge, before one or the other is a winner.”

Having actually met both of those notables in their new bodies, Colt was hard pressed to figure out who to root for. “Can’t you stop them?” he asked without thinking.

“Me? Oh, is that your solution? Two archangels fighting isn’t enough, you want to make this a three-way? Don’t ask me to talk sense into them. I tried for six months straight - my vessel’s tongue actually shed a layer of epidermis at one point. Useless. And I can’t stop either of them the hard way. That’d just destroy what’s left of the planet. Any Archangel on Archangel violence leads to death and destruction on a massive scale.” He was avoiding Colt’s eyes when he said that. Because though it was probably true, it was also obvious he wasn’t going to try. Colt didn’t know
if it was cowardice or if Gabriel just couldn’t bear the thought of raising a hand to a brother. In his less lucid moments, Colt saw Gabe not as a celestial destroyer of planet-shattering power, but as a sensitive kid who just wanted to sit in his tree house until the familial screaming and breaking of dishes stopped, and everyone loved each other again.

“So what are you going to do?”

Gabriel did the dead man’s grin again. “Oh, that’s easy. In terms of power, Michael has the edge on Lucy, but the latter knows that, so he brought big friends with him. The Horsemen, Princes of Hell, Knights, the whole hierarchy. Rafael and I have been ordered to attack those notables where they have gathered, and kill as many of them as we can before they eventually bring us down through sheer numbers. A suicide run, plain and simple, though Mike had the decency not to call it that. So what I am going to do is visit every liquor joint and brothel still standing between here and Armageddon, and then I’m going to go and get myself killed.”

“That’s a great plan,” Colt muttered, rubbing his forehead beneath his tatty old hat.

“Yeah. Wish I had Dad’s option.” Gabe’s words were short and sharp like glass. “Turn into a Machine without ears, without eyes, without a heart, so I don’t have to—. Michael was surprised when I didn’t object to his order. He’s been trying to destroy our brother for the past two years, while being the most-—most self-righteous ass about it. And when I bring up all of our family who’ve died in the past two years of war, he just nods and says something sanctimonious about the greater good. Honestly, I’d have agreed to anything just to get out of his presence. I look at him—... all I see—... he makes me want to vomit, and angels not having a gag reflex, that’s saying a lot. So yeah. I think... I think I’m looking forward to that long deep sleep. I’m not afraid anymore. Let it come.” Gabriel stood staring at the distant horizon. A stray gust of wind parted the black-on-black clouds and let a halo of sunshine play around his features for a few seconds.

Colt was moved to comment.

“Music hall actresses with their talent down their corsets have better delivery than you do. Git out of here if you’re gonna,” he added, making shooing motions. “Me and these humans, we have enough to worry about.”


“Gabe,” said Colt, but the angel had already gone poof. Fuck. Maybe it wouldn’t matter, but Colt regretted he’d not said-

“Sorry, I just realized you meant me,” said Gabriel, reappearing. “What?”

“... Only a coward gives up when there’s still something to fight for. And only a fool don’t know when to duck.”

Gabriel looked puzzled. “Hmmm, okay? Sorry, human wisdom must be too wise for me. I better get going, don’t want to be late for my own demise, that’d just be embarrassing. Head east until you hit mountains, then north.”

“Why?” but only a flap answered him,

The humans headed east, then north, finding only a few dead demons and Croatoans huddled together with their eyes burned out.

Far on the horizon, lightning cracked and forked for an entire week before it finally went silent and dark once more.
Only a coward gives up when there’s still something to fight for, and only a fool don’t know when to duck. That pretty much became the motto of the underground railroad.

It was summer. Of course it was summer. It was always summer. And dates didn’t matter anymore.

Colt nodded at Benny, bringing in a few more escapees out of Paradise. A solidly built young man with fierce eyes walked at Benny’s side, a new operator out of P342. Benny came over to make introductions.

The man had a handshake like an iron clamp. “Good to meet you, sir. Name’s John Winchester.”

“Winchester?” Colt stared, something in his chest making odd motions. John looked a lot like Henrietta. “Henry’s boy? My god, how long had it been?”

“You knew my dad?”

“Yes. I guess.” Knew. “Your dad is...”

John’s face hardened and his eyes took on a distant light. “My dad-“

“Don’t tell me.”

“Huh?”

“I have enough graves in my soul. I don’t want to dig another.”

---

Henry had lucked out when it had come to new parents back east. He’d grown up an educated, genteel kind of man who didn’t really need the help of the rough madcap uncle who had very, very rarely shown up to visit him for a few years. John, now, he was another sort altogether, which was how he’d ended up relocated to P342, away from the gentle sheep. John had more of Henrietta in him than Henry ever had. So surely now it was safe, it was even a good idea, for Colt to keep a closer eye on this family that could, perhaps, in another universe, have also been his own?

He watched over John as the latter grew up into a fierce, strong man. John worked for the railroad, and then for the resistance for many, many decades. Surely make his grandma proud by never giving up. Then one day he found his soulmate, and got married.

Colt wasn’t fool enough to enter Paradise except under certain rare occasions. Important occasions, such as to wet a new baby’s head, for example. Quite the screamer of a boy, with eyes just like Henny’s.

He had maybe ten whole minutes of contentment before John’s other friend and resistance cell leader, exceptionally invited for the occasion, sat down beside Colt to inform him they had a
problem of angelic proportions.

“Who the hell is Metatron?” Colt asked, his eyes not leaving Mary holding the baby while John, Bill Harvelle, Bobby Singer and Rufus Turner got illegally drunk.

“A real tallywag. I mean, forget your average angel, this pustule takes it to a whole new level.” The Joker was looking over his shoulder, as he always did in New Jerusalem. “As I understand it, Metatron was hanging around the Campbells because he’s looking for strong bloodlines. And then guess who walked in the door and fell for Mary Campbell? She came west, and so did this stain, oozing after her.”

“Should you be here?” Colt asked carefully, eyes scanning the corners of the little house.

“He’s gone now. He’s not part of the losers garrisoned here, he’s something of a special envoy.”

Colt started thinking of ways and means of getting John and his family out of Paradise. It wouldn’t be easy. Mary had views.

“I think he’s doing something to the Machine,” the Joker said, gaze turned inward. “I think he has... something. A tool. For instance, you know I have my own means, right? I checked a few years back when these two lovebirds first met. Mary and John were not among the chosen. She shouldn’t have had that brat. I didn’t say anything - I’m a fountain of sensitivity - but I knew. Yet lo and behold.”

“....what are you saying?”

“That this cad can manipulate the Machine in limited ways. He can turn certain parts on and off at any rate, such as allowing a woman to get in the family way.”

“That’s possible?”

“It is for him.”

They were silent a spell. Measuring the significance of an angel insuring the continuation of Henry Winchester’s bloodline.

“So Michael knows everything?”

“Aha, that’s the odd bit.” The Joker’s expressive face was all scrunched up in perplexity. “I have triple checked all my sources and... no. As far as I can tell.”

“Why not?”

“I am not sure.” The Joker paused to chew his lower lip. “But I believe that the toad in question is keeping John and the boy here as an ace in the hole. Waiting for a time when he can best bargain them off against a whack of power.”

Colt reached idly into his jacket’s hidden holster. The Colt’s hilt felt cold. “Where is this little toe-rag?”

“Not around for now, but I have a feeling he’ll be back. He’ll keep an eye on the family. So are we. He might be tempted to tinker again. That’ll give us the chance for a little... talk with him.”

---
Four years later, another baby was born. Born under a bad star, or so they said, though they couldn’t be more wrong about it being a bad omen. On this Metatron’s remains, the Joker found the tool the dumpy little angel had used to mess with the Machine. Something very handy, though only truly useful as part of a set. Something that might change the silent war that had been playing out in Paradise for nigh on two centuries.

The Joker started making all sorts of plans, but Colt didn’t pay too much attention to the affairs of angels. He had other concerns. More and more people were running from Paradise, Colt was busy. But never too busy that he couldn’t keep a distant eye, from the shadows, on one of the families in P342. It wasn’t the fate of the world or of men or of angels that kept him at his post. He just owed it to a memory.

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The start of a new year (2017 was the incredible total Colt came up with one night when he was very drunk). Mary was dead, John was dead, because Samuel Colt could still build amazing weapons but not keep safe what he needed to defend. Their boys were alright though.

Or so he thought until he heard the name Winchester again in a very unusual context, and news of a rather incongruous wedding rippled through the grapevine.

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Next chapter: Dicks with Wings and Other Things

“Dean, this is the person who kidnapped me. Or saved me, maybe.”

“Maybe?!” The man’s voice ricocheted through the space in a theatrical way. “I’d say ‘certainly’, tall-and-handsome.”

“He’s also the Joker you guys all like so much, and I’m afraid you’re not going to like the next bit...”

Chapter End Notes

NOTE for guns n' history nerds! Sam Colt is obviously a real historical figure as well as a figure in series, however there are some inaccuracies here that you can blame on SPN, not on yours truly. The actual year the colt revolver was patented (1836, after Hayley’s comet had come and gone) probably doesn't matter, since this version of Colt became a deadbeat in the midwest rather than an ambitious young industrialist traveling to England to sell his new idea. But the real kicker was that in series, The Colt was a cartridge-loaded revolver, and Colt's design in 1836 was a more traditional
ball-and-cap model. Darn. I'm going to assume Colt later retrofitted his gun to handle metallic cartridges (developed in post-civil war era iirc), which is probably what they assumed in series as well.

That was your 5 minutes of 'Mal puts waaaaay too much thought into her hobby' ^^;
Don't worry, next week, the 'Joker' shows up and nothing can stay serious or gloomy around him.
This is the Day in which God’s most excellent favors have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace hath been infused into all created things. It is incumbent upon all the peoples of the world to reconcile their differences, and, with perfect unity and peace, abide beneath the shadow of the Tree of His care and loving-kindness.
--- Gleanings from the Writings of BAHÁ’U’LLÁH

Cas had made one noise during the whole of Samuel Colt’s tale, something like a wounded groan that had Dean reaching for his knife. It’d been when it turned out Dean and Sam were actually related through their grandpappy Henry to all this craziness. Which was when Dean had also put two and two together and gotten damn me. The rest of Colt’s tale had fallen into a funereal silence.

Dean knew the enemy. He knew how angels worked with vessels. The strongest were restricted as to hosts, sometimes down to a single human bloodline.

“So that’s why he wanted me and Sam to come to P1.” Dean sounded oddly detached to his own ears. “Cause he wants one of us to...

“He wants you specifically, I bet,” Colt said, still staring into the fire. “You’re his type.”

There was not a single inch of Dean’s body and soul that didn’t go ick!, though oddly enough his first reflex was to glance over at Cas to see what the angel currently in his life thought of that proposition. Cas was staring blankly at the far wall with a closed off expression and hadn’t seemed to hear.

“He meant as a vessel, not a date,” Sam said with a trace of dry humor - very dry, hardly humor. “Because you’re the first born and a soldier. A second born advocate wuss isn’t to his liking, apparently.”

“Don’t fool yourself,” Colt said softly. “He’ll take either of you in a heartbeat. Especially if he realizes Dean here is trapped. He needs permission, same as any other flapper. But your sigils are wired into the soul, it’s destroyed when the trap goes off. If the body dies, he can bring that back, but the soul, nope, he’s outta luck. What we don’t know is why he wants either of you.”

“What? You just said-”

“We don’t know why he’s coming down to earth,” Sam once more interpreted Colt’s meaning. “It seems Michael was severely injured during his fight with Lucifer. It’s not easy for him to integrate a vessel since Henrietta was-...” Sam, who knew the meaning of the word tact, glanced at Colt and didn’t finish. “He’s only been actively looking for a vessel for a few years now. We think he has a purpose in coming down.”

Dean hadn’t yet gotten past the ‘Biggest-bastard-in-the-halo-brigade-wanting-to-wear-him-like-a-Sunday-suit’ part of the revelation yet, he’d not thought about what Michael would do with his body once he was down on earth. From the way Colt had said humanity was on the brink, and from his description of what he’d saw ‘Henrietta’ do before that vessel was destroyed in the final fight, Dean knew that if he and Sam were convinced or coerced to agree to- to that, that there’d

Dicks with Wings and Other Things
be no opposing someone of that power. But he was being bombarded with a lot of information here, and he couldn’t afford to drown in it, or panic either.

“How do you know that? That he’s injured?” Dean wasn’t used to his little brother echoing resistance talk- oh, right.

“I’ve been told,” said Sam in a very neutral voice that suggested he was not taking anything for granted from the source in question.

“Is the why significant? Don’t all angels want to come down and meddle?” Dean asked, dwelling more on the how and the who.

“Not Mike, no, he hates this stinking place,” said someone behind them, making them jump.

Two men had come through the rear door and had stopped at a prudent ten yards distance. The man who’d spoken was clean shaven, in his mid thirties, with a crooked grin, dancing eyes and the air of one who’s seen it all and can’t be possibly bothered to take any of it seriously. He was dressed in canvas trousers and a hussar jacket rather the worse for wear.

“I personally like to think he’s coming down to help with the Paradise newspapers. Maybe write Michael’s Agony Aunt column where he’ll thoughtfully fix all human woes,” the man said. He seemed to contemplate the idea while he gave a slow suck on something in his mouth. Then he shook his head. “But I’m afraid it’s much more likely he’s decided the Plan just isn’t working - what with Croatoans and Levis and uppity humans all over the place - and has decided to come down and finish what he started two centuries ago. Hiya Dean. Castiel. Long time no see, all that.”

“You.” Cas had stood up slowly, eyes fixed on the new arrival. The one short word rang hollow as a coffin, and the look on his face had Dean scrambling to his feet to stand at his side, knife clearing its scabbard.

“Wait- Dean, stop, that won’t hurt him.” Sam caught his arm. He had a sour look on his puss.

“This... this is the one who kidnapped me. Or saved me, maybe.”

“Maybe?!” The man’s voice ricocheted through the space in a theatrical way. “I’d say ‘certainly’, tall-and-handsome.”

“He’s also the Joker you guys all admire so much, and I’m afraid you’re not going to like the next bit.”

“You’re probably right,” Dean said, gaze going from Cas’s face to the new arrivals.

Sam sighed faintly, then said in a formal way, “Gabe, this is Dean, as you well know. Dean, this is Gabriel. The Archangel Gabriel.”

The Archangel Gabriel.

One look at Cas’s face was all it took. No, this was not a very bad joke in poor taste.

“The Joker is an angel. An archangel.”

“Yeah. Sorry,” Sam added as if this was somehow all his fault.

...Maybe one of the Croats had infected him and he’d gone insane...

“Yeah, not dead, obviously,” the angel said, addressing Cas. “Oh, years. Of course he can’t find me
down here, and I’ve learned tricks to hide myself when I have to go out and about. Can you use your mouth to talk? We’re losing our human audience.”

“You-...”

“You already said that, but at least you vocalized, that’s progress.”

“We thought you were dead. We mourned you.” Castiel sounded gutted - worse, betrayed. The spring of insane anger slowly coiling up inside Dean tightened another notch. “And you were hiding. All this time. You’ve been colluding. With the humans.” A wild glance at the man next to Gabriel. “With The Enemy!”

“Plough me with an eggplant, you’re right, Colt, he can pronounce capitals,” said the second man who’d followed Gabriel in. “Is it all angels who can do that, other than bums like Gabe, or is it a special talent only the most self-righteous ones have?”

“No, they can all do it,” Colt said with a morose air of one who didn’t like anybody present and just wasn’t sure who the lesser of several evils was.

“The enemy? Who or what is the enemy?” Dean had to ask. “‘cause usually the enemy is the Host, at least in my world.”

The man snickered in an unctuous way. He was a solid-looking gent, dressed in city-slicker black tailcoat, black shirt and cravat, very dandy. His eyes made Dean feel slimy every time they brushed him up and down.

“Crowley is a demon,” Sam said tartly.

“Crowley is the king of all of hell, you big lubbock, and you better remember it,” Crowley corrected.

“Crowley is the landlord and nothing more,” Gabriel said, finally glancing fully at Dean. “Don’t worry about him, he’s just-“

“An archangel and a demon.” Dean turned his back on the pair to challenge Benny and Colt. “This is the resistance? This?!”

“Nope.”

Dean’s wild gaze centered on Colt. “What?”

Samuel was staring into the fire. “They’re not the resistance, any more than I am the railroad. Gabe gave us Enochian magic, he gave us a clue as to what was going on, he helped a lot over the years. I’m warning you right now, you can talk to him for a full week of Sundays and he’ll still come off like a total ass, but-“

“Thanks, Samuel, I love you too.”

”-but he’s okay. He’s not the resistance, however,” Samuel concluded, finally looking up and facing Dean square on. “The resistance is people. Men and women up and down the line, in the settlements or working undercover in New Jerusalem, risking their lives to kick off the angels’ yoke. Men like John Winchester, who-“

“Did my father know about this?” Dean pointed wildly back at the pair near the fire.
“Yep.”

That had not been what Dean expected to hear. “...You mean that?” His gaze flickered to Benny - because at this point even Colt was suspect. But Dean knew Benny, had known him for over forty years. Benny had saved countless people from the Host over the past two centuries, enough people that he never lacked for blood when he needed it, hell, they lined up to volunteer for him in free settlements up and down the Midwest, because he was one of their defenders, who risked his life and everything he had and was for their sakes.

...and he was a vampire. Nominally an enemy, like angels should be... Dean had always known that out on the edge where he operated on the railroad, battles lines were never that clear cut.

Benny gave him an understanding look. “Brother, I just learned about Gabriel this week, when I got called here to help direct you in. He don’t spread his identity around. But I worked with Colt for well over a century before I met your daddy and you. If he says Gabe is on the level... I gotta believe him.”

“What if this angel is using us - the resistance - all of us for his own ends?”

“He is,” said Colt, once more not what Dean expected. “But his ends and ours mostly coincide, especially these days. I’ve been around for two whole centuries, I’ve verified what he said. Hear him out, Winchester.”

“Hear him out? Hear him out?! He kidnapped my brother! You kidnapped Sam, you asshole!” Dean shouted, rounding on Gabe.

“Oh my, yes, I kidnapped poor lil’ Sammy,” Gabriel cooed. “So cruel of me. Unless you remember that the simpler option for dealing with Michael’s vessels would have been to destroy you both, and I decided not to go that route, you’re welcome.”

Cas was still standing at his side, presenting a common front to the enemy. The angel’s hand was on Dean’s shoulder, a rampart of protection, of support… but the brief press of fingers was a warning too. Right. Right, that cheerful shrimp over there was- was another fucking Michael, another Lucifer-

And right this minute, Dean didn’t care.

“You could have gotten him killed! Me and Cas too! Don’t pretend like you’re doing us favors!”

“Whoa!” The grin turned jagged and openly mocking. “Sharper than the serpent’s tooth is the ungrateful brat! I’ve done you and your family nothing but favors, kid! I hid your grandpa, I protected your Dad as much as he’d let me, I murdered Metatron for you - though I would have done that last for the fun of it, to be honest. I made sure you and Sam were safe in the loosest Paradise there is, I left you there to live out a life of ease and peace for as long as it was possible - but when the bull biscuits started flyin’, I took considerable risk getting your brother out and made sure you could follow. You, Dean-o-”

Dean gasped - the bastard had materialized right in front of him! Poking a finger hard in his chest.

”-you have nothing to complain about! Him, on the other hand-” the finger now jabbed Castiel, “he has legitimate beef. Or he thinks he does. Come on, bro, lay it on me.” Gabriel lifted the finger away to beckon Cas as if inviting him to strike the archangel on the chin and get it over with.

Cas’s jaw moved, but when he spoke, his words were hard and measured. “You are a traitor.”
“There you go!” Gabe nodded enthusiastically. “I see myself more as a deserter and freedom fighter, really, but potatoh-pohtato.”

“You are opposing the rule of Heaven.”

“I can see where you’d think that. I’m actually opposing Michael. That’s not the same thing, though Mikey wouldn’t say so. Yeesh, our big bro is one hell of a soldier and general, but he doesn’t do well when left holding the bag. He always saw himself as the good son, the obedient one. Running out of orders did his head in.” Gabe shook his own noggin in a way that suggested pity as he made a loop in the air with his finger. “You see, Mike has fallen prey to circular logic. He’s head of the Host and the last archangel standing, so what he does has to be right. He’s not hampered with the ethical dilemma the rest of you angels face, the fact that if you have to use strong-arm methods in perfect Paradise, that means you’ve already failed the Plan before you even begin. No, what Mike does is right, what is right is what he does, so as far as Mikey is concerned, anything goes. Can’t is no longer in his vocabulary.”

“At least he’s following our Father’s directives,” Castiel bit out.

“No, he’s not. Good grief, bro! You’ve lived a few weeks in Paradise now, do you really think that- that milquetoast watered down version of a boring Sunday afternoon is what the Plan was?! That’s Michael’s thing! Control! Everyone in line! Do as I say! Not the Machine. Dad’s greatest achievement with humans was free will. See much of that in Paradise?”

Cas crossed his arms and glowered. “Are you saying he’s disobeying the Machine?”

“Cassie-...” Some of the manic energy seemed to trickle out of the nut, his shoulders slumped a bit and a faint sympathy twisted the crooked smile. “Cassie, the Machine is broken. Has been for centuries.”

