The Last Archangel: Redemption

by inukagome15

Summary

If you're dead, you're supposed to stay dead. Especially if you went on a self-imposed suicide mission to save the world. Not that Tony'd know. The last thing he remembers is touching this giant tree in Afghanistan.

Notes

This is the sequel to The Last Archangel, a Supernatural and Avengers crossover that is primarily Tony/Gabriel-centric. I promised I'd get it out this year, and it looks like I'm managing that. This will be a much longer tale than its predecessor, as it is already over 80,000 words and there's still much more to say.
I hope that this lives up to expectations; I admit I'm rather nervous about how this will be received given the reception the last story received. It's a high mark to live up to, and I hope that this story meets expectations and even surpasses them.
They had Fallen. His brothers and sisters… Every last one of them…*Fallen*.

And because of *him*. Because he had tried – once again – to fix this. And he had failed. Like he always did. Because there was something wrong with him. A crack in the chassis, as Naomi had said before he’d fled her the last time during the second trial.

Naomi…

*A silver tool speared through the back of her head, blood spilling out from underneath.*

“Our mission was to protect what God created. I don’t know when we forgot that.”

She was dead now, too. Metatron had killed her, and he had gone and taken Castiel’s Grace to complete the spell.

*How* could he have been so stupid?

He should have waited – should have waited for Dean. They should have done it together.

“These were never trials, Castiel. This is a spell. And what I’m taking from you now – your essence, your Grace – is the last piece.”

Not for the first time he wished he had someone else to lean on, someone older, someone who knew what to do. He was so tired of making decisions and messing up catastrophically.

He had failed them all again, and now he had no idea where he was, and he needed to find Dean.

“And now something wonderful is going to happen, for me and for you. I want you to live this new life to the fullest. Find a wife. Make babies. And when you die and your soul comes to Heaven, find me. Tell me your story.”

Thank everything he had ever believed in that Metatron didn’t know about Dean. He wouldn’t have been able to handle it if anything happened to him. Dean was all he had left now, and *he needed to find him*.

Still shaking and shuddering from the shock of his Grace being extracted, Castiel stumbled through the trees, barely catching himself on the rough bark that scratched his palms painfully.

His eyes were burning with tears, and Castiel knew that if he were to reach up, his face would be wet. Crying…it was such a human thing. Castiel barely knew how to deal with it, along with all the other visceral human emotions that were so much more than anything he had experienced before.

He had to find Dean.

He—
he could make out the trees around him and the sterile lights that seemed to be a city.

Castiel didn’t like that he’d lost consciousness like that. It was unpleasant, and it served no purpose other than to waste valuable time. He could have contacted Dean by now.

Pushing himself to stand upright, Castiel staggered slightly before regaining his balance, his eyesight not keen enough for him to be able to make out anything untoward that he might stumble over. He couldn’t sense the Earth; he couldn’t sense the universe; he couldn’t sense Heaven; he couldn’t sense Dean.

It was the last that almost sent Castiel into a panic attack, but he slid back down to sit, clutching at his knees as he forced himself to calm down.

He might be human right now, but he could handle this. He could.

All he needed right now was to find out where he was, and then he could find a phone and contact Dean to tell him his location.

He would be panicking right now after seeing the angels fall from Heaven.

Taking a calming breath, Castiel stood back up, legs notably steadier now. Making his way through the trees and shrubbery, he found himself at a road with people and cars. The sky was pinkening, and Castiel rubbed a hand over his face before he turned left and headed towards the buildings he could see.

It turned out that he had woken up in a park, and it looked completely different from where he had been last night. He knew he hadn’t seen these buildings in that clearing where he had watched the angels fall.

Breath coming more rapidly now, Castiel reached for the wall that bordered the park, stumbling over to it and leaning heavily against it. His trench coat fluttered against his legs; there seemed to be a weight on the left side.

Reaching in, Castiel pulled out what looked like a transparent rectangular flat plane of glass. Peering down at it curiously, he rubbed his thumb over the smooth material, only to be startled when it blinked blue and a clock appeared under his thumb.

Turning it around, Castiel found himself looking at what looked like a highly futuristic phone, judging from the little apps he could see on it.

Tapping on the screen, Castiel found it to be easy to use, his second try pulling up a keypad. He had no idea how or why this phone was in his pocket, but he wasn’t going to ask questions when he knew Dean’s number by heart and could call him right now.