“What?!”

“Luci’s last strike was on P1 directly. Just before his death in 1846.” A shadow of sadness ghosted Gabriel’s features. “He knew Mike had him on the ropes. And in his anger, Lucifer attacked the one person he had always thought of as the real guilty party. And he might have a point. He ignored Michael, turned his back on our brother just as the latter was bringing down the sword, and struck at our Father instead. He didn’t break the Machine outright, but he hobbled Him. The Machine was supposed to regulate the Spheres and keep balance and peace, and you have to agree we don’t see a lot of that out there. And in addition, our Father has not spoken to us directly since, haven’t you noticed?”

“I-...the Machine still works-“

“The automatic functions are working, and He is still there, but it’s not actually communicating beyond that, right?“

“He speaks to Michael,” Cas said. Something was shaking at the back of his voice.

“To Mike? Nah. He don’t.”

“You’re lying.”

“Oh, am I? If the omniscient manifestation of our Father was speaking to Michael and fully agreed with his plans, don’t you think He would have told his favorite son where to find his perfect vessel ages ago?”
Gabriel let the silence spin its gears for a few long seconds, just to underline the fact that Cas really couldn’t say much to that.

“Yeah, He didn’t. Right? Which was why that ambitious toad, Metatron, was hoping that having Mike’s meatsuit to hand the day our brother wanted it would be worth a whack of power. I managed to scrap Metatron before he could spill the beans. Unfortunately, once Michael actually started actively looking for his vessel, one of his agents followed Metatron’s trail all the way to P342. Naomi and all them were starting to look into your little dead-end Paradise. Not very efficiently, but they had to be getting close to figuring things out. So what does the Machine do, hm?”

Cas and he stared at each other, and then Gabriel made a brusque hand gesture. “That was an actual question. What does the machine do? Decrees, the altars, Intelligence, all that is managed by angels. What are the functions which are independent of our input?”

Castiel frowned uncertainly, as if expecting a trap but unable to see what it was before he put his foot in it.

“The Machine can do exactly three things without any input whatsoever,” Gabriel continued blithely. “He suggests the best option for personnel reassignment and human relocation. He manages the infrastructure of our communications - makes sure reports get to where they’re going-“

Dean was close enough to Cas to hear his soft sharp inhale.

“- and the big one: He presides over unions. Do I see a dawning of understanding? You think the Machine is helping Michael? It made sure John Winchester was the furthest away from P1 that it could manage- right next to the Wilds and the resistance HQ. It moved around a ton of dissatisfied humans - hell, it did more to create a railroad in P342 than either me or Colt ever did. It made sure that the personnel assigned to the garrison were the dregs of the barrel. Your honeybear and his brother stayed hidden for nigh on fifty years in that pit of a Paradise, despite some very serious people looking all over every continent for the Michael Sword’s descendants. But when big Mike finally started closing in, what happens? A report happens to find its way to a Seraph, even though it hadn’t really been earmarked for him at all... and boom! That Seraph gets roped into a union in view of every saved soul of P342 and beyond. You may not know this, but the news and the pictures of you two in your magical rainbow o’ joy popped up on Lanterns as far away as Madagascar, through some kind of crossed wire the Word cannot seem to figure out, fancy that.”

“And Hell too. We have a pirated lantern down here. It was sweet,” chimed in Crowley.

“Maybe even the Levis got a looksee at the happy couple. Lots of witnesses. That puts the people who were looking for you in a bind,” Gabe said, glancing at Dean. “You could no longer disappear discreetly. If you did, a lot of angels, starting with this one here, would have a lot of questions.”

“You’re full of bull,” Dean objected, ignoring the buzzing sound in his ears. “Michael summoned me and Cas to P1 the very day you grabbed Sammy.”

“Again, you’re welcome.”

“So me and Cas getting hitched didn’t stop anything. Just the opposite, probably brought me to his notice-“

“Oh? Say, are you in P1 right now?”
“Uh...”

Gabe sucked his candy and looked impressed. “Gotta hand it to Dad. Even with both hands tied behind his back, He can still do His magic. One hell of a protector you got assigned, right, kid?”

Protector... assigned...

“You’re sayin’ the Machine just needed to give me a nanny?” Dean’s face felt odd, stiff and cold. “That it’s not- that the union isn’t real?”

Behind Gabe, Crowley burst out laughing. “Aw! The look on his little face as his heart breaks and all his dreams of romance die!”

“... Is there a reason I can’t kill this dude?” Dean asked, gripping the demon knife.

“There’s a few reasons unfortunately, and no, Dean-o, it’s not faked.” Gabe spoke briskly but there was a faint understanding in his words that were almost as bad as Crowley’s interjection as far as Dean was concerned. “I checked. Twice. Since the notion of John Winchester’s brat falling for an angel was as far fetched as it was hilarious. Initially I thought it was some weird plot to draw me out of hiding. Even though the union looked properly Dad-approved, I still had my doubts. So I had people keep an eye on you in P342. Saw how things went down when you were attacked. And I... ah...” Gabriel scratched his nose and glanced at them through his lashes in a way he probably thought looked adorable, and made Dean want to punch him, for his own sake and for the odd way Sam suddenly went red and looked away. “To be perfectly honest, I may have put you two through a few more miles on this recent itinerary than was strictly required. A small number of angels have defected and eventually found their way to my side over the centuries - usually the scrapings of the P342 barrel, since no one cares if they disappear. They might have been keeping a discreet eye on you two during your trek, in case you ran into more trouble than you could handle. And also to see how you behaved, since that kind of jaunt would have had Romeo and Juliet at each other's throats after a fortnight. But here you are, stuck together like a ship and a barnacle... So, in final, Dean, if you were hoping for an easy annulment of the ol’ matrimonial shackles, you’re out of luck. You and Cas just happen to be made for each other - believe it or not. Dad just made sure you two got together in time to have a wedding instead of a funeral.”

Dean opened his mouth - and realized that anything he said at this point, from ‘of course I knew that’ to ‘are you sure?’ could be vastly misconstrued one way or the other by his spouse. Not that Dean himself was all that sure how his own reaction was to be construed in the first place. His emotions were busy rioting.

Fortunately Gabriel could be counted on to make noise to cover an awkward pause. “I hope I didn’t make Dad’s feat of ingenuity sound easy, right? Because it probably wasn’t. Not only has the Machine been hobbled by Lucifer for ages, but His range has been further reduced since then as well. Turns out Metatron was turning functions off right and left, and inter-species mating was one of them-“

“You keep saying that. That he could manipulate the Machine.” Cas’s voice was oddly measured, even Dean had a hard time figuring out just how much emotion was crawling beneath. “How is that possible?”

“The little rat had means, but I am not going to go into them now with you because I am still not sure how far I can trust you,” Gabe said archly.

Cas’s eyes narrowed.
“So,” Dean said, “it is possible for angels and humans to-” Why the hell was he focusing on this stupid tiny little matter instead of the bigger picture?!

“Oh yes! It’s happened before. Unfortunately.”

“What?! I never heard of that!” Dean glanced from Gabriel’s mug to Cas’s blank look.

“Some peon angel - Lemuriel, remember him, Cassie? - got hooked to a human at one point during the Apocalypse, but things were so bananas back then that nobody paid any attention. No idea what happened to them - hope they found a quiet corner of nowhere to go live in and tucked it in after them, because seeing what happened to Akobel, I doubt-“

“Akobel?” Cas asked sharply.

“Oh, right, you wouldn’t know. For good reasons. Next time I dump something on Naomi, it’s going to be boiling hot tar and feathers,” said Gabe with a distant look, though why he was mentioning that queen bitch right now was beyond Dean. “Yeah. back in 1901, Akobel found his soulmate - his human soulmate. Unfortunately for them, it happened in a peaceful library in P1 where they don’t have Lanterns and everyone blindly believes what the Word says, so when they were murdered-“

“Murdered! Akobel fell in the war with Azazel!”

“Haven’t you been listening? Mike has lost the plot and he’s not listening to Daddy surrogate anymore! Having a powerful seraph getting hooked to a human could compromise his control over the Host. So Akobel and Lilly got ‘reassigned’ away from P1 and disappeared off the face of the map, and everybody who wondered what the hell, got either killed too if they were human, or had a trip to Naomi’s little inner sanctum. And Metatron ‘fixed’ the machine so angels and humans couldn’t get united any more. That last was a hack, pure and simple, and seems the Machine managed to kick it off eventually, which will put a bug up Mike’s butt. But too late to do anything about it: shit like that going down in P342? Nobody shuts up there. Besides, the news has spread too far now. You saw how the bible thumpers in your gulch reacted, right? That’s how they’re reacting all over the place, like this union is the coming of the New Age within the New Millennium, like it’s the final fruition of the Plan. If Mike wants to break that, he’ll have to do it very, very publically, and get the entire Host wondering what he’s up to - which he’ll do, mind you, but I’m sure it made him pause, and allowed me to get my own plans in place. Dad did a great job in arranging some protection. In addition to bringing joy and happiness to two beautiful hearts and all their friends and family!”

A complex series of emotions fired off inside Dean on cue like a flurry of fireworks, but true to form, all he did was mutter, “Bullshit.”

Then he couldn’t help but glance at Cas, a mix of feeling both a bit guilty - without being sure why - as well as irritated and a whole host of other things.

Cas didn’t look at him, didn’t seem to be registering the same inner conflict, but then again he was obviously too busy still reeling from all the shocks to the system recently - one brother a traitorous coward forming the resistance, the other a power crazed lunatic who wanted to wear Dean like a suit. Yeah, the Seraph had had a busy afternoon, and it showed. Both Gabe and Mike being a pair of shits was hurting Cas deep in the heart of his loyalties. Dean felt a touch of hurt on his behalf which just irritated him more, as were Crowley’s giggles as the demon apparently read every one of his thoughts off his face.

“How can I believe any of this...” Cas finally said softly.
Gabriel cocked his head - an echo of the way Cas did sometimes, like a bird trying to get a better view of the world by looking at it from a different angle. “Hm?”

“You could be lying.”

“Ah. Right.” Gabriel rubbed his eyes and grimaced theatrically. “I should have known this was going to be a problem.”

“Cas, it does explain everything.” Sam said quietly, opening his mouth for the first time since the introduction. He’d been listening to Gabriel quietly, gaze flickering towards the archangel and then away again in a manner that riled Dean up without being able to explain why in the slightest.

“Don’t bother, Sammy-me-boy.” Gabe was examining Cas’s face like he was reading a newspaper. “Castiel is bright, and that righteous stick up his butt could be used to beat a Levi to death, but he only very recently had a new trip to Naomi’s, so we’re not gonna have any luck sowing the seeds of doubt.”

“Why do you keep mentioning Naomi?” Dean stuffed his hands deep in his pockets because they were twitching to go and- and grasp Cas’s shoulder, give him some support, moral, physical or otherwise. “Where does she feature in all of this?”

“Something you don’t know, Dean - but Cas does, even if he doesn’t like to think about it. The mind trap used on you is a subversion of a much more elegant technique used on angels to, shall way say, change the-“

Cas looked up sharply. “That is only done in extreme cases of insubordination.”

“- which is what having doubts, or telling Mike to stick it where the sun don’t shine, comes down to, boy-o. You are aware, by the way, that if what I’m suggesting is true, and that you recently had your clock cleaned, you would not be aware of it. Right? But I’ll leave you to think about something. It was found that the best way for Naomi’s little tinkering to take hold with as little stress for the subject as possible - and trust me, she’s had problems with that - was to not drop the angel right back into the flow again where they could notice any discrepancies. Nowadays, when she ramrods one of you, she makes sure that they will be reassigned to a brand new position away from previous memory triggers, right after a little rest. Sound familiar?”

Dean’s head whipped around at the word ‘rest’. His husband was silent and expressionless. But Dean knew, he just knew Cas was in no way putting any faith into what his traitorous resistance-founding brother was saying.

“You’re not buying it,” Gabe said, obviously coming to the same conclusion. “But at least you’re not doing anything stupid.”

“You’re an archangel, you could kill us all,” Cas pointed out.

“Um, yeah.”

“But that does not mean I’ll help you.”

“Oh boy.”

“Cas-“

Cas interrupted Dean, grabbing his arm and gesturing around them. “Dean, look at where he is, the company he keeps. We have no proof any of this is true. This could all be an elaborate attempt at
entrapment. There is no way we can believe any of this.”

“Then we have a bit of a standoff,” Gabe said thoughtfully. Crowley had stopped laughing, smirk fierce and wary. A small metallic noise made Dean look over his shoulder. Samuel had drawn his revolver from his duster and was loading it with more angel bullets.

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**Next Chapter: The Key out of the Impasse**

“Whoa whoa whoa! Everybody calm the hell down!”

Chapter End Notes

More exposition (it had to be done sooner or later) but in a chapter or two we get more action again. And also *action ;)*
Chapter Notes

Please note that Dean is still the emotionally constipated grump we know and love, so don't expect any grand romantic declarations any time soon, you gotta read between the lines. This is the case in most of my fics, I'm not a traditional romantic ^^;

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And I will appoint my two witnesses, and they will prophesy for 1,260 days, clothed in sackcloth.” They are “the two olive trees” and the two lampstands, and “they stand before the Lord of the earth.” If anyone tries to harm them, fire comes from their mouths and devours their enemies. This is how anyone who wants to harm them must die. They have power to shut up the heavens so that it will not rain during the time they are prophesying; and they have power to turn the waters into blood and to strike the earth with every kind of plague as often as they want.

-- Revelation 11:3-6

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Dean stepped briskly between Cas and Gabriel while angling towards Colt. “Whoa whoa whoa! Everybody calm the hell down! That means you too, Cas. Look, I know this is shaking your universe a bit - a lot - but I’m inclined to believe him, at least for some things.”

Cas was standing with his arms loose at his side in the kind of pose that usually saw an angel blade slide into his palm. “You shouldn’t. What proof do we have for any of this?”

Good question. ‘My gut’ wasn’t going to cut it, and ‘because my entire life to date is proof that your brother Mike is a dictator and a certifiable loon’ would just hurt Cas more without really winning any arguments. “Colt and Benny vouch for Gabriel. Colt’s human, I suppose he could be bamboozled-“

“Nope, I’m trapped same as you, kid, any interference in my noggin and I blow up,” Samuel rasped from where he was still sitting by the fire, finger on the trigger of his angel-killing revolver.

“So you say,” Cas told him tartly. “As for the vampire-“

“I’ve known Benny most of my life,” said Dean, catching Cas’s arm as the latter gestured angrily at his friend. “I trust him.”

There was a terse silence. A silence in which, not a month ago, Dean would have slotted in the words, ‘in sum total he’s saved more humans than you’ve killed, angel.’ He wasn’t going to say that today, though. Because things had changed between the two of them, so he didn’t need to.

“Dean,” said Cas, taking it down a notch but voice still tense with urgency. “You don’t understand. Gabriel is a master manipulator. Reality is his plaything. Even the- even your friend Benny and Colt could have been fooled. What he is saying - there are other explanations. Benny can’t confirm Colt’s story about you being Michael’s vessel, he didn’t know that part or Gabriel until this past week, he said so himself. Michael could have wanted you to come to Paradise 1 because of our
union, to find out-

“...There could be an explanation. Other than this- this insanity,” Cas added, gesturing brusquely at a spot halfway between Gabriel and Colt. “The Machine, broken? Michael conspiring against our Father? The facts fit the theory superficially, but there could be other explanations, and we cannot know the truth.” And his instinct was obviously not to trust the traitorous archangel chumming around with demons and angel-killing gunsmiths.

Dean turned to fully face Cas. “I... have more information. I saw something. When I cut that bullet out of your hide a few weeks back.”

Castiel frowned, caught short in his tirade. “What did you see?”

Dean spoke slowly. “I could tell you. But you shouldn’t believe me.”

Cas’s puzzled look faded to one of understanding. “I want to, Dean,” he said softly, earnestly, “but I know this- this entity is the Joker...”

“Yeah, this guy’s the Joker - not that I haven’t stopped reeling about that yet. At the end of the day, though, he works for the resistance and helps the railroad, and that aligns with my beliefs. I warned you from the start, right? I promised not to put a knife in your back, but that was as far as I could go. If this was some ploy to get you to betray the Host, and Samuel and Gabriel ordered me to lie my ass off to convince you, I’d do it.”

For the first time since they’d walked in, Gabriel lost that unflappable look that’d been irritating Dean profoundly; the archangel blinked rapidly a few times and then scratched the back of his head. “Well that was, ah, abruptly and needlessly honest. Hey, Dean-o, next time I’m working on a complex negotiation, remind me not to bring you.”

“Shut up, angel. Cas and me, we tell it like it is. Besides, he’s smart enough to have thought of that. And I wouldn’t have it any other way,” Dean said firmly, looking back at his spouse.

“Except that makes the next bit tricky,” Gabe said slowly, still scratching. “I have a plan, but I need Castiel’s cooperation. Or at the very least, I can’t have him running off to tell Mike about it.”

“My cooperation? How can you trust me?” Cas asked, still looking at Dean, only at Dean, even as he addressed his brother. “Like Dean, my loyalties are what they are. I would cheat and lie if it’d get me out of here to warn Heaven about you and your dubious alliances.”

“... Wow. You boys really are soulmates. Cassie...” Gabriel’s voice trailed off. Dean was facing his spouse, but the texture of Gabriel’s silence suggested the Joker was looking them over with those sharp intelligent eyes. “Cassie, breaking your conditioning is sine qua non to your believing what I’m telling you, but to undo the knots in your brain, you’d have to trust me to-”

“No.”

“And you won’t trust me until you believe me. Yeah, that logic bites its own tail, don’t it. Hmm, an impasse.” Once more, Dean felt Gabriel’s gaze rest on him rather than on Castiel, as if waiting to see what Dean would do next. The archangel still sounded lighthearted, but Dean could feel time running out. Damn it, there had to be a way out of this stand-off, he didn’t-
He didn’t want Cas to die down here. He didn’t want Cas to die at all. The guy was an angel, of course, but he had a kind of—of purity about him, a sort of weird solemn way of looking at things without—without bullshit, with this devastating honesty that— and he wasn’t a maniac, or a self-righteous prig. He was—

There was a morass of feelings boiling around in Dean’s gut, and he did not have the time or luxury to examine them all, but there was one fact he could reach for, one that made sense to the Dean Winchester who worked for the railroad and the resistance, and that might make sense to these men gathered here too. All personal stakes aside, Dean could see a future where Cas would be one of mankind’s greatest allies. It’d take time and work, because Cas was stubborn—rightly so, Dean wouldn’t trust a weathervane. But once Cas was persuaded, oh, he would make mistakes from time to time but at his core, Dean knew his angel would try to do what was right, more than Gabe and his shirking, or Colt and his tragedy-ridden guilt, or even Dean himself, the angry guy who just couldn’t stop fighting, couldn’t—couldn’t try to reach out—

He wanted to. He wanted to reach out now. All those weeks of furiously fighting it, recoiling at the very idea that he could be friends with an angel—and he was damn well aware the word ‘friend’ was a convenient label to put on something he did not have the opportunity, or more likely the courage, to examine any more closely at present… He thought he’d be turning his back on his father, but as it happened, John had worked with an angel when required, had trusted him, had even invited him over to see Dean come into this world. That had to mean something. John had never said anything that would suggest he might be open to doubt, to nuance—bloody Winchester code—but actions spoke louder than words.

Yeah, actions spoke louder than words.

“... Hey, Colt?”

The old-timer looked away from Cas. His thumb was still on the hammer, Dean noted.

“Can you unlock the trap I have on my mind?”

“What? Why are you asking that?” Cas, startled, looked quickly between Dean, Samuel and Gabe, with a particularly meaningful look at the latter to remind Dean that walking around with an unprotected mind was a recipe for disaster when hanging around angels. Ironic, really.

“The trap in my head. It’s locked in place by the person who put it in, so it can only have one key—but Samuel, you’re the final linchpin, in a way. You’ll have a skeleton key, won’t you? In case of emergencies?”

“Hell no, you idiot,” Colt sneered. “That’d make me a weak link. The only person who has the key to that noggin of yours is the man who trapped your mind in the first place.”

Shit. “I don’t remember who— that whole night is a blank.”

“Side effect of the process. Plus protects that person’s identity. You know how we operate, boy.”

God damn!! It was hard working for a paranoid organization at times, even if he knew why it was such. “Do you know who did me? Can we get him or her here? Are they even still alive?” Dean asked, rubbing his forehead hard.

“He’s alive, he’s right here. I said I didn’t have a skeleton key for all your heads, but I’m the one who did yours,” Colt said gruffly. “Part of the process is to make sure the person understands what’s being asked of them, and that they’re fully committed. I owed it to John to ask you myself.”
“...Oh.”

“Why you askin’?”

“If Cas can read my thoughts-“

“What?!?” Cas interjected sharply.

”- then he can see-“

“Dean, no."

”-see what I saw, he’ll see proof that Gabe is right on at least one thing. On the fact that somebody’s messed with his mind recently.”

Castiel’s mouth stayed open around another objection.

“Cas, you need to see this.”

Samuel looked from Dean to Cas and back again, eyes glittering in the dancing light of the fire.

“Hm. Okay. But to be clear, kid: you’re a linchpin, he’s an angel. Gabe’s deals are his own, he leaves this to me if he wants my help ever again. If your angel scans your mind, he is not leaving here alive unless he’s helping us, and I will need guarantees on that.”

“Trust me, Samuel,” said Gabriel with a strangely knowing look on his face. “Once we get this wrinkle sorted, Cassie will be on board. Hell, he’ll lead the charge.”

Dean still didn’t like the sound of Samuel’s threat, but he didn’t see any other way forward. “Cas? Will that work for you?”

Cas actually flinched and then his gaze fastened on Dean’s boots. “I don’t want to do this.”

“You what?” Dean’s jaw dropped. Colt, Gabe, even Benny, they all had good reasons to object to breaking railroad protocol, but not Cas. “What do you mean, you don’t want to do this?”

“...I don’t want to do this. To you.”

“B-but why not?”

His straight-shooter angel seemed to have a hard time meeting his eyes right now. What was the problem? Sure, the process was invasive n’ unpleasant n’ all, but Cas had done it to countless humans and to Sam as well, and what had Sam said about it? That Cas had been ‘clinical’-

Dean remembered the first time he’d seen Cas shirtless. The injuries and the blood pouring down his back hadn’t figured into Dean’s first (or second or third) reaction to the sight... Yeah, it was goddamn hard to remain clinical when it involved someone one was clo- who was- someone one was expected to live with for the rest of eternity.

“For the love of- is that the problem?! You don’t want- because- this is no time to be a fucking gentleman! Or a prude! In case you missed the subtext here, if we don’t help them, they are going to kill us.”

“Me. They might try to kill me. They have no reason to harm you. You and Sam could stay here, you’d be safe. Right?” Cas’s eyes had flickered over Colt, Sam, Benny, settling on Gabriel - he’d looked at everyone except for Dean.
Gabe rubbed his chin. “Hm. Well, we’re too far down in hell for Mike to find us, so yeah, they might be okay. For awhile. Cassie, don’t do anything stupid,” he added quickly. “Was that your plan all along? Bring Dean to the resistance HQ, make sure Sam was in no danger, and then go back by yourself and try to sort out what’s going on at the risk of getting shredded when you showed up without them? Keep them safe at the cost of your life?”

Cas didn’t answer, not directly. But he looked down at the ground as if he had a bone to pick with it and that was the only confirmation Dean needed. That, and a sudden realisation: that Cas had talked about his plans of going back to the Host and ‘explaining his actions’ over the past fortnight, but had never mentioned what would happen to Sam and Dean in the meantime...

“That’s a stupid plan,” Dean said harshly. “And by the way, hubby, didn’t your precious Machine say we need to stick together when it hitched us?”

“You don’t believe in that,” Cas shot back, gaze still nailed to the ground. His mouth twisted on the words as if they’d tasted sharp and bitter on his tongue for a brief moment he was now intent on denying.

“I believe-” Dean’s voice went ragged, “- I believe you’re the dumbest angel in the lot! I believe - I believe I’d rather you grope me in the head than give up and die for me you pathetic feathered idiot!”

“Now I wish I had not forsworn romance. This is adorable.”

“Someone shut up the demon or I will! Now Cas, I am going to get my head unlocked, and you are going to look at what I found, and then you are going to let Gabe here fix it, and like that Colt can ease off on that fucking trigger over there and we can move this bitch forward without you dying. Alright?”

Cas’s shoulders slumped a tad and he nodded reluctantly.

Samuel got up from his bench with a groan and a creak of joints, walked over and tapped Dean on the head while muttering a few words in Enochian heavily flavored with a New England accent. Then he headed back towards his spot by the fire.

Dean blinked at his back. “That’s it?!”

“Sorry, did you need something more elaborate? Were you that keen on having pins in your head?” Colt shot back, pausing in his footsteps. “I gotta knife here-”

“Forget it. Cas? You’re up.”

“.... I really don’t want to do this,” Cas whispered.

“Tough.” Wasn’t as if Dean was keen on this either; he couldn’t face his own emotions, confused and vulnerable as they were, he didn’t want Cas looking at them. But they didn’t have to go there, he’d focus on what he’d seen during the surgery the other day, and he trusted Cas not to rummage.

After three more reluctant seconds, Cas lifted both hands and placed them on either side of Dean’s face. His fingers were warm, callused from holding his blade, his touch gentle.

Dean tried valiantly to keep the simple informative memory of what he’d seen that night front and center of his thoughts, but it stood a snowball’s chance in hell.

- can count on one hand the times he’s touched me- he always asks for my permission, from that
very first time in my bedroom, I noticed that. Barely touching me now, so gentle for hands so strong- I remember how he pulled me out of that well that night - part of me admired him from the get-go even when I was tryin’ to plug him with my knife- shit! Focus on the surgery! Bare chest-gah! Focus! Lights! The lights on his skull and not thinking about waking up by his side the next morning, quiet and warm and close, and how long it’s been since I- goddamn!

Cas was staring at him. His touch on Dean’s thoughts were as gentle as his fingers, not directing or forcing the memories or invading any railroad secrets, just watching, barely brushing - and seeing all that stream by inevitably. Dean felt like his face was going to combust and he was now the one unable to meet Cas’s gaze, preferring to stare down at a button on his duster.

The hands left Dean’s skin, leaving tingles in their wake. Cas stirred. “That’s-”

“We don’t have to talk about it!” Dean squawked, then his eyes flickered shut. “You were going to ask about the marks I saw. Sorry.”

There was yet another snicker from Crowley, who seemed to be enjoying this more than a dozen Lantern shows rolled together. Sam and Benny were trying hard to not look at Dean’s flushed face. Dean appreciated their efforts to ignore his embarrassment, however transparent. Gabe, of course, didn’t bother, but he looked away from Dean before the latter could punch him on principle to examine Cas’s face. Colt, back by the fire, was polishing his gun and looking irritated with the whole fuss.

When he finally had the guts, Dean glanced at his significant other. Cas was silent, with the air of one chewing something over. As far as proof went, it wasn’t much. Dean had just seen an odd pattern of lights on his noggin; scar marks on an angel. That was why Dean had not just said they were there, why he’d gone this route. Because what he was asking Cas to do here was huge, it went against every fiber of the angel’s being. So Dean had done something he had sworn he’d never do: let an angel into his thoughts. He’d been ready to die rather than let that happen before... but he’d not even thought of it in that context - for starters, it wasn’t ‘an angel’, it was Cas. Dean trusted the stubborn, righteous feathery son of a bitch. And Cas knew it now, he had proof of that at any rate. And if he could return that - the trust and the willingness to take something on faith even if it went against everything he believed in...

Cas stared at Dean for what felt like hours, though it was probably only a few long seconds, then he turned slowly towards Gabe

“...Fine.”

“You sure?” Gabe asked around his candy. Dean glared at him. What the hell! Hurry up before Cas over-thought it and changed his mind!

“Yes. I’m sure. Dean trusts you-”

“Sorta.” Damn mouth. So much for not giving Cas a chance to back out. “I trust Benny and Samuel, and they seem up to think this is a matter of life and death for the whole of humanity, which is worth taking a risk over,” Dean elaborated.

Cas nodded at him somberly, before glaring at his brother once again. “I still don’t believe you,” he said bluntly. “But my loyalty is ultimately not to Michael or the Host, it is to my Father, to the Machine that is His manifestation here on earth. He has decreed that Dean and I are united. If Dean believes this strongly that this is the way forward...”

It wasn’t what he said, it was the way he said it. Slowly, as if putting the words together one at a
time like paving stones in a path leading forward. And the way he had, perhaps unconsciously, reached for Dean’s hand even as they both faced Gabriel. Dean felt something uncharacteristically warm go through his middle, which was normally more comfortable with anger, violence and cynicism. What Cas had said could be construed as, ‘I just do what Dad tells me to’, but the slow way he’d said it told Dean, at any rate, that what Cas was really saying was, ‘I’ve decided to stand alongside my ol’ ball and chain, and I’m just finding a way to justify my decision that ensures I’m not actually betraying the other person in my life I care about.’ It was a lot to get out of just a few words and fingers arounds his own, but angels could accomplish miracles, and the intriguing otherworldly puzzle that was Cas had miraculously taught Dean to read between the lines in a way that would leave Sammy, the communicator in the family, standing at the gate. Well, hot damn…

Cas took a step towards his brother - and looked back in surprise as Dean’s fingers refused to release his, holding him back. Dean was surprised too. On the heels of his discovery of a bunch of unspoken stuff between him and Cas, came a sense of protectiveness and an unwillingness to see his angel get messed with.

“Dean-o?” Gabe queried, eyebrows dancing around as he gave their joined hands and then Dean’s scowl a dubious look.

“... Okay, I can see why this has to be done, but I am not comfortable with you tinkering around in Cas’s mind. You’re a dick.”

“Why thanks!” said Gabriel brightly with every evidence of perfect sincerity.

“Um, Samuel?” Dean glanced back towards the fire. “Can you-”

“I can’t undo complicated crap in the tangle of light and self-righteousness that passes for an angel’s brain,” Colt snorted. “And neither can Gabe.”

“Oh- wait, what?!”

“I could try,” Gabriel corrected, “but I could blow him up like gunpowder if I get it wrong, and yeah, you’re right, Dean, while in there I could maybe mess around, and Cassie would never be able to fully trust himself after I’m done. Not ideal.”

"Then what the hell is it that we have been talking about for the past- "

“We’re still going to get him sorted,” Gabe interrupted soothingly, walking off to his left and waving at Dean and Cas to follow. “I’m just not gonna be the one to do it. Kevin here, on the other hand- Kevin, wake up.”

“Urghel,” said Kevin, sitting straight up from where he’d fallen face first against the table at some point in the past few minutes. His eyes were glassy.

“You’re up, boy, find the one we need.” Gabriel prodded the kid and then gestured at some flat stones in front of the dazed human. The kid pointed at one of them seemingly randomly, then let his hand drop back to the table as if weighed more than a gunny sack of flour.

“It’s really not that complicated,” Gabriel continued blithely, “and you’ll see, I won’t be involved in the process at all, Dean, so relax. Cassie, all you gotta do is look at the tablet Kevin just pointed out.”

“Why?!” Dean shouted, mind still reeling beneath the various flavors of emotional racking he’d undergone in the past few minutes, apparently for nothing.
“Because these three stones are part of the Machine.” Gabriel gestured at them brightly - Dean couldn’t help but notice that the archangel was taking care not to touch them himself. “They are the Word of God, the final definition of the Plan that manages the spheres. The Angel, Demon and Leviathan tablets, we’ve dubbed them. The human tablet is, we suppose, still in place since the Machine can manage the mundane sphere just fine. I found the Angel tablet on Metatron. Azazel had the Demon tablet - just touching these things makes you a powerhouse, which was how Azazel was kicking the Host’s ass. Eve had the Leviathan tablet, and the lil’ runt of the litter held off all the chompers with it, that’s how much of a punch these rocks pack. Took them ages to bring her down - and fortunately she hid the tablet before they killed her. The Leviathan were looking for it all over Purgatory, and even with the Angel tablet in my mitts, I wasn’t sure I’d be able to get it out of there. But Michael unwittingly helped me out by picking a fight with the chompers once Azazel was dead. Always needed a fight, did Mike. That left Purgatory a little bit less full of dangerous critters, since they were all out on earth making everyone miserable, so me and a few good men snuck in and we eventually found it a short while back - just before the big mouths realized what I was up to and came flooding back to their home ground. I left them a few fake tracks to follow, they’re ripping the place apart as we speak, which I have to say, does amuse me. Then I found the next prophet in line once I had my prizes. Hence Kevin here, who’s having a ball reading all my dad’s scribbles. Aren’t you, Kev?”

“Anybody else hear that ringing noise?” Kevin asked, still staring at the far wall.

“Right you are. So this is the Angel tablet. It was wrenched from the Machine’s guts, but it is still linked to it in a way. It can reset you. I believe. I certainly hope so, this is central to my plan. Benny, can you please take Kevin away and feed him and put him to bed? The rest of you,” Gabriel added, grabbing Sam by a corner of his vest and pulling him as he stepped away, “should grab some distance.”

“Why?” Dean asked suspiciously - but it was hard not to notice that everyone, including Colt and a sadistically grinning Crowley, had already followed that advice.

“Because I’m ready to bet this will get a little intense. Dean, over here.” Gabriel beckoned from the far side of the fire.

“No,” said Dean on principle before looking at his spouse’s profile. “Cas, did anything he say make sense? Sounded like moonshine madness to me.”

Cas didn’t answer, didn’t watch Benny lead Kevin off towards the far door, didn’t look away from the stones on the table, lying all-... all stone-like and not shining or looking ominous in any way. Ignoring Sam’s hiss behind his back, Dean even gave one of them a nudge. It moved an inch along the table with a rasping sound and then just lay there like a dumb rock.

“Dean, if Gabriel says you should come here, you really should,” Sam said tensely.

“I swear, if he’s messing with us,” Dean started to grumble, ignoring his brother as Cas reached out and put a palm flat on one of the tablets.

Nothing happened. For about five seconds, the time it took for Dean to start putting together a tirade that would send even an archangel running for cover-

Whoosh!

Dean staggered in the sudden tornado of dust and paper that had sent every torch in the place whipping like banners. Loose pages full of Kevin’s scribbles lifted up on a sudden sharp wind and carried away his hat. And he’d seen something, a flicker in the air, like that time Balthazar had
shields him from Michael’s light; as if something massive and bright had moved through the air in front of him for a brief moment, intangible and almost invisible, a massive wing sweeping out, and -

“Cas!”

Cas had let go of the stone and sank down to the ground, clutching the edge of the table like a drowning man clutches driftwood.

“Cas! You okay?! What’s the matter!” Dean was crouching at his side in an instant.

Cas shook his head convulsively a couple of times, and then looked at Dean. The angel was so white in the face - a dead man’s pallor. His eyes searched Dean’s features as if he was seeing him for the first time, in something like growing horror.

“Dean.” The familiar voice, the familiar deep rumble, was trembling as it held his name, shook with it. “Dean… I… I am… I am so sorry…”

“Huh?! What? What for?”

“We… we… it wasn’t the Plan. It was never the Plan… none of it. All… all those humans-... what have we done…” Cas’s eyes turned blindly away and his forehead sank against the edge of the table. “What have I done…”

Dean shook him gently by the shoulder he did not remember grasping. “What… what’s going on? Cas? Come on, talk to me.” You’re scaring me.

Cas’s eyes flickered shut and a look of pain crossed his features. He didn’t answer.

“Cas- Gabriel, what the hell is going on?!” Dean glared helplessly at the archangel who’d finally strolled forward, his hands-in-pockets attitude casual, but something somber and sad deep in his eyes.

“Give him a minute, Dean-o. Cassie here… he’s got a mind of his own, and he’s always had a soft spot for humans, so I imagine he’s accumulated a lot of doubt and distress at what’s been going on in the past two centuries. And it’s just hit him all at once.”

“...What?”

“Doubts. Downright dissension. Or just plain questions. Mike don’t allow any of that. So Naomi takes it away. Cassie… I know some of the crap you were ordered to do was dire, but focus on the good stuff, too. It’s not all bad. Remember? Those memories should also be back. Remember how you broke rank during Armageddon to shield that town in Jordan? How many folks did you save that day, do you reckon. I’m sure you’ve turned a blind eye to a few other things in your time. There’s a good reason you were put on army duty with no contact with humans, and cats like Ishim and Asmodel were handling the inquisition instead. Remember that stuff too? It makes up for the bad tripe, a bit.”

“No,” Cas rasped, forehead still slowly grinding side to side against the edge of the table. Dean didn’t know if he meant he didn’t remember, or if nothing could make up for Libertad, for the executions and conflict, for the fucking Plan that wasn’t one...

“Cas, come on,” Dean whispered - useless words, he couldn’t imagine anyone consoling him if the positions were reversed. Except… except it wasn’t fair! “Don’t do this to yourself, Cas! If they kept- kept sandpapering off the edges, like, how could you question them? How could you be
expected to do things differently? Don’t take it all on yourself, give most of it back to those assholes. How much?” he asked, looking up at Gabriel. “How much messing did they do?”

“With Cassie here? A fair amount. He’s a good soldier, mind you, he’s naturally obedient and can smite as hard as the next guy in line when you ask him to, but he’s one of those who likes to think, and Mike, well, he’s paranoid. Naomi rewrites a lot of angels on a regular basis, particularly the Seraphim, but any of my brothers with half a brain and a propensity to ask questions tend to get regular visits to her office... Some of them break, you know. After awhile. They just… lose something. Die a bit inside-”

He stopped talking as Cas slowly straightened up. Dean got to his feet too - but one look at his angel’s face banished the hope that Cas was starting to feel better. Far from it. There was a look in his eyes as he turned slowly towards Gabriel that made Dean’s mouth go dry.

“Balthazar?” Cas asked, voice as soft as the whisper of gunpowder sifting into a jar full of nails.

“Yeah, ‘fraid so. P342 is a dumping ground for angels damaged by too much tinkering. Balthazar, Samandriel, Melod - I’m not sure about Zuriel, to be honest, it’s possible he’s just being himself more than usual, but Uriel too is a casualty of-”

He was interrupted by a crunch. Cas’s fingers had crushed the thick wood of the table he’d been grasping, as easy as if it was a dry biscuit.

Gabriel gave Cas a quick measuring look and then put a hand on Dean’s shoulder. “Dean-o, maybe you should- Cassie here is kinda mad right now-”

Dean batted away Gabriel’s arm, ignoring the archangel’s attempt to get him to step back. “You think?! Hell, I’m mad!” He was, too. Furious. Damn it, he liked Balthazar, who was Cas’s brother in a way that actually counted. The last time he’d seen the angel kept playing through his mind, the light extinguishing, that apathetic dullness taking over again- hell, maybe he couldn’t snap a table in two, but he could damn well kick a leg and wish it was Naomi’s shins!

Then Cas let out a wobbly breath, anger leaking away again. Dean - who still hadn’t let go of Cas’s shoulder - gave him a rough pat. “Come on, man. You know what we humans say. Don’t get mad, get even.”

“You don’t understand.” Cas rubbed his eyes. “Everything I believed in... is a lie.”

“I just found out the head of the resistance is a celestial prick of the same kind that I’m usually fighting, and that I’m archangel chow myself. Trust me, I’m flat on my ass too.”

“...What are we going to do?”

“I... I don’t know.”

“We’re safe for now at least,” Sam pointed out timidly from behind Gabe; he’d approached once it seemed the fireworks were over, to offer support, the big-hearted brother that he was. “I... considering the alternative, can we hide out here...?”

“You’re both perfectly welcome to stay here with me for as long as you want,” Crowley said from the safe distance he was still at. He was looking from Sam to Dean and back again with a rich slow smile that had Dean going, “Nuh-uh, not gonna happen.”

“Oh, come on,” Crowley crowed. “Since I’ve started sub-letting the place, I’ve improved the comfort ten-fold.”
“Why are you even helping?” Dean challenged, giving the so-called king of this hole a baleful look.

“Out of the goodness of my-“

“Hell has lost all the heavy hitters it ever had, and my power’s pretty much the only thing giving this place any juice any more, however incompatible we are,” Gabriel interjected indifferently. “As for why Crowley will be helping us in the long run...” Crowley scowled at Gabriel’s back. “He likes breathing. It’s one of the many bad habit he’s picked up in the last three hundred years. A habit we may all have to forfeit if my brother has his way. You see, Samson,” Gabe added, reaching back and way up to ruffle Sam’s hair and ignoring the irritated growl that got him, “having you and your bro hide out in Hell is a stop-gap solution at best. You may be the perfect vessels, but Mike could make do with any truly strong person in a pinch. He’s avoided it so far because he's heard rumors of my survival, and a makeshift vessel won't give him leeway to fight me. But if he decides to take a shortcut, the few minutes he'll have before burning the poor boob out will allow him to dropkick the planet into the sun.”

“So hiding’s not an option,” Dean said, bloody-mindedly relieved he’d not have to rot in this dump for centuries with only a depressed angel and Crowley for company. And Sam, reciting the lines of the New Talmud to put himself to sleep every night. Better by far to go down swinging.

“No. But fear not!” Gabriel said brightly. “I have a clever plan.”

“No you don’t,” Crowley sniffed. “You have a ridiculously suicidal plan.”

“Most clever plans are. So, who’s in?”

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*Next chapter: Storming Paradise, Seizing Heaven*

*Humans liked to gamble. Angels, not so much.*

*Man, Cas sure looked moody tonight...*

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter sees a change of venue and things get iiiinteresting ^__^ Though it might get delayed, or the next one might, depending on how much real-life work gets dumped on me and how much sleep I forgo (kudos and comments encourage my insomnia!)

We are nearing end-game, it looks like this fic may clock in at 28 chapters, though I won't know for sure until next chapter is complete.
One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, “Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.” And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.

-- Revelations 21: 9 - 12

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They didn’t just fly straight from hell to heaven; now more than ever they had to keep their association with the resistance a secret. They hiked a whole day and a half away from hell’s gate, to an abandoned shack Colt had marked on the map. The humans rested, but just a short while. They got up with the dawn, heralded by a thin cold wind that sneaked inside the rundown cabin that was otherwise as dark as pitch.

Then Cas put a hand on each of their shoulders and wham. They found themselves on a tall flat roof bathed in golden sunshine, afternoon warmth radiating out from the nearby stone parapet. Both Winchesters staggered; the contrast was dizzying to say the least.