“We’re sorry, but the number you have dialed is not in service. Please check the number and try again.”

No, no, no, no. Dean used this number; Castiel knew he did. How was it not in service?

Trying again only gave him the second message, and Castiel hunched over, pressing the edges of the phone into his forehead, desperately trying to keep his breathing steady. He couldn’t afford to panic now.

Think, think.
Maybe there was some clue as to what had given him the phone.

After a few more taps on the screen, Castiel found himself in what seemed to be the description of the company that made the phone, the amount of data available, any available accounts, and a host of other things that didn’t interest him. The company was Stark Industries, but Castiel had no idea what that was. The data plan seemed to be rather excessively large, but he didn’t need that.

He next ended up opening what seemed to be the address book, and there was only one number in it: Tony Stark.

Seeing no other option for him, Castiel pressed the call button, waiting nervously for whoever would pick it up.

The line rang for what seemed like an eternity but was probably only seconds, but Castiel couldn’t tell anymore because he was human.

Squeezing his eyes shut, Castiel brought his other hand up to pinch his nose, telling himself to count to three between breaths like he’d seen people on television do.

That was when the other person answered, beginning to speak immediately. “So are you going to make a habit of calling instead of randomly appearing unannounced in my kitchen? Because that’s something I can definitely get behind.”

Though Castiel had only seen him once in his new vessel, he instantly recognized the voice. “Gabriel, brother…” To his dismay, his voice broke halfway through, and he had to breathe in shakily to stabilize himself. “I need your help.”

Chapter End Notes

The actual Chapter 1 will be up Friday; it’s about 3,000 words or so, but chapters after that will average about 6,000 words at least in length, some stretching over into 9,000 words. Updates will then be weekly every Friday, so as to give me enough of a buffer that I can finish this story without making you guys wait in-between chapters.

There’s also a surprise pairing that I’m holding off on tagging because I want it to be a bit of a...surprise. But if someone tells me they absolutely hate surprises and another good reason, I will reconsider.

So...preliminary thoughts?
Some of you have expressed concerns about this surprise pairing waiting in the wings. I understand these concerns, and while I don't think I can alleviate them until the time comes, I will say that this pairing won't be typical. At all. I can promise a happy ending in this story over all, but I can't make promises for everyone reaching their own personal "happily ever after." But there were sort of...hints in the last story, little pieces of dialogue that you might've glossed over...

In any case, that's about all I'll say on the matter. As you may have noticed, the prologue was more of a teaser. Here we are about two weeks earlier in the timeline (if I have my math right).

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“It begins after you come back from Afghanistan in two thousand nine…”

Tony was largely of the impression that everyone around him had ingested a hallucinogenic substance and mass hallucinated the whole story. It had happened before, and it was certainly probable in this event.

It wasn’t that he disbelieved the ginger-haired man who called himself Jarvis (no, wait, he really did), but more that the whole story was so ridiculously implausible that he kind of wanted to congratulate them all and tell them to give it to Hollywood to make it into a movie. Because…archangels? God? Gabriel?

Him being Gabriel?

Tony had had a hard time not laughing Jarvis out of the room. The only reason he hadn’t done so was because of the earnest expression on his face and the changing expressions over the others’ faces. Pepper and Rhodey hadn’t seemed surprised at most of the story, but the others – the so-called Avengers – had at turns winced and had sympathetic expressions on.

It wasn’t until the end – when Jarvis’s voice had begun to waver and crack slightly – that Tony realized that whatever he personally thought of the story, it had been very, very real for the people in his hospital room. And the sword Loki had given him was definitely a point to their favor. Along with the fact that his chest was missing an arc reactor and there were no scars to show for it ever having been there in the first place.

Out of the entire story Jarvis told him, though, what hit him hardest was Obie – Obadiah. He had difficulty believing that his pseudo-father figure had betrayed him like that, practically offering him to the terrorists on a silver plate.

But at the same time… Something in him just knew. With a sickening sense of finality, Tony couldn’t help but remember the weapons the terrorists had used. And how else would they have gotten hold of them without someone dealing to them under the table? Someone able to slip it under Tony’s nose?
Not that he’d been very responsible to begin with. The guilt he felt was slightly alleviated by the knowledge that sometime during the last few years – years that *he couldn’t remember* – he’d cancelled weapons production and moved Stark Industries into a new direction. And he didn’t know why an archangel would even be interested in headlining a Fortune 500 company to begin with.