“Warn a guy next time,” Dean grumbled, though he’d known Cas was going to fly them here. He just didn’t like to be caught flat footed.

“Whoa...” Sam whispered.

Dean glanced over at his brother and rolled his eyes. “Here we go.”

“Huh? Ugh, Dean, come on! I know- I know the circumstances, but this is New Jerusalem! It’s the heart of humanity now. It’s... it’s beautiful.” The big goof walked to the edge of the roof, eyes wide.

P1 was laid out around them like a strange echo of the Machine: a mixture of golden stone, glass domes higher than any house in Lawrence, graceful circles and curved walls of bright green like oxidized copper looping here and there, presumably depicting the windings of the river Dean had heard about. It was as gorgeous as a glittering music box, and it looked just about as fun to live in. There were no people around, which compounded the effect. But it was Sunday, Dean remembered, and P1 was full of the kind of gents who went to church or stayed home to read their Bible. And they had three days of Sabbath - three!- to respect every type of temple here. No wonder there were a lack of saloons and dance squares and general milling about.

“Wow,” Sam said in wonder, his eyes fixed on a large rectangular building about half a mile away, gilded and shining in the rising sun. It looked to be the size of over ten regular houses, and as fancy as a wedding cake.

“That’s the Temple,” Cas said helpfully.
“I know. The third Temple, the house of the holies. I’ve seen engravings.” Because Sam looked at engravings of bloody big buildings instead of looking at engravings of girls showing their ankles, or fellas baring their chests, the weirdo.

“I wish we could go and see it together,” Cas said softly, “but-”

There was a flap behind them.

Dean force his hands to stay innocently at his sides, though he was not actually armed. Even his demon killing knife had been left behind with Benny, who would continue serving the railroad for as long as humans survived. Dean had nothing on his person that could be construed as a weapon, though he had slipped six bullets in his coat pocket on leaving, ammunition Colt had thrust into his hand ‘on the off chance’.

“Bartholomew,” Cas was unreadable as he turned around. “You didn’t need to come and meet us in person.”

“Castiel.” The sharp-dressed coat-and-tails guy looked from Cas to Sam to Dean and back again. He had three other angels standing like a phalanx behind him. The air seemed to ripple with heat waves around them. Nobody in the welcome wagon was smiling.

“Thank you for your patience,” Cas said formally. “I fulfilled my mission.”

“I can see that. Where was Sam Winchester in final?”

“I’m right here,” Sam muttered, turning his back on the splendor of P1.

“He’d been taken by the human resistance. They wanted to lure Dean and I out of Paradise for their own ends,” Cas said, stiffly but not entirely inaccurately. Gabriel had tried to coach Cas into weaving intricate lies to cover their weeks of absence. After three days of rest, planning and Gabriel getting progressively more and more frustrated and loud, it was decided that ‘simple was best’. “They hid him behind wards. Dean and I searched for weeks while evading danger ourselves. Fortunately...” Wisely Cas chose to turn his head and pass on the ball.

“They grew careless,” Sam the Advocate said smoothly with the decades of habit of using words like weapons. “They moved me around constantly and kept me blindfolded, but eventually I managed to get away from their magic and pray for deliverance. Castiel found me, punished the few who didn't run away, and now we are here.”

Bartholomew looked at each one of them in turn again and then fixed a hard stare on Cas once more. “Brother?”

“No now,” Castiel said firmly in response to whatever question had crossed the Ether. “You can debrief us all tomorrow. Sam and Dean are tired. I will not have them further harassed today, after all they’ve been through.”

“I see,” said Bart after a short pause. “Very well.”

Yeah, Dean concluded, this guy was nothing like the losers from P342. There was no way of knowing how much he doubted their story. It sounded paper-thin… but Dean was a good operator, he knew the art of the lie. Only the guilty had explanations and fabrications trotted out before they were even requested. Cas, the good soldier who’d recently had his clock cleaned by Naomi, would not think he needed to elaborate on ‘mission accomplished, guilty punished, two humans brought as ordered, sir.’ The Seraphim were loyal, they were autonomous, they had sole discretion over their missions, and you didn’t call one a liar to his face without damn good cause. All this was
what Gabe and the Free Will gang had been counting on. That and the whole notion of bringing the Michael Sword to P1 of all places being of the ‘so dumb it can’t possibly be a trick’ variety of tricks.

Cas nodded firmly as if Bartholomew’s acquiescence had never been in doubt and then looked around. “Can you or one of your flight show us to our home?”

“Your…” Bartholomew paused and looked askance.

“Home. We are permanently relocated to Paradise 1. That’s what you told me.”

“Yeah, hope you didn’t mean for us to sleep out in the street. I think there’s a decree against that,” Dean drawled.

“The mishap occurring on the very same day you were requested to come here may have derailed our quartermaster’s attention,” said Bartholomew evenly. He was not oily like Jonah. This guy was as smooth and cold as the flat of a well sharpened knife. “We did not know when to expect you.”

“We’re here now,” said Cas bluntly.

“Yes. Of course.” Bartholomew gave them a smile which he must have practiced for hours in front of a mirror. Dean wasn’t sure what effect it was supposed to convey. Maybe Bartholomew didn’t know either. “If your humans are tired, we can make arrangements for now, and later we can-”

“Oh, no need to worry about me,” Sam said as if the idea had just popped into his mind instead of being carefully planned ahead of time. “I’ll stay with friends. I’m sure they won’t mind.”

Bartholomew looked at him with a faint air of interrogation (and still no hint as to what lay behind those cold eyes).

“I have a standing invitation from Elizabeth Ruberg to stay with her and her wife whenever I can come visit P1. You’ll have heard of her, I’m sure. Head of the Advocacy League?”

“That is good to hear,” said Bartholomew, rather than ‘damn you for finding the best protection a human could wish for in this day and age.’ The League was a power not to be neglected. It wasn’t just that each and every one of them could argue until the sun went down and even an angel got bored. The members of the League communicated, they were organized, and people respected them, the good people, including many of the Sheep, and yes, even a few angels believed firmly in their cause and helped them out as much as they could. If Sam was kidnapped out of the home of the current head of the League, the kind of woe that would generate would cause unrest, worry, protests and paranoia from P1 to P419 or higher, and the angels did not want their charges disturbed, after all. They trod carefully around the Advocates.

Then again, if Mike’s plans came to fruition, even the League wouldn’t be worth more than a pinch of ash... still, it kept Sam from being an easy target. It also made Dean the likelier candidate for a Michael suit. Sam had protested like hell for every minute of the three days they’d planned this. But since he was also expected to try to rally the league in case the ultimate plan failed, and he’d be infinitely better at that than Dean, the latter had prevailed. In the end, this was Dean’s risk to take.

It was as if Barty-boy was following the same line of reasoning as he looked fully at Dean for the first time. “Will you and your companion be willing to stay in the garrison a few days, Castiel? Until we can arrange more permanent quarters?” At least he wasn’t saying ‘your human’ now.

“Oh, that sounds grand, don’t it, honey?” Dean said, looping an arm around Castiel’s waist and
leering, because his association with Cas was evidently bugging Bart (if his way of not addressing Dean directly was any indication) and hell if Dean was going to lose an opportunity of discomfiting an angel who couldn’t bust his chops in return. He thought he heard the faintest of sighs from his spouse, but hey, Cas knew who he’d married by now.

Bart’s smile became even more artificial as he gestured at the building behind them, a lot more fortified and box-like than the rest of P1. The garrison. The kind of place it was easy to enter but not so easy to leave.

“Very well. Welcome to New Jerusalem, Heart of the Holies,” said Bart formally before turning away and disappearing. His three companeros stayed behind and were undoubtedly going to stick to the pair of them like glue until Cas brought Dean to the garrison and the doors slammed shut behind them. Fine. Let them lock Dean up and relax, thinking they had at least one Winchester under their thumb.

Even if the angels snatched Sam, or managed to foil their plans and tied Dean to the stake, neither Winchester would become the new Sword. Sam’s head and soul were now as trapped as Dean’s were once more. Sam had accepted it - hell, he’d insisted. And he’d make sure the smarter people in the League were aware of what might be coming, to rally and organize the resistance to doomsday if it came to that. Gabe’s plan was a long shot at best, better have contingencies. That was what the railroad did best. Don’t give up the fight, but do learn how to duck.

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“Thank you,” Cas said, though the angel who’d walked them to their room had not said anything. Out loud, that is. The cat, one of Bart’s goons, had been as buttoned up and blank as the boring garrison corridors they’d traversed to get to here, a long wing off the main compound with a series of doors leading off into, one supposed, individual rooms.

Dean opened the door Cas pointed him to, strode in brashly- then shock sent him reeling. “What the hell?!”

It was almost identical to his room back in Lawrence.

Cas, who’d followed him in and shut the door, glanced at their surroundings and then back at Dean. “I thought it would be familiar.”

“But- but how-…”

“This room is part of the garrison. It is like a small echo of Heaven on earth. It shapes itself to my will.”

“Oh. Uh.”

“You don’t like it?” Cas didn’t sound disappointed, merely curious.

“Oh. I appreciate the effort, Cas, I really do. But it’s, uh... it’s distracting. Can you put it back to what it was before?”

“There was nothing here before.”

“Oh. Like your office. Right. Uh…”
Cas lifted a hand in a vague gesture. The walls and furniture shimmered and ran like watercolors that hadn’t yet set.

“Is this better?”

Dean stared, and then snorted with laughter. “What the bloody hell? Dude- you got something to tell me?”

”...what?”

“Where did you get this room from?” Dean did a full turn on himself, taking in the delicate furniture, the boudoir-thingie with the vanity mirror, the bed a battlefield of knitted comforters and lace. “Cas… tell me the truth. Are you really a dame in there?”

“...I’m an angel, Dean,” Cas said with that patented air of patience tinged with puzzlement that was so very familiar and endear- familiar, mainly. “This is a copy of Ethel’s room. The vessel before Jimmy’s. It was the same size as yours, it fits this space.”

Dean should find that severely more disturbing than he did. He rolled his eyes and shook his head and made vague ‘Jesus’ noises for the form, but he’d probably sprained his sense of normalcy on his wedding night, and now he just took these things in stride. It was... well, it was part and parcel of the wonderful mystery that was Cas. Dean picked up a bottle of perfume from the vanity, sniffed it. It wasn’t fake or filled with water; it smelled like grandma Millicent, what he remembered of her. Lordie...

“Did you want me to-” Cas made a gesture at the walls.

“Yeah. If you don’t mind.” It’d be like spending the night in Ellen’s room. Just plain weird - weird-uncomfortable rather than the plain weird-weird of Dean’s room materializing all around them once more.

Dean poked around curiously once things had solidified. His cedar chest of linen was there, his toiletries on the shelf with his jug and basin... Cas had spent time in his room, looking at stuff. It wasn’t an entire copy, there was just a blank wall instead of the workroom door, and no window on the other side; not surprising, this room was deep within the fortified garrison which had not looked keen on sporting windows, not that angels needed them anyway… But everything else was perfectly recreated, including the pomade Dean occasionally used for his hair. Intriguing, really... how did Cas do it? Never mind, now he’d gotten over the shock, it was familiar, which was nice, even if he would not be spending more than a few hours all told in here.

And on that thought...

“Can we talk here?” Dean asked quietly.

“Yes. I am keeping out eavesdroppers.”

“Good.” Dean relaxed and rolled his shoulders. “Into the jaws of the wolf, hm?”

Cas nodded. He’d also put away the mask. That depressed frown was back, the one he’d been sporting these past three days, ever since he’d gotten bowled over by all the doubts and the memories of blood of the past two centuries. Dean didn’t like that expression, but he was damned if he knew how to lift it.

He went to sit down on the bed. They’d explored P1 a bit, walked Sam over to Elizabeth Ruberg’s house, and had dinner with the elderly couple (it had involved chickpea stew and lots of reading of
both the New Talmud and the ancient Tanakh, and Dean had had to valiantly fight off mind-numbing boredom; all the more annoying as both Sam and Cas had listened raptly.) The sun was probably sinking outside, but Dean wasn't yet tired. It was barely noon back West...

He watched as Castiel carefully took off his duster and put it down on a nearby valet. It was obvious to humans, who knew clothes, that the coat was heavier than it should be, a lot heavier. But the linen the tablets were wrapped in had all the wards the resistance and railroad had ever invented, modified and enhanced further with knowledge from witches and demons, so they should be invisible to angels.

...'Clever plan’. That’s what Gabriel had called it. Yeah. Right. Fucking desperate was more like it. Still, so far, it was going like Gabe had said it would. Dean had not gotten jumped by Big Mike as soon as he showed up in P1, as he’d half expected. Looked like the Free Will gang was right: it took time and effort to summon down Michael. It’d never been easy for an archangel to come down and possess a mortal, even more so since he was diminished or injured from his fight with the devil (or something, Dean had stopped listening when Gabriel had mentioned the words multi-dimensional footprint.)

According to the angels in their resistance movement, events in P1 would not be precipitate, they would move at a celestial pace. It would take days, weeks, months even for Dean and Sam to be each evaluated for suitability, and sounded out for willingness to accept their future role. Funnily enough, bringing both Winchesters had not only given Cas credence, it'd given them extra breathing space. Instead of plonking desperately for Dean as the last remaining candidate, now they had a spare, and they had to make a choice. Angels hated making choices. Good. Except this meant Dean had had to bring his brother here, which was entirely Bad, but Sam had put his foot down and three days of arguing had only made him more stubborn about coming too.

It could be weeks before Big Mike was ready to come down and meet his new burro, but the Free Will gang did not have months in which to plan. No. Because tomorrow Bartholomew was going to debrief Cas, or maybe Naomi would, or somebody was going to take Dean aside and start looking at him...and then the cat would be out of the bag. They had one last night, and tomorrow morning, when they were walking through the heart of the fortified compound towards Bartholomew’s office or whoever was going to be their designated interrogator, they would have to slip away.

Because the jaws of the wolf didn’t only contain the garrison of P1, the largest celestial barracks on earth, it also held the Dome. Instead of a warehouse and an altar right beneath the God Machine, there was a round building, well defended and warded after Lucifer’s last-ditch strike against it back in the 1800s, where the original Machine resided, the one all other Machines were linked to and from which the tablets had been taken. Their objective.

It was a desperate gamble to get there with the tablets. And after they’d gotten there, it was a slim chance they could fix the God Machine - what was Dean supposed to use, one of his tiny clockwork screwdrivers? And even if, by some miracle, they managed all that... they'd be caught by Michael or the garrison or both and would almost certainly die even if the rest of the plan succeeded, and Dean wasn't putting much faith in the latter...

Gabe’s theory (theory!) was that any celestial being communing with the Machine after the Angel tablet was re-inserted would get the same whitewash job Cas had, especially if boosted and fully restored with the other tablets. He hoped (hoped!) that the angels would then help him contain Michael, stop him from leaving Heaven, which was hard enough for him to do as it were anyway. Gabriel was confident (or so he said!) that this would not lead to a new Armageddon, even if he had to intervene personally, despite what happened the last time two archangels had a dust up. Yeah. At the end of the day, Dean knew what this plan really was. Fix God and He’ll make
everything ALRIGHT. Yeesh. Dean understands the daddy issues at play here, but really? They were counting on the rebel to fix their precious Machine with the help of one lone confused Seraph? All before an archangel and the entire Heavenly Host could react and pound them into dust? It was completely daffy. Dean suspected Gabriel and Cas couldn’t see it, though, because they were convincing themselves this plan was God-sanctioned. Gabriel managing to corral all the tablets, despite having to lay low, him finding Kevin to decode them, the way the Machine had protected Dean, thrust him at Cas, and kept them both safe from interference while they made their way out into the Wilds… Cas and Gabe saw this as proof positive that the Machine was behind all of this, choosing the human and the angel like knights of yore to come and challenge the bad guy and put everything Right. Dean, for his part, was far from convinced; it was just as possible that the only thing helping the Free Will gang so far was a passel of good luck and happy coincidence. Hell, even if this was God’s plan and they pulled it off perfectly, didn’t mean this was necessarily a good thing as far as Dean was concerned. Fixing the Machine might just lead in short order to greater restrictions, more control by God and the Host and an overall worsening of the conditions in Paradise for free-thinking humans. The only reason it wasn’t the worst thing he could possibly contemplate was because the alternative was Michael blowing the whole kit and kaboodle to kingdom come. Some choice… But staying in Hell wasn’t an option, not with Mike on the warpath, so Dean was willing to stand in the line of fire and roll the dice. Humans loved to gamble. Angels, less so.

Man, Cas sure looked moody tonight...  

Dean sat himself down on the edge of the bed and looked around. This wasn’t a perfect copy of his room. Not only was he missing a window, he was missing that whole section, as the walls here angled differently. Which meant that Cas hadn’t created the couch near the window either, there wasn’t really any space for it.

...No place for an angel to sit. Huh.

“Cas.”

The angel went from staring at nothing to staring at Dean.

“Come over here. You’re not going to stand all night, it’ll get on my nerves.” And it wasn’t as if he hadn’t already spent one night in Dean’s bed before.

Cas came over without a word and without offering to create a chair out of thin air to sit on. Dean suspected his husband was distracted. He sat down and fixed burning blue eyes on his coat on the valet.

They sat in silence for awhile. Somewhere out in the gathering night, Gabe and Colt and dozens of local operatives were rallying. With them, a tiny mismatched army: a few angels who’d made it to Gabe’s side over the centuries, the remaining demons under Crowley (who’d had enough of the last apocalypse, thank you), whatever and whoever they could pull together at short notice. A lot of them were going to die tomorrow, attacking P1 in the sole hopes that this would distract the angels in the compound while Dean and Cas made their way to the Dome.

Yeah, this plan was nuts. Dean felt calm, though, even oddly lighthearted. He’d been given the option to fight, he’d be taking his chances, he’d go down swinging. There were worse ways to go. And one way or the other, it’d be over soon. Honestly, compared to living an eternity of boredom in Paradise, this might be the better option, especially if he could kick Mickey in the nuts before getting his ass evicted from the mortal coil.

But that was tomorrow. Tonight... tonight he was alone in a room with his husband, on a bed that
they would undoubtedly share if he didn’t want Cas to stand around like a scarecrow. Cas was... he was right there, his weight dipping the mattress, the soft sound of his breathing, the warmth of his body nearby... Dean cleared his throat.

“Last night on earth,” he announced (since Cas wouldn’t know what a threadbare come-hither that was.) “We’re soldiers, we’ve waited for battles at dawn before. What do you do to pass the time before the trumpet blows?” Sleep wasn’t going to come easy, that was for sure.

“I meditate on my orders and find contentment in my role,” said Cas in a voice that made it quite clear he’d be able to do that tonight right after the entire universe turned into guacamole. “Barring that, I try to empty my thoughts.”

“Wow. Fun.”

“You?”

“I get laid,” Dean said straight out, since he was pretty fucking likely to die tomorrow and damn the consequences.

“Then we will neither of us get our last wish tonight,” Cas said stonily.

Wow. Okay, way to say no, Dean thought, fighting back an instinctive surge of pique. He reminded himself of Cas’s reaction to sex when he’d mentioned it months ago, it’d made things pretty damn clear. The guy thought it was disgusting, no way around that.

Cas stirred. “I’m sorry. Your urge to enjoy the pleasures of the flesh one last time is normal. I wish it were feasible. But having you wander around looking for coupling in the present circumstances would be...unwise. I know you see that, I understand you were just ‘laying it out there’ as you say.”

“Yeah, yeah. That's okay. I’d rather stay here,” Dean said and realized this was 100% the truth. They could both be sour and depressed together, and tomorrow would come as bloody relief as a result.

“That seems a paltry substitute,” Cas said softly, gazing down at his hands folded on his lap. He almost sounded sad.

“I don’t see it that way. Spending time with, uh, someone you get along with - a bit - well, that’s pretty damn good too.”

“I am honored you think so.”

“Don’t get soppy on me now, Seraph,” Dean said archly, bumping their elbows together.

That earned him a low “hmf.”

“Yeah, it’s okay like this,” Dean said. His arm, without any form of orders, had insubordinately draped itself around Cas’s shoulders, friendly-like.

“Even if I’m an angel,” said Cas dryly, getting into the spirit of things. He’d glanced briefly at the arm, but didn’t seem to mind.

“You’re not just any angel, angel, you’re the most uptight, upright, darn-tootin’ angel of them all,” Dean said drolly. “Take Balthazar. Given the chance of a final roll in the sheets, he’d be all over it, but you? Hah, no way, no how.”
“Hm,” said Cas. Then, after five seconds of silence: “What do you mean?”

“Balthazar. He’s chased half the skirt and tail in 342, those that weren’t scared of a bit of penance if caught.” So not that many in sum total, but Balthazar didn’t seem to mind the myriad times his flirting was shot down.

There was an awesome moment of silence in which Dean could almost hear little angelic gears turning in the head close to his own; in his imagination, it sounded like the ting-tong-ting-tong of the God Machine, a teeny tiny version thereof. He wasn’t very surprised when Cas leaned away from him slightly, pulling against the arm around his shoulders to turn and examine Dean’s face, a very obvious question about to pour forth like an awkward rainbow.