At the end of it all, after Jarvis had related the entire story – essentially Tony’s life in the last couple years – Tony had been left alone. They’d taken one look at his face, which had probably looked extremely dumbfounded, and given him some much needed privacy.

Tony had taken the opportunity to get out of bed and into some proper clothes, fingers tracing over the cloth of the dark sweatshirt he had apparently been wearing…before. When he’d seemingly been Gabriel.

His fingers clenched in the soft cloth, eyes squeezing shut as he tried to shut out the oppressive silence. He pressed the palm of his hand into his forehead, desperately trying to focus on something other than how quiet it was. For a moment he wished that he had someone else in the room with him, someone who would talk and fill the silence.

But he didn’t.

Forcing himself to take a deep breath, Tony let his hand drop, opening his eyes as he refocused on his clothes. He needed to get dressed, and then he could see about getting out of here.

As it turned out, despite his clean bill of health, S.H.I.E.L.D. personnel were leery of letting him out. Something about legal issues, although Tony suspected it was something else because of the looks they kept shooting him.

It was like they expected him to just vanish before their eyes.

Or perform a magic trick. He’d go with that.

Rhodey eventually rescued him, reminding the doctors that there was nothing wrong with Tony and they could release him without a problem. Once free, Tony met Pepper in a really fancy looking plane on the deck of a gigantic flying carrier (a *flying* carrier! He really hoped he’d been the one to design it). He half-expected to see Jarvis and the three kids sitting around somewhere, and was relieved (disappointed? Why would he be disappointed?) that they weren’t.

Instead of Malibu, he ended up in a gigantic tower in New York that had his name plastered on it.

Pepper and Rhodey must’ve read something of his thoughts on his face, because they shared a quiet look and left him alone.

Which half of him vehemently protested to while the other just desperately wanted to make some sense of his new world.

The penthouse of this tower – *his*, he reminded himself – looked like something he would’ve designed himself. It was aesthetically sleek, the furniture comfortable but formal. There were pictures pinned to the fridge in the kitchen, and Tony was abruptly reminded of the fact that he had *kids*.

All the food in the house looked nothing like what he tended to eat. He absentmindedly took a popsicle from the deep freezer and unwrapped it, looking over the drawings. He could clearly tell that they were of the Avengers.

Most jarring was the one picture of a man who looked like himself, but there were giant wings
arching out from his back and a glow around his body. Written in childish writing at the top were the words, “My Daddy Tony.”

Throat thick, Tony had to turn and leave the kitchen. He couldn’t deal with that now.

Instead, he sat down on the couch, picking up a tablet that lay on the table. There were other signs of people living in the tower strewn about the living room now that he took a closer look; there was a blouse tossed over a chair at the bar, a book lying on an armchair by the window, a toy car under the table, a lone sock stuffed between the couch cushions, and an actual set of boxers that he found behind a pillow. He quickly dropped that, not wanting to know who had been having sex on this couch.

He turned his attention to the tablet, switching it on. It was his design; he’d recognize it even ten years from now. And that meant he had no trouble navigating the features and getting to where he needed to be – which was the Internet.

And he started from the beginning. Back in 2009 with Afghanistan.

By the evening, the others had filtered into the living room. The kids showed up first, the one who’d introduced himself as Dummy curling up besides Tony and leaning his head against his shoulder. Tony stiffened uncomfortably but made no move to push him off.

Although he couldn’t remember ever doing so before, the position felt familiar. And Tony wasn’t that much of a jerk that he’d push a kid off.

The other two came shortly afterwards, the girl pressed up against Tony’s other side while the boy leaned against her, looking up at Tony with dark eyes.

The picture he’d seen on the fridge flashed through Tony’s mind, and he swallowed. He was no one’s father.

He looked up a moment later to meet Jarvis’s calm eyes. There was no judgment in his face, just a calm acceptance and something else that Tony didn’t want to look too deeply into.

Pepper, Rhodey, and the tired-looking man came in next. They ended up on the carpet, Rhodey pulling out a pack of playing cards and engaging the other two in one of the most ridiculous games of go fish Tony had ever seen.

The blond man who’d been sitting at Tony’s bedside when he’d woken up – Steve – wandered in and took a seat on the armchair with the book, quietly leafing it open and beginning to read. He gave Tony a look but didn’t say anything.