“Not me,” Dean snorted, trying not to laugh. “Me and Baz aren’t what you’d call compatible that way.”

“I knew that,” Cas said weakly. Dean had to swallow another laugh at the obvious relief the words belied.

“You should know that, after taking a trip through the ol’ Dean homestead,” Dean pointed out without rancor, tapping his forehead with his free hand.

“I didn’t go invading your privacy,” Cas said reprovingly. “I focused on the night we were attacked, not on your past indiscretions.”

“Ooooh, indiscretions, is it? Hah.”

“Sorry. That was probably not the right term.” Poor angel looked a tad constipated. “I didn’t need to look to know you would not be involved with an angel, at any rate. You despise our species.” His tone plainly added, ‘and I don’t blame you.’

“Well, I can quite honestly say I’ve never made a pass at an angel before tonight. Figures the one time I’d try, it’d be an immediate tumble from the saddle.”

”...Pass?” Cas’s face fell into a frown. “Saddle?”

“S’all good, Cas, don’t worry about it.” Dean patted the far shoulder against which his hand was resting.

Cas did the thing again, where he leaned back to scrutinize Dean’s face.

“You... meant earlier - with your wish for copulation - you meant with another human. Right...?”

“Or with an angel who’s not losing his rag at the idea.’

Blue eyes widened, but Dean just grinned, because there was massive surprise there, a bit of concern, but no disgust or panic - and even if there had been, it’d still be better than the previous ’abandon all hope’ moodiness.

“...With me?”

“That was actually what I was angling for from the beginning. Doofus.”

“...Oh. I am not very good at picking up on innuendo.”

“I should have realized that. But I didn’t think you’d be that keen. I mean, you looked properly miffed at the notion before… and it’s breaking the rules.”
“Really? The rules? You are going to tell me about the rules, Dean Winchester?” That was a nice ragged grin on that really nice mouth.

“Gotta know ‘em to break ‘em.”

“Hm. I am going to do that tomorrow anyway. I can break a small one tonight, I think.”

Dean’s heart rate picked up right on cue, though he played it suave. “Oh really?”

“You are about to give your body and soul to a cause which should rightfully belong to angels,” said Cas with his usual straight-up intensity. “It seems petty to resent giving you something so small tonight.”

“Tch, I don’t want you to be my martyr, Cas. The point of this is a fun activity for two people who like each other.”

“Then that seems even more appropriate,” Cas answered softly, holding Dean’s gaze. Then he added at normal volume. “I am not sure about fun, I don’t know how my vessel will react - but if Balthazar does it, as you suggested, it will be neither difficult nor onerous, because I know how that being’s mind works.” A faint confusion then crinkled Cas’s brow as his gaze dropped from Dean’s face to his open collar, his chest and then his lap (direct, as per usual, heh.) “I know how this is done in theory, but this is very far outside my area of expertise. I don’t even know where to start.”

Dean leaned forward slowly, closing half the number of inches between them. “Oh, for that, have no fear. This is my dance reel. I’m something of an expert.”

His presumptuousness earned him a faint huff. Cas’s gaze dropped to where Dean’s fingers were toying with the edges of his cravat. There was no hesitation in his expression. “Then I am in your hands.”

“Oh buddy, you did not just say that.”

“I apparently did.” Cas’s ironic half smile faded into something softer, more tender. “If this is an acceptable substitute for human companionship?”

“Yeah.” Dean’s voice dropped and he pressed his forehead against Cas’s, and they breathed the same air while a bit of unspoken shit happened, just to be sure they both knew what was what, without having to say anything embarrassing. “Yeah. Reckon you’ll do.”

The lips crooked upwards again in humour. Dean feathered a kiss at the juncture of that smile, caught the faint exhalation it earned him on his own mouth.

“You’ll tell me. Right?” Dean whispered before trailing a kiss to a faint dimple he’d been way too aware of for way too long to pretend this was all just spur of the moment and he’d never ever thought of his husband in this context before. “If you start feeling, I don't know, uncomfortable with what we’re doing. You can-”

“You won’t make me uncomfortable.” The words caressed his lips, made them even more sensitive.

“Huh-uh. You’ll tell me anyway. Right?”

“Yes, Dean.”
Shivers ran from his mouth down his back and all the way down to his prick, which apparently liked those words, especially right now and in that tone of voice. Dean swallowed convulsively.

“I mean it, Cas.” At this point Dean suspected this was more an admonition to himself and his pecker to not go overboard and miss any signs of distress. “This is all new and-“

He strangled himself when Cas reached up and put hands on either side of Dean’s face - so gentle. When Cas leaned forward in turn to drop a light kiss on the crook of Dean’s lips, as he’d just done, the ensuing shiver of sensation was like the tingle he’d felt when spinning and laughing beneath the clouds of a storm.

“Okay,” Dean croaked, “we’re all onboard.” Why was he still talking? Why was the touch on his cheek making him blush like a debutante? Oh- oh right, it reminded him of-

“Why were you so surprised that I wanted to... um... do this with you? Didn’t you see into my head the other day?”

Cas had re-applied the same kiss, as if curious about the sensation. The question made him pause and lean back a tad (and made a part of Dean kick himself for derailing the moment.)

“See? See what?” Cas asked, also whispering, the rumbling voice low, and intimate, and what was the question…?

“Er. When you looked in my head. Even when I was thinking about that night you got hurt, I... Er. You know?”

Cas tilted his head to one side - Dean actually shuddered under the sudden onslaught of many emotions - and looked puzzled. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“You. Um. That night. Even though you were injured, well, I rather liked seeing you without your shirt on.”

“Yes.”

A pause.

Cas stared at him and Dean stared back. Apparently Cas had witnessed Dean’s feelings but not understood their implication as they related to himself. Dean opened his mouth-

Words failed him when Cas, with a sudden air of purpose, removed his hands from Dean's face, reached up and smoothly pulled off his ever-present cravat (the knot suddenly and mysteriously absent) and then quickly undid his buttons and shrugged out of both his suit and shirt in one improbably swift movement.

Dean’s mouth was moving but was too dry to let any word escape.

Cas glanced down at his chest and then up at Dean’s face without a single remote hint of embarrassment or shyness. In fact, the latter’s familiarity with the angel’s small tells informed him Cas was both intrigued and rather pleased with the effect his initiative had gotten him.

“Ummm…. You will... seriously, you will tell me if I, uh... do anything you...” How come the complete virgin was considerably less intimidated right now than the expert?

“Yes, Dean.”
“Right,” Dean croaked. His palms were numb and prickling as if they were encased in ice, and that well-built chest a few inches away was the only source of warmth left in the world.

Cas’s eyes dropped to Dean’s collar with an intensity that was well nigh going to set the cloth on fire in a second. He lifted his hands and hovered his fingers an inch from Dean’s neck. “May I?”

“Er, yeah, yeah, sure, you, er… You know, I’m normally a lot more smooth than this.”

“Yes, Dean.”

“Great, now you’re making fun of me,” Dean huffed drolly, watching fingers undo his shirt buttons.

“Of course not, Dean.”

“Uh-huh.” Dean finally shook himself and slipped his shirt off, Cas’s fingers chasing the cloth as it ran away from him and then smoothing back down Dean’s chest, head tilted curiously and with no trace of hesitation, not that Dean was surprised any more. Dean and his reputation had attracted a few virgins in his day; based on past experience, he’d assumed this would end up being embarrassing, quick and sticky in short order, but he’d forgotten to factor the angel into the equation. Who knew what Cas was going to get out of it, but Dean wasn't going to worry about that, he was going to throw out all assumptions, he was going to approach this like they were both grownups who knew what they were doing, he was going to make love to his husband on their belated honeymoon, and if this ended prematurely, or sideways, he’d deal with it, and he doubted Cas would mind either way.

He leaned in gently and slowly, to avoid dislodging the fingers exploring his chest, and kissed the mouth still angled in that curious tilt.

“Part your lips. Just a bit,” he whispered, and deepened the kiss when Cas complied. There was not the faintest twitch in the hands running over his abdomen and sides, no recoil. Cas’s eyes were blue and open and trusting, from what Dean could see from his very foreshortened angle. Dean kept on kissing and tonguing as he - finally! - got his hands on those wide shoulders, the corded arms… he explored for awhile. Cas finally got the idea and responded to the kiss, tongue caressing his. He tasted… different, he tasted like nobody else Dean had ever kissed before, no hints of spices or herbs or past meals, but a faint… something, almost more like a tingle that could have been entirely in Dean’s feverish imagination, reminding him of that taste in the air right after lightning had struck…

Dean could have spent all night in the absorbing endeavor of kissing and caressing Cas, but things were getting a bit tight and uncomfortable south of the border. Anyway he did have to rest at some point, and this was, well, this was almost certainly their last night, there wasn’t going to be another opportunity to start simple and elaborate later, so he was going to go as far as he could and Cas would let him, damn the dawn and the devil take regrets.

He toed off his boots, pulled off his belt, unbuttoned his fly with some relief, but paused with his pants slipped halfway down his thighs. He broke the kiss that had been lingering for the past few minutes, to hop and half roll over to the head of the bed. His questing fingers found the small pot he kept discreetly stowed under there. Fortunately Cas had been diligent in his recreation. When Dean thumbed off the cork stopper, it smelled the same as usual, corn oil with a hint of mint. He wondered when Cas had seen this… then realized that, angel perceptions being what they were, he’d probably just sensed it, the same way he’d sensed that keg of moonshine in the cellar and the loose tiles he’d fixed on the roof one day.
Cas’s eyes had been running over the revealed flare of Dean’s hipbone, the fine hairs around his pubis, the hard lines of the cock rearing from the pants, as if they were all worthy of exactly the same level of keen interest. Then his gaze settled on the pot in Dean’s hand. He stared at it and his brows went up in sudden understanding.

“Oh. That is what that is for. I had wondered why there were traces of fecal matter in there.”

“Hmm-hmm,” Dean hummed, squirming back towards his previous position on the bed. “Say, Cas, got your angel blade handy?”

Cas’s eyes darted around the room in sudden alarm and when Dean glanced down, the blade was in his husband’s hands without any sign of how it’d gotten there. “Yes. Why?”

“The rosewater romance is still twitching, you might just go ahead and finish it off.” Dean dropped the once-more-corked pot on the bed and finished hauling off his pants, socks and undergarments all in one go.

“What?”

“Don’t worry, you and I never needed it, we always said stuff straight up and honest.” Dean dropped a kiss on the puzzled crook of Cas’s brow, the tip of his nose, the mouth open around a possible question, the sharp cut of Cas’s collarbone. He ran palms down the muscles of the strong arms, the skin peppered with dark hair, the beautiful, beautiful fingers. He plucked the blade from them and tossed it to the far side of the bed, then went for Cas’s belt. He kissed down Cas’s side, lingered on the bud of a nipple as he went for the buttons of Cas’s fly. Cas didn’t react, didn’t jump when Dean gently pinched the nub between his teeth, but when Dean glanced up, there were those blue eyes devouring his face with their usual penetrating stare, the same leveled at him when he cooked, when he did some clever spellwork out in the Wilds, when he slept, when he argued, when he’d reached out down in hell and let Cas in.

Still looking at his husband’s face, Dean eased down to his knees between Cas’s legs. He teased at the pants, pulling down slowly, tugging a little against Cas’s weight when he got to where they were pinned to the covers- then groped wildly and snapped his head down to stare. The cloth beneath his fingers had abruptly vanished. Cas was sitting naked on the edge of the bed as if he did this all day long, his pants nowhere to be seen.

“Cheater,” Dean huffed tenderly, looking up. Cas stopped staring at Dean to turn that gunsight of a scrutiny onto his own crotch. The sudden way he focused there seemed to indicate he was both surprised and somewhat pleased to see the dick nestled in the wiry black hair, stiffened and half erect.

“Everything seems to be functional,” said Dean dryly. He leaned forward slowly and gave the swelling flesh a light kiss, then applied a longer, trailing wet one, and grinned at the twitch beneath his lips. He looked up. “Still doing okay?”

Cas stared at him as if Dean had spoken Enochian backwards, and then blinked and nodded vigorously after decoding the question.

“Alrighty then.” Dean wrapped his grin around the tip of his spouse’s cock, tongue chasing a hint of that taste of lightning and light that he'd found in Cas's mouth. Cas, completely ignorant of human conventions, particularly of the bedroom variety, didn’t make appreciative noises or encouragement or anything one might expect, but neither did he protest, and when Dean glanced up, it was to meet that blue-eyed gaze as bright as the noonday sun, watching him raptly. That and the further swell beneath his tongue and fingers suggested there was the opposite of any problem or
objection here. Good. He reached for one of Cas’s hands, quiescent on the coverlet, and
couraged it to rest on his head. Cas touched him with the same gentleness as before, as if Dean
was something precious and fragile. Dean liked it a bit rough, but didn’t mind this either… He
shifted a bit on his knees, free fingers trailing over his own growing erection which was starting to
quiver and beg for a stroke. A few quick tugs was all he allowed. He wasn’t sure how Cas would
react to what was going to follow; he doubted his husband would be scared off at this point, but
maybe he shouldn’t delay in getting on to the next stage, he wasn’t sure what Cas’s endurance
would be like, it being completely untested and all. He reached blind for the pot of oily mixture
while he let his tongue and lips and teeth continue to play.

Finally his nails and irritated fingers managed to flip the cork off the pot again, and scoop up some
of the oil. He brought it to his own ass and started to get ready at top speed. Sure, he’d love to go
slow, but the clock - and possibly Cas’s staying power - might not cooperate, and Dean oh, Dean
knew what he wanted. Even if it turned out it was only going to last a few seconds and be over real
quick, he wanted Cas in him like he had never wanted someone in him before.

“Scooch back a bit,” he whispered, poking Cas in the side while his other fingers still dipped and
stretched and scissored and pulled - there was a bit of stinging and some protest from his ass which
hadn’t seen that much action in the past few months, but Dean didn’t care, in fact the thought of
Cas fitting in him tight like a large fist in a glove drove shudders like a herd of wild horses
stampeding up his spine.

Cas sat back a few inches until the back of his knees touched the bed, feet still on the floor; they
would give him some traction to thrust upward later if he felt like participating, but with Dean on
top, the human would have things entirely in his own hands if the angel preferred to stay passive.
Dean went for the pot again, made sure Cas was slicked up properly because Dean had to be able
to walk, run and fight tomorrow and all. Cas still looked really intrigued and whole-heartedly
absorbed by all of this. Dean had the impression his husband hadn’t blinked once in the past ten
minutes.

“You, uh, you mentioned you knew how this was done in theory, right?”

Once more that singular pause of an angel reorienting his thoughts towards the ability to speak.

“Yes, in my time watching humanity, I have seen-”

“All good then,” Dean interrupted, clean hand over Cas’s mouth because there really wasn’t much
that could follow that statement that was going to improve on ‘yes’, and quite a lot that was going
to have the opposite effect.

Despite every intention of ignoring the follow-through thoughts (- how long had Cas watched
humanity? Since the beginning of time? Had he actually been at Sodom and Gomorrah, say?),
Dean was distracted enough where he didn’t quite think the next part through. He clambered up to
kneel on the edge of the bed, straddling Cas’s lap, hands pushing down on Cas’s shoulders,
unthinkingly expecting his greater weight to push Cas to lie back down on the mattress. And when
his angel sat there unmoving instead, as solid as the proverbial rock of ages, Dean’s slippery hand
skidded off skin, his leg caught in rumpled cover, and he almost went tumbling backwards off the
bed.

He would have, but Cas reached up, fast as a thought, and caught him, hands firm behind his back,
holding him steady at a bit of an angle in a way that would have been completely impossible to
maintain for mere human muscles.

“Gur,” Dean said, or at least that is what he would remember saying later.
“Dean?” Cas asked, concern imprinted on his face. “Are you alright?”

“M’fine,” Dean croaked, wrestling with the overwhelming wave of desire that was crashing through his body and wringing the very breath from his lungs. He—… he was a big guy, well-muscled in this world where most people no longer had to work or fight. He’d always been stronger than any of his lovers, it was so obvious he’d never even thought about it anymore, it was just a thing; if he ever had thought about it, he would have said he liked being able to pick someone up and hold them, show off his hard-earned strength, cherish them and— it’d never occurred to him he might like it the other way around. Like it a lot. Way ‘a lot’. Those beautiful hands locked on his back, holding him up like he was as light as a damsel - oddly enough, something only an angel could do…

“Keep holding me up,” he panted out quick and sharp, and bridled Cas’s mouth with a searing kiss before the angel could ask any questions that Dean would be very embarrassed to answer. Still kissing his husband frantically, he squirmed his bent knees forward so he could lean back a bit while still being able to lift himself up over Cas’s lap a bit - Cas’s hands not giving the slightest inch, as firm as if Dean was lying on a bed. Dean’s own muscles had locked to help, instinctively, but slowly his back loosened as he found a good angle to let himself relax into that hold, draped over Cas’s solid shoulders, hips angled in, Cas’s hard cock bumping against his inner thigh, his balls, then his ass cheek, then—… it took him a few frantic seconds to find the correct approach, and his brain was still sending warnings that this angle was precarious as shit, but Dean was no longer listening to that particular organ. His body trusted Cas to stop him from tumbling backwards and braining himself on the floor, his body and everything else trusted Cas to hold him tight.

He even relinquished his own grip, reaching back with one hand to hold Cas’s bobbing erection still until he could— oh damn - he could sink onto it. Then Dean flexed his thigh muscles and clung to Cas’s shoulders again to avoid going down too fast, and also to avoid losing it even faster. Goddamn- hell- goddamn fuck this was it this was what he’d wanted, this fine body with that fresh scent unpolluted by sweat, the arms that could be so very gentle and that were also so very, very strong, and that hard length slowly spearing into him, oh goddamn!

He’d probably said some of that out loud. At least the swearing. Because Cas said, “Dean?” in somewhat concerned tones (but otherwise not sounding breathless for a bent penny.)

“S’okay,” Dean whispered - possibly whimpered as pleasure rippled up and down his body. “‘s’fine, just hold on.”

This was an unusual angle, he couldn’t get the deepest penetration like this, and instead of pleasing him deep inside, it teased and spooled the delight and the desire out like a guy-line, ratcheting up a little at a time the more Dean eased down and relaxed into the hold. His own strength was rising to the challenge, as his legs moved him up and down, sinking him a little deeper each time, letting Cas in a bit more each time, a little bit more, a little further into Dean, a little further… There, that rhythm, that was good, that was- it was building pressure up inside him, but slowly, dragging out the feelings mercilessly. He had this much agency and no more, he could only go back and forth on Cas’s cock while the pleasure gathered inside him like stormclouds rushing together from a long way off and far overhead. His own prick was hard and leaking between them, where it bumped against his belly, and brushed against Cas’s hard stomach when Dean leaned forward to catch another kiss, another taste of lightning…

“Cas—”

- he remembered the air so heavy and quiet right before the storm, as if everything was closer and more vibrant and real, and small things, like barriers and inhibitions and long-held lies, were twigs
to be blown away-

A little slip of his sweat-soaked arms sank him just a bit deeper and Dean cried out, a bitten off noise he buried in Cas’s neck. He heard a puff of air near his ear.

“A- ah! H-hold me!”

Hands on his back tightened a fraction.

Flash of Cas’s face, blue eyes on him, watching-

“-just- just like- like that-”

Cas shifted. Just a bit. Not a flinch or a sign of weakness; he leaned back an inch to better accommodate Dean’s canted body - sending fireworks like a dozen railroad signals rocketing up to Dean’s inner sky. Cas was- was reading his body language, figuring out how to help spool out that pleasure even further, goddamn this was good-

Dean’s feelings were blowing through him too, finding no more resistance, overlaying the pleasure of the body with a deep contentment of the soul. This - this was where he belonged, this- this was something he’d wanted all- all his life.

“Just- hold- hold me-”

“Always,” Cas whispered near his ear.

That inner pressure was peaking, a warning crackle of lightning ran up Dean’s spine - no no no not yet - they only had tonight - never wanted this to end- never wanted to lose Cas deep inside him like that-

Cas deep inside him-

His nerves were cranked to the breaking point, the pleasure gilded by the burn of his thigh muscles, the stretch of his ass around that rock-hard cock, the strength of the hold on his back, the fingers still somehow so gentle - not gripping - firm but gentle-

One hand slipped and flailed at Cas’s shoulder, the other was on his own erection as the growing pressure touched off every point of his body with flashes of pleasure and lightning and pleasure - oh! Damn!

… Dean breathed deep (and rather wobbly), nose pressed against warm skin. Yeah, had he really been worried about Cas’s endurance here? His mighty angel was still hard as an oak within him, while Dean had just turned to boneless soup ready to trickle off Cas’s lap - or he would have, but Cas had leaned back another inch or two, holding an impossible angle that would make a human’s stomach muscles tie themselves into knots, if his spine didn’t do so first, all so he could cradle Dean, hold him safe and keep the sweat-bedraggled limp rag of a human husband from sliding off onto the floor. Dean lifted his head and focused his eyes…

… to find Cas, lips parted, cheeks flushed, staring at him as if he were the most extraordinary thing in all of creation.

“Whew,” said Dean, very intelligently. Apparently his brain was now as wrecked as the rest of him.

“...Can I do that?” Castiel asked in something like fascination.

Dean turned that question one way, then another. “Er, you mean... finish? Uh, yeah. If you want.”
Cas’s eyes widened. He looked stunned at the very idea. And Dean had a sudden horrible premonition that the next words out of Cas’s mouth were going to be, ‘great, how do I do that?’ and Dean was even more buggered than at present if he knew how an angel was going to get his jollies if that ride hadn’t done the trick.

But Dean, who spat in the Host’s eye every Visiting Day, who beheaded Levis and stabbed Croats and bothered angels high and low, was never one to back down from a challenge. He righted himself, trying to wiggle his knees into a better position so he could climb off Cas’s lap and see if hands and a bit of vocal encouragement might not do the trick- and if that didn’t, he’d find something else! He-

Cas breathed in sharp, and his hands held Dean still, then slowly pressed him down again. Dean crooked an eyebrow down at his husband. Had he seen a - a weird flash of brighter blue deep in those so-blue eyes? The hands on his back relaxed, just a breadth - and then pressed him again. Cas’s eyes widened.

Dean moved against the mitts holding him steady still - and goddamn but his spent cock tried valiantly to twitch and rally when those strong hands let him flex out and then brought him back down again, firm and demanding, still gentle and guiding.

Right, this could work. Dean felt a smirk he would not have allowed himself with a virgin twist his mouth up sideways as he lifted up sharply - and let Cas pull him down just as smart.

“This working for you, angel?” he whispered, and chuckled when he got a serious and emphatic nod in return. “Alrighty then…”

He’d felt a bit mortified earlier that he’d lost it so fast and thoroughly, not to mention the whys and wherefores of having been so turned on, but now Dean was right behind that chain of events, because this meant he had his control back. He could watch, his eyes clear and wide open and catching every nuance of pleasure crossing his husband’s face as Cas and he moved together.

“That’s it, angel… that’s it, sweetheart… you can feel it, can’t you... ” The tiny flickers of expression, the way Cas’s lips parted, were way too absorbing to worry overly much about what was coming out of his own mouth at present, Dean decided.

The mess of fluids coating Dean’s stomach and groin was cooling, and he really couldn’t care. Not when he thought of Cas’s seed joining his, dripping out- it was becoming his new holy mission in life to see that happen. To rip that out of his angel and mingle them together.

“In me. I want you in me. That’s the way… just need to let it build… right here…”

Dean reached back - hell if Cas was going to let him fall now, or go anywhere, those hands were bringing him up and down without much of his assistance now, seeking, demanding. Dean reached down and around and found where Cas was thrusting into him, the wet slippery curve of his hard prick, the junction beneath, the sensitive skin, the balls hardening and tightening- Cas made a sound, punched out and then wobbly on the inhale.

Dean leaned in for a kiss, savage and sloppy, because that burning blue gaze ever-widening felt like staring straight into the sun. But he still ripped his head back to stare when he felt the fingers on his back stiffen, convulse, and Cas made the same noise again, small and tight.

He watched in awe as Cas threw back his head, lost that insane focus of his, lost everything for a moment melting into rapture… The body beneath his bucked and pulsed, Dean could feel it in every inch of skin that connected them, against his muscles and deep inside, deep, deep, a warm
Dean suspected he said something at that juncture - oh wow or something equally stunned and stupid that he would force himself to forget later because it’d make him wince with embarrassment (and also get him inappropriately hard.)

Cas crumpled back onto the bed, and Dean had to chuckle at the blank and blissed out look on his husband’s face. Hrmmmm, looks like they had both gotten their last wish tonight. Dean had gotten laid like never before, and Cas was certainly thinking of nothing right now, or at least nothing ominous or heavy.

Dean pulled away, a little regretfully, ignoring muscles that were battling the warmth and residual pleasure to complain about the unexpected work he’d just put them through. He sank down next to Cas and relaxed against the covers for an instant, ignoring the way both their bodies were still dangling half off the bed. His finger idly traced sigils, meaningless and kind, on his husband’s chest. His eyes closed of themselves. But then he shook his head.

“Better get under the covers. One of us here does need to sleep and wake up without a crick in his back.” His body still felt boneless, he gave himself good odds that he’d drop off as soon as his head hit the pillow.

Cas made a vague noise of assent, and then there was a weird kind of flutter.

Dean blinked rapidly. He was still curled up against Cas’s side, but they were now laying in the bed instead of across it lengthwise, and under the sheets.

“Uh…”

“I hope that was permissible,” Cas murmured; he was still holding Dean loosely, his left arm draped around Dean’s waist, hand resting on his thigh, and his eyes were shut.

“Shortcut. No problem.” Entire sentences were too hard to formulate. Dean felt warm and content… and also quite dry and clean all of a sudden. He had a feeling the angel had done something a little more than tuck him in. Oh well, he didn’t feel like rinsing off, he might not even have any water in the basin and jug over there, and he had no desire to wake up crusty tomorrow morning.

The sheets felt crisp and clean against his warm, loosened body. Real crisp. Dean’s eyes slid open to see embroidery on the hem near his nose.

“Uh… why are these sheets…?”

“Hm?”

“Right. These are the sheets I had on the bed last time you were in my room. When I got those bullets out of your back. That’s the memory you used to build all this when you walked in here.” Cas made a noise of assent.

“Ah. Apt.”

“Why…?” Cas asked, then cracked open an eye to see why Dean was chortling to himself.

“Hm. Never mind.”
Even though he still seemed puzzled, the corners of Cas’s mouth twitched up, echoing Dean’s chuckles, until they were grinning at each other for no reason, or for all the reasons, perhaps, and for nothing that needed to be brought up now.

A hand brushed Dean’s mouth, his chin. The smile on his husband’s face slipped, became deeper, more tender.

“You need to sleep.”

“Yup.”

“... Are you worried about tomorrow?”

“Scared, you mean?” Dean asked with a hint of irony. “I know the odds. But no. No fears. And no regrets.”

Not quite true, he had some, but none that haunted him here tonight, in the warmth of Cas’s arms as he burrowed into the fold, slipped one leg over a strong thigh, and tied them together like a lover’s knot. “Don’t worry about me, angel,” he whispered against the skin of Cas’s shoulder. “And don’t hesitate tomorrow, whatever happens. Remember, this is my choice, I’m doing what I wanted to do all along: go down fighting.”

A faint sigh brushed his hair, but Cas would not deny him this, Dean knew it.

“Besides, if this really is my last night on earth, consider that I got to spend it deflowering an angel. Talk about going out with a bang.”

Cas let out a huff like a chuckle against Dean’s forehead and pulled him close, putting an end to any conversation.

Dean’s eyelids drooped. Faint scents teased his nose… Cas smelled a bit like him now, a hint of sweat, a fair amount of sex. At the back of it all was that breath of… of fresh air, that crisp clean brilliant feel that there’d been in the air right after the storm. Dean breathed in deep and closed his eyes, turning his gaze inwards at last. Finally facing those feelings that’d been loosed all at once while their bodies rutted and their smiles echoed each other and their emotions meshed.

Yeah, no point in denying it. Dean had found his soulmate, and was fast and firmly in love with him.

It felt irrational, especially for a hard-bitten caballero who did not believe in love at first sight, or even second or third. Because really, they’d not know each other all that long when all was said and done, and they were so very different, and still virtually strangers to each other on some fronts (though they’d had one hell of an introduction in one area tonight! Woooheee…)

But the scant three months they’d lived together didn’t feature in the matter, neither did past enmity or mistakes, different beliefs and approaches. Because they had managed to connect, despite everything. Dean had seen into the maze of light inside Cas’s borrowed skin. And every thing he’d found there seemed to have been a key designed for a specific lock within Dean’s soul, or a door in Cas that Dean alone was allowed to open. They had found common ground, they had built the bridge between them, they’d taken a few steps along its span… He wasn’t sure how Cas himself saw matters, and it didn’t really matter either, not to Dean’s feelings. Dean had no doubts about his husband now, Cas’s feelings were there, and were genuine, but they were also angelic, which means that whatever Dean felt, Cas was probably heading that way too but approaching from the opposite direction. Love… Cas loved everybody in a way, his Father, his brothers, the
cantankerous human husband he’d been saddled with and whom he had treated from the start with such circumspection and honesty… Cas loved the whole of humanity enough to stand up and die to try to save them tomorrow. The exact label on the feelings he had for Dean probably didn’t matter any more than mattered the eyeblink of time Cas had known Dean in his otherwise tranquil billion-years existence.

Dean knew, to the bottom of his being, that if they had had the long life together that they were meant to have, then every new and fascinating thing he’d find out about Cas would make its way into his heart and soul, and vice versa. Up to and including the spectacular fights they would still have, since they were both as stubborn and ornery as a couple of tom cats, soulmate stuff notwithstanding. But even those arguments would have gotten them closer once the dust settled, he was sure.

All these places in Dean’s soul that were just waiting for someone to touch them…but they were probably going to die tomorrow, and so… so at least they’d had tonight. Death, when it came, would hopefully be final. But it couldn’t take that. No, it could never take that.

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Next Chapter: Inside Out

Dean fitted the black cavalry hat on his head, adjusted the angle, then winked at his angel. All ready to sin.

Chapter End Notes

Looong chapter reviewed at the 11th hour, so typo spotting welcome. Next chapter might be delayed a week, but I'm glad I got this one out, the guys (and we) have waited long enough ^_^
The fourth angel poured out his bowl on the sun, and the sun was allowed to scorch people with fire. They were seared by the intense heat and they cursed the name of God, who had control over these plagues, but they refused to repent and glorify him.

-- Revelation 16:8-9

Dean took out the few things he needed from his pack and then left the latter abandoned on the floor. So far, the day was going exactly as planned. An angel had rapped on the door thirty minutes ago - waking Dean up from a deep pleasant slumber and interrupting Cas from his occupation of, it seemed, staring at Dean’s face intently all night long. Bartholomew wanted to see them. Dean noted that Bartie had sent someone rather than summon Cas mentally or send half a dozen celestial toughs; hopefully their ruse still held and the angels were trying hard to be polite with the muck-ridden human in the hopes he would quickly accept to become the Michael Sword.

The wallet with the daguerreotypes of his family was in his interior pocket, the runed gloves were pulled onto his hands, small tools were squirreled about his person, Colt’s bullets were in the warded bandoleer beneath his canvas jacket, he had all he needed. Dean fitted the black cavalry hat on his head, adjusted the angle, then winked at his angel. All ready to sin.

They barely made it out of the guest wing before the angel who had been politely guiding them abruptly disappeared. Cas lifted his head like a hound scenting the wind.

“It’s started.”

Dean cocked an ear, but he couldn’t hear anything. He’d expected an explosion or some form of perceivable attack. But if Cas said Gabe had just kicked down the front gate and started his ruckus, Dean would believe him.

Hallway after empty hallway followed, broken up by the occasional deserted room. This place was huge compared to P342’s tiny lil’ garrison, and this section was presumably meant only for angels, no furniture or accommodations for humans needed. They didn’t see a single soul, or any trace of angels either, presumably the distraction was working. They forced themselves to walk normally anyway; their best cover was to maintain the illusion of collaboration.

Then they reached a junction, and the way Cas stopped and looked over his shoulder said that the illusion was about to be broken.

“This it?” Dean guessed, tilting his chin at the perfectly innocuous door that looked no different than any other.

Cas nodded succinctly.

“Okay then, here goes nothing.”

Still walking normally, just in case, they made their way through the door. The hallways were still the same - hell, exactly identical, angels really had no imagination. But now they’d gone past the
area where Bart and his surveillance arm lurked, and their presence here, if challenged, would not be so easy to explain.

The walls were white and, well, odd; there was no visible light source, no candles, no kerosene lanterns, no little fairy lights the angels preferred, it was as if the walls themselves were glowing and illuminating the space. This place felt more alien than the angel barracks Dean was familiar with, and considerably less inviting to humans. Now each hallway they traversed ended in a closed door. The way Cas put a hand on the surface before opening them suggested they were locked, and not just with a key.

“How far?” Dean whispered - angel senses being what they were, he didn’t need to keep his voice down, his presence alone would be enough to alert any celestial being paying attention, but he couldn’t help himself. This alien building made him feel like an unwelcome intruder, like a roach in the foundation.

“Only a few-”

Cas stopped. They were halfway down a corridor ending in a four way junction by the looks of it. Voices, loud, abrupt and in mid-argument, suggested someone had just opened a door into a hallway at right angle to this one.

“-not the Plan!” a woman had just said, voice ringing clear as a bell.

“It obviously is.”

That cold, controlled purr… Dean went rigid. That had sounded like Bartholomew. What was that bastard doing here?! He was supposed to be organizing the defense against the invasion which Dean had to hope to hell was manifesting somewhere at the gates of New Jerusalem.

“He’s going to kill all the humans!” the woman said, a stringent protest.

“He’ll send them to their eternal reward,” Bart corrected.

If Dean wasn’t in love with an angel and used to listening to those tiny hints in his voice, he’d have missed the faint inflection there, the one that clearly tagged on ‘not that they’re worth it.’ Even if he’d missed it, the flare of Cas’s nostrils would have given it away.

“This is not our Father’s plan!” the woman insisted.

“You are not privy to it, only his favored son is now. We owe him our obedience. Come,” Bart added, interrupting whatever the woman was about to counter with, “it will be tidier. You like that too. Move along, do not disgrace yourself further.”

A scuffle of footsteps - shit! They were coming this way!

Cas stiffened. He must have seen their bind as quickly as Dean. The voices were close, and there were no doors nearby to duck into, no place to hide. Dean wasn’t sure they could make their way backward fast enough, or if they could afford a pause in their forward momentum, not with Bart actually here and not as distracted by Gabe’s antics as he should be. Which meant-

He and Cas both arrived at the same conclusion together. Cas abruptly vanished, and Dean hurled himself towards the crossroad a few feet away. Better to get the jump on the angels than get spotted from a distance and let them raise the alarm.

There were four of them! Shit! The angels had been focused on whatever it was they were doing or
arguing about, they lost a second in blank astonishment as the human interloper thundered around the corner and charged at them. Then it was on. Dean caught an instinctive punch on his sigiled gloves and shoved the angel back - right into Cas who had flown in on cue, blade out. Then Dean dodged a knife thrust from a startled chicken hawk to his left. Bart was there too, but he was wrestling with the woman who, a second before, was being strong armed along the hallway by Bart’s two goons. She had seized her moment and turned on him, wrestling with him and evening the odds for a few precious seconds.

Cas dispatched the second angel and hesitated before the tableau. Bart, dagger raised, was trying to bring it down on the unarmed woman who was holding back his blow with both hands. Dean for his part, didn’t pause; he went scrambling after the blade that’d fallen from one of Cas’s kills, then he threw himself at Bart and skewered him straight through the back. The angel hadn’t even looked his way, his face twisted in a tight snarl of hate that Dean had never expected to see on celestial features. Apparently that chick must have really wound him up.

Bart stiffened. Light like trapped lightning crackled through his frame, spilled from his eyes and mouth, thundered in his death rattle… then he fell limp to the ground. A flash so bright it blinded Dean a moment, and made the luminescent white walls look gray by contrast. When he blinked them back to their normal pearlescent white, they were marred with the charred marks of wings.

Also, Cas had the woman by the throat and his blade poised to stab.

“Castiel,” the woman said, with great composure considering her position, and that she’d been a helpless prisoner dragged out of a room up ahead and then almost skewered not ten seconds ago.

“Naomi,” said Castiel, illuminating a few things for Dean and making him shift his grip on his brand new blade.

Naomi drew a breath as if to say something cool - lost it in a startled hiss as she took a second longer look at Dean and blanched, more horrified now than when Bart had been about to plug her.

“Are you **insane**?! Get that human away from Michael right away!”

Cas loosened his grip, but took one step that put him between Naomi and Dean. His blade was still at her throat. Naomi did not seem to notice.

“Don’t you know what he is?! He’s the Sword! He-” She gave Dean a sharp glance from the soles of his boots to the top of his hat. Dean had been admired quite a bit in his life, top to toe, and this, by comparison, was about as pleasant as being flayed and anatomized. “Is that what you’re counting on?!! Do you think one of those pitiful mind traps the humans have developed will even make *him* blink?! Destroy Winchester now or get him away from here!”

“I see you know what’s going on,” Castiel concluded slowly.

“Of course!” Man, she was shaking like a leaf, raging emotions getting deep into the vessel, fingers clenched into fists buried in the pleats of her conservative black dress. “I have been fighting for three decades to keep this- this situation under control! Ever since I found- But then you came crashing into all this-”

Naomi abruptly stopped and pulled in a deep breath. When she focused on them again, her glare was no less unpleasant, but it was more constructive.

“You are here, deep in the compound, and I know you are not stupid, Castiel. Do you have a solution to stop our brother’s mad plan?”
“You’ll forgive me if I don’t answer that,” Cas said in a completely neutral way that made it quite clear just how much he loathed the bitch.

Naomi sniffed. “That means you do, or you think you do. Fine. There’s a fuss at the northwestern gate, which cannot be a coincidence. Bartholomew has not, I believe, had time to openly strip me of rank or made my arrest known, I should still be able to issue orders. I’ll make sure all the angels of the Word are out of the inner compound, and anyone else I can persuade or order about. That will presumably help?”

“I can’t say,” Cas repeated.

“Urgh!”

Dean meanwhile had been checking the angels to make sure none of them were playing possum. Something caught his attention on Bartholomew; a bulge in the severely tailored suit. He wouldn't have thought much of it on a human, but angels didn’t stuff their pockets, and the thought tripped over the way Naomi had gestured down at the body earlier, as she said “when I found-” and then interrupted herself. Dean slipped his hand into the coat, ignoring the way the vessel's blood dyed his fingers red, and drew out...

“Well, stone me. Cas, this what I think it is?”

Naomi broke away from her staring contest with Cas to give the revolver in Dean’s hands a look reserved for the worst demon from the deepest pit in hell. “That. I wish I’d never found it.”

“You found it?”

“The trackers summoned me when they found Azazel. I could feel the power on his remains, I knew its origin, I saw the magic the humans used to bring him down anyway, I found that on one of the men the trackers had caught nearby. I knew. I knew we had missed something, I knew there were powerful enemies-...”

“Powerful enemies moving against the Host, you thought, so you looked into things more closely… and found out that ultimately the enemy was on your side,” Cas interpreted. “And this is the best you could do with your knowledge? Continue your oppression and keep things hidden?”

“I kept you hidden!” Naomi spat. “For years- decades now - after Azazel’s death I falsified all key reports to Heaven to make the situation seem as benign as possible, pretend the Plan was working as he interpreted it - downplayed the resistance, the doubts growing in the garrisons, kept everyone’s attention away from that foul pit of a Paradise and away from the Sword’s descendants- but then you burst on the scene and married one of them! I spent all my resources hiding your tracks when you ran away. Sam Winchester had already been taken or destroyed by Gabriel and his human goons, I knew your escape was no coincidence, that you had somehow been warned, I thought that if nothing else you could get the vessel away and give us more time!” Naomi drew in a breath, gathered her control a little bit, and tossed a venomous glare down at the body at her feet. “I underestimated Bartholomew. I underestimated how closely he was watching me, how ambitious he was, and how utterly- utterly ruthless he would be when he learned what was really going on. When he found that weapon in my possession, it only confirmed his suspicions. I should have thrown it away, it’s useless without the ammunition-”

The click, click, click of Dean slowly loading the Colt interrupted her.

“It can kill regular angels,” she finally said, and there wasn’t the slightest hint of fear on her face, had to give her that. “But it won’t kill him.”
“Not planning to,” said Dean smoothly, pointing the gun right at her noggin. She just stuck her nose up, all proud-like, and glared past the barrel straight at him.

“Don’t, Dean.” Cas slipped his blade back into his coat.

“Really? After what she did to Balthazar and the others? After what she did to you?” Remembering the raw pain on Cas’s face these past few days, the only regret Dean would feel if he pulled that trigger was that he couldn’t kill her twice.

“Whatever her crimes,” Cas said coolly, making Naomi turn that tart look on him, “she has shown that she doesn’t serve Michael, but our Father. Naomi, we are going to fix this. We need access to the Dome and to be left undisturbed for as long as possible.”

“Why?” Naomi asked, surprised, but then waved her own question away. “Never mind, don’t tell me. To access the Dome, you need to use this sigil, here.” She traced something in the air so fast that Dean could only blink, but Cas nodded in understanding. “I will do what I can on my side to leave you undisturbed, but the Dome—... I will try to distract the watchers in Heaven as well, but Castiel, I can’t keep him from interfering. You will be right on his doorstep. He—”

Cas strode by her without a further word.

Naomi made a rather unladylike noise behind them and disappeared.

Dean tore his gaze away from the empty space where a dame who had really been begging for a bullet had been a second before, and ran a few steps to catch up. He gave his husband’s profile a side glance. “Hope you’re sure about that.”

“Hm,” was all Cas said.

“So you do gamble. Didn’t think you had it in you.”

Cas gave him a fleetingly puzzled look, then continued to walk on.

Naomi did not send an army after them one second later, so it seemed Cas’s gamble had paid off. Maybe she really was drawing away the troops, or else Gabriel was doing something truly spectacular to the northwest and had drawn all the attention there, but either way, still not a single angel in sight as they made their way deeper into the garrison. It only took a minute before Cas reached for a perfectly nondescript door, similar to the dozens they’d already seen, and opened it briskly.

The room on the other side was circular and large, the size of a barn back home. In the center was what Dean had to suppose was The Dome. He had to suppose that because it was shaped like, well, a dome, and it appeared to have been cast in metal all in one piece, without the slightest sign of a rivet or a seam anywhere to be seen. What startled Dean, however, was that it was not that much taller than man-sized. He’d seen party tents that were bigger than this. This made no sense: the garrison was circling a humongous domed structure that could be seen from any point in New Jerusalem, and the Machine was a scintillating pearl floating above it. Dean had thought they’d be ultimately heading towards the roof of that structure. What were they doing here, underground if he hadn’t lost his bearings, facing this little lump of a thing?

“This…this is seriously it?”

Cas tromped forward, obviously answering in the affirmative.

“I don’t see a door.” Dean sidestepped, ready to make his way to the far side of the construct, but
then Cas gestured, that complicated wave in mid-air imitating what Naomi had done earlier. Without fuss or fanfare, the metal dome now had a hole in it. It was cut into its side and low enough where two tall fellas like him and Cas would have to bend sharply over to get through.

“Okay. Gotta say, I imagined this a tad differently, but let’s do it.” Dean followed Castiel through the entrance into the darkness beyond, the utter darkness of the inside of a big metal bell with only one small opening. Crap, Dean had not thought to bring a lantern-

When he straightened up, he was outside. Bullrushes nearby swayed in the breeze, a squirrel chittered in a tree, jealous of its nuts, and Dean managed not to fall flat on his face in the crisp green grass.

“What the hell?! Where are we??”

“The dome. Come on.” Cas cast a worried look at a point in the distance, and then walked swiftly forward, leaving a burst of pollen and crickets in his wake.

Dean, gaping, swivelled around. They were in an endless meadow sparsely dotted with trees. A creek ran by a short distance away, a couple of birds splashing in its shallows and ruffling their feathers. The sky was endless overhead. The only jarring aspect - other than the entire thing - was the dome, the same one they’d just entered. It was right behind them, its entrance dark, looking even smaller here in the middle of this wide open space. As Dean watched, Cas made a gesture over his shoulder, and the hole in the side of the metal disappeared once again.

“O-kay,” Dean said, because his mouth hated letting on when the rest of him was flailing. He turned on his heels and walked away from the metal dome, and followed his husband, trying not to gape at the pleasant greenery around him or prod at a rhododendron nearby to see if it was real.

If he wanted to look smooth and in control, he failed when he ran straight into Cas’s back. His husband had stopped in his tracks.

“Oof! What?!?”

Cas was staring off in the distance. “We need to hurry.”

“Why?”

“We are at the threshold of Heaven, within Michael’s reach. I don’t think he is aware of us yet, but that won’t last.”

Dean glanced up. There was a fluffy cloud overhead. He glared at it suspiciously.

“I don’t see any pearly gates, hon.”

Cas was silent a few seconds, focusing on something Dean could not imagine. Then he looked over his shoulder, grabbed Dean’s chin gently and pulled it so that he was staring straight across the meadow. “Over there.”

Dean stared. About two hundred yards away, a deer was chomping on a bush. There was nothing else to be seen.

“Um-”

“There.”
The abruptness and angle of Cas’s index finger indicated a spot not far away from the deer. There was still nothing to see.

“Uh-”

“Never mind. We need to fix the Machine.”

“Right.” Dean blinked. He’d forgotten about that for a second. “Hey, where is it? It’s- it’s not back in the Dome thing, is it?” That would be confusing. More confusing.

“It’s right here.”

In a spot not five feet away, that Dean was ready to swear on a stack of bibles as big as himself had been empty two seconds before, was a bubble of familiar-looking glass with clockwork inside. It was similar to the one that floated over P342, though maybe half the size. It hovered two feet above the fresh grass beneath it, and rose to a little over head height. Okay. Fine. At this point Dean had stopped wondering how or why. Now he just had to wonder what to do next.

Cas quickly got the tablets out of his coat and started to unwrap the linen. He pawed at it as if his fingers had gone to sleep. Dean took the bundle from his hand and got the warded cloth off in three brusque movements. The stones were heavy and very, well, stone-like in his hands, and seemed to go with the marvel of clockwork before him in the same way a brick went with a wedding cake.

“Cas… what do we… you see where to put them in, right? It’s something an angel can see, right?”

“No,” Cas said simply, looking at the Machine.

Well fuck.

“Um. Okay.”

Dean grabbed his panic by the scruff of the neck and tossed it out. No time for that. He walked briskly around the Machine, about the size of their kitchen table back home. All encompassed by the glass bubble, no sign of any entry. The clockwork inside whirred and emitted a few quiet ‘tings’ at regular interval. Dean dropped to the ground, tablets awkwardly grasped in the crook of his elbow, and looked at the underside, prosaically hoping for an opening, but no luck.

“Cas? Any joy on your end?”

No answer.

Dean scrambled to his feet and made his way around to the side Cas was on. “Cas?”

Cas was looking away from the Machine, across the meadow where the deer had lifted its head and was staring over its shoulder.

“What is it?”

“We have to hurry,” Cas said. He briskly turned towards the Machine and put his hands on the glass.

Without a fuss, it vanished as if it had never been there, leaving the mechanism exposed.

“Well that makes it easier,” Dean said numbly. “Okay, now what?”

He leaned in, looking carefully for anything shaped like a tablet. He’d never seen the Machine up
close before, of course, and even through his focus and concern, part of him marvelled at the intricacy, the beautiful springwork, the delicate cogs and wheels dancing around. A tiny little astrolabe moved incrementally as he peered at it. There were no rivets or any sign of how this clever clockwork was put together, but maybe there were covering plates hiding all assemblage parts. Still staring at the whirring marvel, Dean slipped his free hand in his coat’s inner pocket and fished around for his satchel of small tools. The problem was, where to start...

“Cas?”

Cas was staring out over the meadow again. Dean looked once more, but still couldn’t-

Wait. Was that something there? Hanging in mid air? It was at some distance, but now that he looked, his eye caught something. Like there was the tiniest of pinpricks in mid-air, but something so bright on the other side that even that tiny hole let through a faint shimmering glow. It was a hundred yards away give or take, yet somehow, some instinct suggested it was much, much further away. The way a star was far away. Even though it was right there in the meadow.

Also, in the few seconds he’d been squinting at it, the shimmer had grown a little.

And that same instinct took ‘getting bigger’, tossed it out and suggested that ‘coming closer’ was actually more accurate.

“Is that-”

Cas looked back at the Machine. He put a gentle hand on a beautiful golden arch holding the axle of an escape wheel. He closed his eyes. Opened them again.

“He’s here. But He cannot communicate with me.”

Oh Jesus Christ on a dry cracker, that thing Dean had been about to take a screwdriver to was God. He’d forgotten.

A cloud passed over the sun. No- no, it wasn’t a cloud, the sky was almost clear, it was rather that the sunlight itself seemed less bright than it had been a moment before, as if something much, much brighter was shining behind them-

“Don’t look, Dean,” Cas cautioned as Dean almost glanced around.

“Okay. Okay.” Dean looked from the tablets in his arms to the mechanism. Think, Winchester! This was - was a mechanism (- no it’s not, it’s God! Shut up-) - it didn’t look broken, but somehow these tablets had been removed, which meant somewhere there was- was an empty space for them. But there didn’t seem to be anything missing, and this wasn’t actually a piece of clockwork, it was-

The ground beneath his feet shuddered.

Dean couldn’t help but look back over his shoulder. Just a quick glance.

The pinprick was now a sphere larger than the Machine, so bright it seared afterimages in his eyes even when he glanced away immediately. The air around it was warping. The deer had run away- and still that impression that this thing was not growing, but traveling towards them - even though distance itself disagreed - at a thundering speed, like a meteor. Dean grimaced and turned away. They were running out of time. In fact, they were probably out of it already. Shit.

“Dean.”
“Yeah?”

Cas put a hand on Dean’s shoulder, leaned forward and said in his ear: “I love you. Do what needs to be done.”

“Wh-”

His angel was gone.

“Cas?!”

Dean whirled around, arm flung up to protect his face from the raw cruel light. He thought he saw something else in his peripheral vision, fainter, a blue light against the screaming devouring one-something exploded, it seemed very close by and yet it took a full six seconds for a large whoomph to echo through the garden, flattening the bulrushes and the grass, and knocking twigs off the trees. The ground shuddered again.

“What am I supposed to do?!” Dean yelped - entirely to himself - as he spun back towards the Machine. Fix it - fix it how?! Shit! Shit, Cas was going to get himself killed and this stupid Machine kept purring along- Dean lost it and simply thrust the stones right into its guts.

He gasped and looked in horror... but instead of crushing the delicate mechanisms, the tablets just lay there, one of them getting nudged aside incrementally by a filigree-fine hair spring, the others failing to do anything spectacular.

“Shit!” Dean picked them up, looked around desperately, circumnavigated the mechanism again, looking for a hole, a ledge, slots, hooks, anything.

Something exploded behind him hard enough to send him staggering right into the clockwork, hand fastening on a large flange. It didn’t turn him to salt like Lot’s wife, it just ignored his fumbling human fingers.

Shit!!

Gabriel had said the tablet managing earth, the mundane sphere, was still in place. Dean dodged and weaved around the Machine, but couldn’t see any other stone slab. Where - where were they supposed to go?!

Dean stared at the tablets, stared at the Machine - screwed his eyes shut.

“Fuck, is this what you need? Need me to pray? Please- please, I pray to God, please show me how to get you working.”

He opened his eyes.

The Machine still ticked and tocked.

Dean swallowed the urge to scream.

The heat and light behind him were growing and a series of rapid bangs like a bandoleer of cartridges dropped into a fire rang out behind him.

“Please.”

The whisper, broken and scared, fell from his lips.
“Please don’t let him die.”

Nothing.

Maybe he had to-

A blast of wind made him cringe- and something struck the ground twenty feet away.

“Cas!”

At the end of a long furrow, the angel, blood marring his coat, pushed himself up onto one elbow, shaking his head dazedly.

Dean glanced over his shoulder, keeping his eyes mostly shut. He could have closed them all the way, he didn’t need them, he could feel the great ball of light move towards them. Towards Castiel.

Dean breathed out. Then he shook his head.

He put the tablets down on the Machine, propped up against the flange he’d gripped earlier in an area where they wouldn’t get in the way of any gearwork, then he turned away. He thought he heard a faint gritty noise as one of the tablets shifted against the other, but he didn’t look back. He covered his eyes with his left arm, enough to block out the light but still see its outward glimmer turning the grass to ash beneath it. He pulled Colt’s cursed six-iron from his belt and walked straight towards where the great big blazing ball of pain and torment stood poised over his husband, and with each long stride forward Dean pulled the trigger, sending one bullet after another thundering straight into Michael.

The light shuddered, crackled and lurched back under each impact until it was a few feet away from Cas. Dean fired the sixth bullet into the light almost point blank, and hurled the gun after it for good measure. Then he dropped and covered Cas’s injured body with his own. Michael needed Dean alive, he might be forced to calm down and bargain. Not that Dean would ever say Yes, but as long as there was an inch left to fight for-

Silence.

Dean hadn’t been fully aware of the howling pressure of noise until it was suddenly missing. Now his gasps sounded very loud in the still air.

Cas was still in his arms; the shudder in his breath spoke of pain, a wet crackle of blood on the exhale. But he was alive. The absence of the searing light at Dean’s back sent goosepimples of a comparative chill running down his spine, but here in his arms, Cas was alive, warm and alive.

“Wh...what…” Cas looked around dazedly, and Dean followed suit very very carefully, ready to cover his eyes and duck his head away at the slightest hint of a glimmer.

There wasn’t any. The space where Michael had been was empty. There was somebody standing off to one side, though. A man in a rumpled knitted coat, hands in his pockets.

Cas gasped and picked himself up a bit. “Father?!?”

Dean stared at the man who’d appeared- shit, appeared right where the Machine had been a few seconds ago!. Was... was this… “Is that… God?”

“No,” said Castiel, bowing his head once more, eyes fluttering shut with pain. “I thought-.. but it’s still the Machine. It’s…”
“It’s a guy,” Dean pointed out warily.

“Hi there!” the stranger chirped. He was wearing farmer boots with mud on the toes, some kind of denim pants, a belt with a weird bronze curlicue on the buckle and a rumpled blue shirt beneath the knitted coat.

“Yes, I know. It’s the original interface. I saw it once during the Apocalypse. It, um… it likes to go by the name of Chuck for some reason,” Castiel finished grumpily, wiping blood from his nose.

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Next Chapter: Stars

“Wow, what a mess!” said Chuck, looking around. The Garden was pristine, Castiel knew that Chuck was looking a lot further than the Dome.

Chapter End Notes

Whew, got it out. Typo spotting welcome, didn't have much time to polish. I've put all other work on hold for now until I can get this puppy finished, only two more chapters to go after this one ^___^
Stars

Then I saw a great white throne and Him who was seated on it. The earth and the heavens fled from His presence, and there was no place for them.

-- Revelations 20:11

As an angel, Castiel could see effortlessly into the multi-dimensional; in fact it took rather a bit of concentration at times to remember how humans saw the world. So he could see the Garden, spreading out forever around them, and he could see the nearby edge of the Sphere cutting that ‘forever’ in half, the doorstep to Heaven. He could see the beautiful, unsullied world born from the heart of their Father, and he could also see the small metal dome they were locked into and which someone was currently beating with a large hammer.

No, wait, that last was not anything in the multisphere, it was just the profound ache reverberating through him, from the ragged torn Grace bleeding Light in his upper Being, all the way to the migraine blooming in his vessel’s bruised cerebral cortex. Ow.

“Okay.” Dean, kneeling at Castiel’s side, sounded like a human who was going to be very dubious about anything anyone was going to tell him in the next few minutes. “I have to tell you the truth, Cas, part of me never really bought the whole ‘God is a Machine’ deal. You know? Not for real. And now I gotta believe God is a Machine who is a dude named Chuck?” It was phrased as a question, but even to the semi-stunned angel, it sounded more like a whole lot of doubt. This doubt started where Thomas the Apostle had left off and just kept on going.

Castiel made as soft a noise of assent as possible, to avoid giving the agony wringing him more ammunition. He closed his eyes and started the painful process of sending healing Grace through his Being and vessel, and the equally painful process of getting to his feet.

There was brusque movement at his side, and then his upward assent was helped by a strong hand on his elbow. Dean steadied him, an arm slipping around Castiel’s waist as if the angel might fall down - a distinct possibility. Castiel gratefully leaned into the assistance and healed the damaged inner ear that was playing havoc with his vessel’s mundane senses.

Dean’s hot unblinking gaze had not left Chuck, who was turning around slowly, examining the Garden around them.

“Hmmm,” said Chuck, scratching the back of his head.

“This is some kind of trick,” Dean finally muttered. “Right? Cas, this is Michael dicking with us. Right?”

“No…” Castiel began to formulate words - short words, as devoid of noisy consonants as possible, that would not further pound in his head. Or maybe he could write the explanation in a letter. Yes, a letter. Then Dean could read it quietly, and-

“Michael’s gone,” Chuck announced without looking around.

“Gone? Gone where? He turn tail and run?” Once more that tone in Dean’s voice that suggested he was going to disbelieve most of what he was going to be told out of hand.
“No. Michael needs a little bit of reflection. Of self-contemplation. I am going to leave him to cool off for a little while, and then he and I are going to have a talk. I think it is long overdue.”

Castiel’s senses flitted towards Heaven’s entrance a short distance and several dimensions away. He did not know how much knowledge Chuck had of recent events, if He realized that His general and first born might not sit obediently on his hands in his room while their Father sorted out the mess he'd made-

“I sent him to the Cage,” Chuck added.

“What cage? Cas, you alright?” Dean looked at Castiel quickly as he felt the latter flinch. Dean, of course, had not heard anything other than Chuck’s explanation. He had not felt the attention of God turn towards one of His children in silent reproof for underestimating Him. Those six short words had had the weight of several planets applied to them, in a Sphere of which Dean, fortunately, was not cognizant. Shaken, Castiel quickly dipped his wings in apology and respect. Then winced as the tattered things sent fresh aches all the way to his vessel’s bones and back again. Urg. Time to put his faith in God like a good angel should, which would allow him to focus on healing himself up before he collapsed into a pile of broken light and ash. Michael… had been quite annoyed with him… Remembering that exploding supernova of fury bearing down on him, poised to crush him like a mundane ant, Castiel was rather glad to have the bars of the Cage between them right this moment.

“So you sent Michael away for a time-out,” Dean finally concluded. For some reason, his husband’s fearless, rather unimpressed tone of voice - born of ignorance though it was - warmed Castiel as much as the waves of Grace weaving him back together. “Thanks for finally showing up to collar the guy you left in charge all this time. You know, before he blew away the planet and everyone on it.”

“You’re welcome,” Chuck said absently; only the topmost layer of the Machine's focus was on Dean’s words, so an automated conversation routine had supplied the answer. Castiel thought it had done an adequate job, but from the way his husband’s jaw tightened, maybe it hadn’t.

“Wow, what a mess!” Chuck finally concluded with one last look around before facing them. The Garden was pristine once again, Castiel knew that Chuck was looking a lot further than the Dome.

“You could say that.” The words rasped past the clench of Dean's jaw. His narrowed eyes suggested he was contemplating the possible penance for punching a flip God in the face, and if it wouldn't be worth it anyway.

“I’m sorry, Father,” Castiel said softly, words buzzing through his receding migraine. “We knew the Plan originally, but-... but we did not understand it, and then things went-... We failed you.”

“Yes, you did. You were always very limited, I’m afraid,” Chuck said, running His fingers through His short beard.

Every one of Dean’s muscles stiffened, his jaw dropped, then he drew in a deep angry breath -

“But to be fair, all this was not meant to happen. You angels were not meant to be dropped into the middle of all this and then left without supervision.” Chuck shook his head. Castiel could see, beyond the imitation of the human gesture, the gears and shifts in the great Machine. The disappointment he found there made him cringe, but there was another feeling there too; a deep sadness harkening back to the cause of their loss of communication with God in the first place. Yes, they had failed their Father, and yes, He was right to be disappointed in them, yet He still loved them, every one of them, even the one who had, in his angry pride and wounded love, struck
at Him and caused all this to happen. Lucifer, their Father’s Morning Star... The humans had a
saying, “You always hurt the ones you love.” Castiel could see its veracity now, and how the
converse was just as true.

“Humans now... humans are meant for free will. That was the essence of the Plan,” Chuck added,
interrupting some very heated words from Dean about Chuck, responsibility, and how Castiel at
least had done his damned best and Chuck should be ‘bloody grateful’. “My best invention. Before
humans, the world I crafted was like clockwork. Everything fit, everything worked. Of course it
did. But it was all Me. It worked because I had made it to work. It was... well, I guess you could
say that after a few eons, it got rather boring. It was just Me, it was predictable and sterile. It
needed something else, something that was not Me. I created mankind, and in them I planted the
seed of free will. The apocalypse was it's fruition, and Paradise was to be the Garden where free
will took root and thrived.”

“What?!” Dean spluttered. “Free will?! You've been dictating my every moment since I was born!
You- you fucking got me hitched! Uh, not that I-... I mean-...”

“We know, Dean,” said Chuck somewhat absently. Most of His functions were still combing
through His self-diagnostics. “I gave humanity free will and, when Lucifer predictably got in a snit
about it, I used his punishment to build in a... let’s call it a release mechanism. Humanity had tens
of thousands of years to grow, develop, make mistakes - a lot of mistakes, you guys were very
good at that, that’s for sure. Then when the stars, my son’s plots and free will aligned, bang! That
chapter of humanity closed, and a new one began. Since free will was incorporated into the very
design, I did not allow myself any control over how or when the apocalypse would happen - to be
honest, I thought it would be around about now, not two hundred years ago, you lot pulled the
trigger on it a lot faster than I had thought.” Chuck smiled. This small hint of randomness, a
departure from the expected in His clockwork universe, had apparently surprised Him for the first
time in His entire existence and had pleased Him remarkably.

The Machine paused as if to allow them to share His appreciation. Dean's “What are you blithering
on about?” fell into that moment like a rock in a well.

“I am explaining what the Plan originally was, Dean, since I know you’ve wondered about this
most of your life,” Chuck answered with the Divine patience for one of his wayward children that
an angel could only marvel at. “It was supposed to be the final culmination of free will. That was
the Plan. When my son was freed and the End of Days started, I descended to earth and became the
Machine. I automated myself, set myself unbreakable restrictions so that I could no longer interfere
except through rigid guidelines. The apocalypse was the tabula rasa needed for a new world.
Paradise would be your fresh start, an environment free of the stressors of bare survival that might
force you all back into old patterns. With history, morality and all your mistakes as your guide, free
will could finally be given rein. I wanted to see what you would do next. That was the Plan.
Unfortunately tying my hands behind my back rather left me vulnerable to Lucifer’s last strike.
When I was unable to communicate with them, the angels took my blueprints of the Plan - along
with a muddled interpretation of it from a rather substance-addled prophet in the past - and then
tried to impose that on humanity.. And that’s where things went a little askew.”

“A little askew. A little,” Dean relinquished his hold on Castiel’s waist, took three steps forward,
fists tight, his frame rigid with anger. “Your Paradise is a goddamn prison! The angels didn’t wait
one minute before becoming our jailkeepers! We’ve been - been penned and herded, tortured and
killed - and your bloody Machine floated above it all to justify their actions! We were even
expected to thank you for it! Hail to the God Machine! Amen!”

Chuck nodded serenely. “Yes, as I said, something of a mess. But interesting. Not one I had
predicted. And I have to say, even under those conditions, humans like you still excelled, Dean.”

Dean’s senseless expletive made it quite clear what he thought of that praise.

“So now of course we come to the crux of the matter,” Chuck added, unperturbed and ignoring Dean’s demeanor (which any religion on earth would have termed sacrilegious at best.) “You’re quite right, Paradise under the angels and the God Machine is hardly what I had in mind, and definitely not what free will needs. So, I will just have to take one further step back and turn it all off.”

Dean blinked. He stared at Chuck, glanced uncertainly at Castiel, then back at Chuck again. “Turn what off?”

“Everything. Well, Me. No more Machine, no more angels. Earth back to the humans, all that. What your resistance was aiming for all along, right?”

Dean gaped at him, while a few feet to their left, the squirrel made its prudent way back to its tree and its hoard of nuts.

“You… you can’t do that,” Dean finally said, aghast.

Chuck had been examining the circadian rhythm of the humans; Castiel could have done the same for one Paradise, with a lot of concentration. The Machine was doing it for every Saved Soul now and for the past two hundred years simultaneously. He glanced over His shoulder at Dean. “Hmm? Can’t do what? Turn off the Machine? Why not?”

“Why not?! But- but- it’d be- that’s insane! Humans are- are babes in the woods! All our food comes from you! I mean, we grow stuff, but not enough to feed a whole city- and the monsters- and- you can’t do that! We’d all die!”

“Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“What?!”

“That is what you told Castiel here loud and clear not two months ago. You said you’d rather be dead than stay in the prison of Paradise. Or never been born, to be more precise, but I can’t arrange that unless I monkey with time, and my tools for that are still coming online. That seems a bit extreme, anyway, and also counterproductive. If you had never been born, this current reversal of fortune might not have happened, which could lead to a paradox. I just got rebooted, I don’t want half my subroutines spinning wheels on that, thank you very much.”

Dean didn’t appear to be listening to the explanations about the inner workings of the God Machine, he was waving his hands in alarm. “You can’t do that! I know- that’s what I said, but that’s not everybody, there’s a lot of folks who are okay in Paradise- and there’s- good god, there’s kids out there, and babies! You can’t-”

Chuck turned to face him fully, looking a little exasperated. “So? Shall we keep it the same, then? Make up your mind.”

“Why are you asking me?!”

“Stuff needs to happen fast here, and you’re the only human on hand. Or should I ask the angels instead? That did not work out so well last time.”

Dean was silent for awhile. Forty one seconds, Castiel noted, examining his husband’s profile
while simultaneously stretching out his wings and repairing them with a few flicks of Grace.

“...I can’t tell you to end Paradise, I can’t make that decision for everybody. It’s not my right,” Dean finally said stonily, and looked away.

Chuck examined him, went “Hmm” and then turned towards the angel. “And you, Castiel? What do you think?”

“I think this is a rather crude test of Dean’s ethics,” Castiel responded, rotating his vessel’s right shoulder and listening absently to a whole lot of organic stuff squelch and pop as it realigned and healed.

“Oh?”

They were both looking at him.

“You are treating this like a binary choice. As if removing all interference is appropriate compensation for the mess we put them in. That is ridiculous. I think you just wanted to know Dean was not the kind of egotist who would make that decision for everyone.”

“Oh?”

At Castiel’s side, Dean twitched. He’d said the same not a minute ago, but having an angel, the oppressor in this scenario, state it out loud would still be hard to swallow.

“So keep the status quo?” Chuck reiterated.

“Yes.”

Divine Intent centered on him, scrutinized him. “I see. And what will you do?”

Cas shook himself out, removed the last bloodstains from his duster with a touch, furled his wings, took Dean’s hand in his own and faced Chuck. “Dean and I will oppose you. If those two extremes are the only options you are giving us, then you are not the Father I knew, and I feel no more fealty towards you. We will resist you, along with Gabriel and the others, we will go out among the Paradises and teach the Saved Souls to survive without you, we will extract them from your clutches one at a time if need be, and when we fall, there will be others to take our place, humans and angels alike. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“Yeah, that was sweet!” Chuck declared with an ecstatic smile. His transcendence into the Machine hadn’t changed His love for the dramatic, illustrated in holy texts far and wide.

Dean’s glare could have melted the walls of the metal dome around them, and sent the squirrel, who’d poked a cautious nose out of a knot in the tree’s boll, scurrying for cover.

“You are as big an ass as your boys,” Dean declared venomously, “and I don’t mean Cas here, I mean the other ones. Fine, you had your fun now? Can we get serious? What are you going to do?”
“Oh, what I was programmed to do,” Chuck said, a trifle apologetically. “I was curious about what you two would say, but I wasn’t actually giving you a choice. There is a Plan here after all, and there’s no leeway, not even for me.”

“Huh?!”

“The spheres are not meant to mix like this.” Chuck waved a vague finger around as if stirring a stew. “It unbalances everything. Angels are great defenders and warriors, but they’re, ah, pretty straightforward. Humans need free will in all its nuances, it’s what they were made for. Normally your species are kept mostly apart - and the Purgatory critters, and the demons. But when I got smashed and lost my tablets, well, my function was lessened and things became fluid.”

“But now that the tablets are reintegrated...” Castiel said slowly, ignoring the noises of irritation his husband was making.

“The borders will be rebuilt. All of them. The angels are going back to Heaven where they belong, and they’ll stay there. They’ll be protectors of the Spheres again, guardians of the natural order, but they will no longer be able to interfere with humanity.”

Castiel nodded. “I see. That is an acceptable solution.”

“What?!” Dean turned abruptly, both startled and appalled. “But what about-...”

“Think, Dean,” Castiel said softly, his fingers tightening over the ones he still clasped. “The Machine will still be on, but without the angels, you will no longer be forced to stay static or confined to New Jerusalem. Those humans who want to stay in its protection can do so. Those who don’t can leave. Those who want to live in their Paradise but visit other cities, trade, innovate, create a whole new civilization, are free to do so. One day I hope humans will no longer need the Machine, but with this solution, it’s no longer a cage, merely a crutch.”

“But... yeah,” Dean said hoarsely, visibly moving away from the personal to look at the bigger picture. “Yeah. I can see how that’d work. Of course, without the sheriffs in town, some people might get violent. A thousand Gordons running around.”

“Who?”

“Never mind.”

“That’s one of many likely problems,” Chuck stated. “Problems humanity will have to sort out. I’ll still be around in a limited capacity, I’ll provide food, healing - though humans will have to go to the altars for that, you won’t have angels running around fixing your slightest booboo. Will it be potentially rough? Yes. But-”

“But we’ll take it,” Dean said harshly. “All I want is for us to have a chance. If some folk get out of hand, we’ll deal with it the human way.”

“As it should be,” Castiel said softly.

“Good good. You see?” Chuck beamed. “This will be so much more interesting. So tell me-”

“Shut up,” Dean advised Him, and turned to Castiel.

Castiel looked at him calmly.

“This means... I guess this means...”
The angel nodded.

Dean cleared his throat and looked away. “You going to be okay up there? You blew up the system. You got Mike locked away. They’ll be gunning for you.”

“I fixed the system, our Father locked Michael away, which leaves Gabriel next in line as leader of the Host. If he takes charge of the day to day operations, I will be quite safe. Infuriated on a daily basis, I’m sure, but quite safe.”

Dean let loose a twisted laugh. “Good. Good… Cas—…” Then he made a sort of weird ‘I give up’ gesture, took a step forward and pulled the angel into a hug.

His body was warm against Castiel’s, arms tight around the angel’s shoulders, sparking recollections of that absorbing and intriguing night they had had. Their last night. Castiel had known all along they would not have more time than this together, one way or another. But this was so much better than what he’d expected when they’d set out on their mission this morning. Dean was still alive against all odds, and would remain so. Alive, and free to finally build his Paradise, his happiness. The knowledge of this would keep Castiel warm over the coming millennia… just not as warm as this moment right here…

“Shit,” Dean said in a broken whisper near Castiel’s ear.

“Ah, excuse me?”

They both ignored Chuck. In an impromptu way that did more credit to his three months among humanity than his eternity as a faithful soldier, Castiel decided he had a bit of credit accrued in Heaven right now and nothing better to spend it on than this right here.

“I’ll miss your stupid staring and all,” Dean said with a damp chuckle.

“I’ll miss you too.” There were never truer words spoken that had not been etched on stone. Castiel would miss this human. He would miss his arguing, his touch, his cooking, his brilliance, his grumpiness, his soft looks hidden beneath the scowls. He would miss him. He would miss him...

“Oh, and what the hell was that right at end there, huh?” Dean’s huff brushed his skin. “Saying, hey, Dean, I love you, and then getting gutted by Michael.”

“I didn’t—”

“You tried. That was a dick move, angel, a dick move.”

“Sorry.” He’d even miss apologizing to Dean for screwing up all the time.

“If I might interject—”

“You can damn well shut up,” Dean informed Chuck without moving away or looking in His direction.

“I think he’s trying to tell us that it’s time to go,” Castiel said softly.

“Oh, right, ‘cause he balls it up for two hundred years and he can’t give us two minutes?” Dean snarled, voice ragged.

“Angels are trying to get into the Dome, and Gabriel is making a fuss in New Jerusalem.” But Castiel’s arms wouldn’t let go either. “It could get nasty out there. People here don’t deserve that,
they'll soon have more than enough problems to contend with. We… we need to go.”

“Yeah, Castiel is right, time to shut the door. Can I slip a word in edgewise now?” Chuck asked.

“No!” Dean said viciously, clinging hard.

“I did have a solution that would keep you two together to continue your interesting little social experimentation - and I’m using that as a euphemism.”

Dean stiffened and lifted his head. “...What the hell does that mean?”

Castiel frowned at the Machine. “What are you saying? I’m an angel, I need to-”

“Hey, what do you think I am, an abacus?” Chuck asked, waving vaguely at Himself. “I may be a more hands-off version of God, but I’m still Me. Sure, I’m a Machine, but I’m self-improving and self-determining and all that. I am not going to change the Plan; it’s time for a new force in the Universe, a new drive. I want to see what humanity can do without the constraints of limited resources, constant war and a bunch of other nasty issues hanging over their head, and I think My solution is still adequate. But you know what I figure? No solution can be permanent and frozen in time, not where humanity is concerned - and maybe even angels could surprise Me.” Chuck added with a curious look at Castiel. “What I’m saying is, I need checks and balances, I need eyes on the ground. I need some reliable sorts to make sure things are as they seem. Not working for humanity - sorry, Dean, I think your brother has a better chance at rallying civilization. And not working for the angels. I need you guys working for Me - or rather, for the whole system, for the balance of it. So here.”

Castiel felt a rearranging of matter on his chest; at his side, Dean jumped. A metal badge had appeared on their coats, a five-pointed star inside a circle. On the top rim of the circle was engraved the word Marshal, on the bottom was an Enochian word for patroller that Castiel hadn’t seen used since they last had a Garden, a long, long time ago.

“You are hereby delegated to - so on and so forth, I’ll think up the words later. You can’t use those to boss people around. Humans, angels, demons and those big bitey things, they all have to figure it out on their own, not with my overview and not with yours. You’re here to make sure I don’t get hacked again. That the borders are kept hermetical and that nothing is creeping up on us. You’ll have to find a few helping hands from all walks of life. By which I mean, you’ll need a couple of the less weasley demons too, and if you can find a Leviathan that understands the balance of power- okay, that might take awhile, but that’s your job too, to look for more like-minded individuals, and possibly miracles. I understand you already have a vampire who could help. So, what do you say?”

Castiel opened his mouth… hesitated. The Machine was omniscient, what need did He have for ‘eyes on the ground’ or anywhere else? But maybe in this new form, that was not entirely guaranteed. Or maybe there was some other reason for this idea, this notion of multispher...
“I don’t think they need me specifically up in Heaven. I can do better work here,” Castiel agreed.

Chuck raised an eyebrow in an exquisite imitation of a human gesture. “Wow, you guys are all romance.”

“Yeah, we don’t really do that crap,” Dean drawled.

His hand had found Castiel’s again and from the strength of his grip, he was not about to let go anytime soon.

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*Next Chapter: An Imperfect Day in Paradise*

*Folk called it the tin star, or the hunter’s badge, or trouble, depending on who you talked to.*
I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this scroll: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to that person the plagues described in this scroll. And if anyone takes words away from this scroll of prophecy, God will take away from that person any share in the tree of life and in the Holy City, which are described in this scroll.

-- Revelation 22:18-19

Dean had hung his jacket at the entrance of their makeshift shelter to ward off the night breeze. His tin star, pinned to the breast pocket, glinted in the light of their tiny campfire. Not actually tin; nobody seemed to know what kind of metal it was. But folk called it the tin star, or the hunter’s badge, or trouble, depending on who you talked to. Whatever it was made of, the marshal's star did not protect from, say, bullets, or vampire bites, or that look he got from Paradisers when they realized a hunter had rolled into town following some gawdawful evil or other right to their doorstep, and life was about to get interesting.

You’d think they’d be more grateful, but life had been so very interesting for everybody these past few months, Dean begrudgingly understood why some people would like their eternity in Paradise to get a little boring again, please and thank you. Still, the way they reacted to his arrival, you’d think he was one of the Plagues of Egypt. The one with the boils and sores.

Until he and Cas whacked some wraith, or exorcised a demon, or cleaned out some Croatoans. Then that group at least would be somewhat thankful for a day or two (which, if he was lucky, involved coffee and pie, and a guest bedroom with a bath). Then they had to move on to the next rumor of monsters or some ungodly not-of-this-world-and-needs-to-be-extirpated threat. Dean had known this job would be a headache.

His eyes strayed to the woven boughs of the lean-to he’d slapped together as the sun went down, propping it between the boll of a large tree and the swell of dirt encasing its gnarled roots. No Paradise tonight, grateful or otherwise; they were camping out in the Wilds, triangulating the location of some monster-spewing hole. Purgatory had sprung another leak. It was their main focus these days; Crowley was taking care of the Hell-side exits. Or so he said. Dean wasn't taking that one on faith, but Purgatory critters could spread infections among helpless Paradisers, while demons were more of a long-term problem, or hopefully no problem at all if Crowley knew what was good for him. The hunters as a group had decided that monsters were to be their first target, along with those demons who had refused the King of Hell’s recall command, and that Crowley pointed out to them a little too gleefully. If he made one more ‘good doggies!’ remark next time Dean and Cas smoked out some rebellious demon mook for him, Dean was going to have Words with the swanky whoreson.

“Gotta meet up with the Busy Bees tomorrow,” Dean said, looking at the slice of sky not obscured by the lean-to’s cover or his jacket. A few stars were peeking out between billowing clouds. “See if they had any luck on their side finding this gap.”

“Balthazar hates it when you call him that, Dean.”
“So does Benny, why do you think I do it?”

“They have a hard enough time getting along as it is, I don’t think you need to add a further irritation.”

“Bull, they love each other, they’re just too grumpy to admit it.”

A mild exaggeration. Balthazar was quick and light and sharp, Benny was slow and deep and solid, they were pretty much antithetical, but they still got along better than their constant backbiting would indicate. Naturally Cas missed that by a mile, and Dean was ready to bet that the pair of bastards baited each other even more when Cas was around, because they must find the faintly puzzled and alarmed look on the Seraph’s face as amusing as Dean found it cute and endearing.

An angel and a vampire were just one of the new team-ups they’d created; the other two dozen groups throughout the world were ex-hunters or ex-resistance for the most part, the ones who’d get bored after three hours in Paradise. They’d run into Charlie and Jo last month, hunting down the same group of skinwalkers they were tracking. The girls had been working with that odd, gangly and perpetually cheerful werewolf dude. He drifted from group to group, helping out any that needed a sharp nose or ‘cheering up’ (Chuck help them). The other non-humans on the roster was that human-friendly vampire and her small brood, and a sultry demon chick Crowley judged too useful to smoke but too dangerous to keep down below. So far, Balthazar was the only other celestial in the ranks, and indeed on earth. Officially. Dean and Cas had a few suspicious rumors to track down, rogue angels and such. Hell, more work…

Balthazar had been the first on the list of new marshals Dean and Cas put together. They knew that particular angel would be happier on the ground and amongst humans. Chuck had fixed the poor guy’s head, and sent him down to earth as a reward for being part of the gang that had brought Big Mike down. On paper, it was because Balthazar had shown the kind of flexible thinking and ethical backbone needed in a marshal. It helped that leaving a recovered Baz upstairs with Naomi would result in a homicide in Heaven, and that would look messy in the new chapter of the bible the religious nutters in P1 were busy writing.

Plenty other angels had volunteered to come down once Chuck had done a general whitewashing job of all their heads; some in renewed fervor for the Plan, others who wished to atone. Uriel was among the latter, Dean had been told. Knowing the truth behind some of the angels’ behavior had nuanced Dean’s hatred of the Host a tad, but that was pushing it. Sure, Uriel probably did want to atone for his mistakes, but that didn’t mean he’d be an obedient baa-lamb for all that. Dean’s job was to plug holes, look for recruits and find miracles, not believe in them. Uriel and his righteous trigger-happy smiting could stay upstairs as far as he was concerned, and continue on with his ‘reeducation’. That term had had a chilling meaning once under Michael, Bartholomew and Naomi. Since Gabe was now in charge, reeducation for even the most dickish of the angels had been commuted to the heavenly equivalent of community service. And since Gabe was, indeed, in charge, community service was crucial tasks such as making sure geese flew in correct migratory patterns each year, or that excess heat from the perpetual summer was getting cleaned out of the atmosphere. Whenever he was knee deep in werewolf guts, or getting nagged by some upright citizen of New Jerusalem, Dean would think of some of his favorite one-time wardens on goose duty, or dressed in a maid outfit sweeping clouds, and it would always make his bad day a little better.

“It’s getting late. You need to sleep,” Cas said, looking down at him. Dean was currently wrapped in a blanket with his head pillowed on Cas’s lap.

“Hmm, not sleepy.”
“You said that if I gave you oral sex earlier, it would make you tired,” Castiel said dryly.

“Hey, I didn’t hear you complain when I returned the favor. And I am tired, just not sleepy.”

Cas didn’t repeat the ham-fisted suggestion that he mojo Dean to sleep. They had had a spectacular argument about that last month. Cas insisted that there was no difference between what he did and normal sleep, while Dean pointed out that he was the one getting dumped into unconsciousness, so he’d know, right?!

“Should I fly us back to Lawrence?” Cas suggested instead. “You can sleep in your bed. Sam would be glad to see you.”

“If he’s even there. No, Sammy’s too busy helping the world sort out its shit.”

Humanity was still, a few months down the line, in a bit of a mess, scrambling to adjust to its newfound freedom like a baby bird falling out of its nest and into a hurricane. Sam was one of the big heads of the new human order, in charge of most of their continent, and was helming his new responsibilities like a champ, like Dean always knew he could. Dean felt a little guilty at times leaving his brother holding that particular bag of wildcats, but the rest of the brand new human council had made it quite clear months ago. They’d carefully thanked Dean and Castiel for single handedly averting a new and more thorough apocalypse, and then almost in the same breath, added that news of their involvement in removing angels from earth had spread, and so it might be best if they found themselves, say, out in the Wild hunting monsters for the next decade or so, only coming back to see their friends and family very discreetly - maybe in the dead of night, yeah, that’d be okay. Sam had shot to his feet and started shouting and swearing and threatening to resign - but Dean was out the door and off into the Wilds before his brother even truly got started. He and Cas would have buckled down to help fix the mess they’d contributed to if it’d been required of them, but since their presence might do more harm than good, agitating the pro-angel factions remaining amongst the Sheep, Dean had leapt at the chance to get well out of the way. Give him hell-beasts and monsters any day of the week, and Sunday to boot..

“Anyway, Chuck doesn’t like it when I use you as a horse and buggy, hon. He says it’s bending the rules.”

“Now you care what Chuck says?”

“We’re fine.” Dean pillowed down, smelling his husband’s scent in the familiar duster. “Just not sleepy.”

Cas sighed and glanced upwards.

A faint cool wind blew through their shelter, making the arms of Dean’s jacket flap. The fire jumped and crackled.

Dean sniffed. He lifted his head. “Hey, it smells like-...”

Rain started to patter on the lean-to.

Dean leaned back. “Yeah, you spoil me.”

“Shamelessly. Now go to sleep.”

Dean nestled down. High, very high above and some distance away was a faint crack of lightning. A hand rubbed gentle circles on his shoulder. The cool wind on his face and the sound of rain overhead rocked him to sleep.
Whew, quite a ride! Thank you for all the comments and kudos!

I am toying with the idea of creating a few timestamps for this fic, since I would love to play in Paradise a little longer, and also show what happens with Sam, Gabriel and other characters down the line. I’m also working on a couple other SPN fics, but there’s barely a few lines written for those, so it may be awhile before they’re out, and I have a few other projects to work on first. My hobby is all-devouring, but I love it anyway.

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