Next were the red-headed woman and her close friend (boyfriend?). They joined the game, although the woman changed it to a game of poker, eyes flickering up to Tony every now and then. She also managed to draw Jarvis into it, and he had an excellent poker face.

Eventually unable to resist finding out just who the underwear had belonged to, Tony fished it out of where he’d last put it and held it out with a finger, well aware of the stares the kids were giving it.

“Uh-oh,” Dummy said, mashing his face into Tony’s shoulder.

“Oh hey,” the red-headed woman’s friend said, looking completely unperturbed. “That’s where it went.”
“Clint,” Pepper said calmly, “why was your underwear in the couch?”

“Alcohol and some bad life choices,” the man named Clint explained, catching the boxers as Tony threw it to him.

“That’s your excuse for everything,” the tired-looking man said, sounding distinctly unimpressed.

Clint shrugged shamelessly.

“Was it sex?” the girl next to Tony asked, her nose wrinkling. It took Tony a moment to recall that this was apparently Butterfingers, and that You was the one plastered next to her.

“No this time,” the woman answered calmly.

“By which you mean you have had sex on that couch at some point,” Rhodey pointed out.

“God, no,” Steve groaned, hiding his face in his book. It did nothing to hide how red his ears had become.

“It’s a good couch,” Clint said shamelessly.

“Ew,” Butterfingers said. She peered up at Tony. “Can we have the couch dry-cleaned?”

“Er…” Tony looked helplessly over at Jarvis.

“The couch was dry-cleaned,” Jarvis said, evidently taking pity on Tony. “Several times, in fact.”

“Do tell just why the couch needed to be dry-cleaned,” Loki said, walking regally into the room. Thor was several steps behind him, frowning down at his phone.

You responded in something that sounded vaguely like Chinese, although it could’ve been Japanese for all Tony knew. He swallowed, eyes dropping down to his tablet and the news site he had open that related one of the many missions the Avengers had had over the years.

“Oh, how crude, Barton,” Loki said, evidently understanding exactly what You had just told him. “I would have done it on the balcony.”

Thor sighed, nudging Loki’s shoulder with his own. “Loki.” The word dripped with disapproval.

“Thor,” Loki mimicked, brushing him off.

“The balcony’s uncomfortable,” Dummy said, moving his head to look up at Loki. “Why would someone want to do that there?”

“I think that any further questions relating to this topic should be asked elsewhere,” Pepper said immediately, giving Loki and Clint a sharp glare.

“Thank you,” Steve said.

Tony just barely resisted asking if Steve had ever had sex before. The dynamics of the relationships he was seeing here were still too unfamiliar for him to feel comfortable with jumping in and saying anything.

“I have a question,” Butterfingers said. “Is it true that you gave birth to a horse?”

In the dead silence that ensued from this question, Butterfingers proceeded to look completely
innocent, tilting her head to the side in the way that all little girls did (at least in Tony’s admittedly limited experience).

“Oh God.” Pepper buried her face in her hands.

Rhodey desperately looked like he was trying not to lose it, but Clint had no such qualms. He’d fallen over against his friend, shaking helplessly with laughter.

The other man pinched his nose between his fingers, sighing heavily.

“Butterfingers,” Jarvis said reprovingly, frowning.

“Norse myths are interesting,” Butterfingers said defensively, tucking a hand into the crook of Tony’s elbow and holding on.

“You don’t say,” Tony finally managed, chancing a glance up at Loki, who wore an unreadable expression.

“Loki does have the ability to shape shift,” Thor answered, tapping a finger on his phone screen. “He did at one point turn into a horse. The results were most intriguing.”

“I don’t think we need to hear any more of this,” Steve said quickly.

“So he did,” Butterfingers said triumphantly.

“I must agree with the Captain on this, dear,” Loki eventually said, shooting his grinning brother a dark look. “You are too young to hear the dirtier details.”

“We’re not that young,” Dummy said sullenly, though he did sound vaguely relieved.

Without thinking, Tony let a hand brush through his hair. “Young enough if you don’t feel comfortable talking about that. How old are you anyway? I’m guessing there’s a reason you look like a kid, considering I built you back in the eighties.” He regretted the words the moment they left his mouth (foot, meet mouth. He’d never hated his motor mouth more).

All eyes snapped to him, and Tony felt like squirming. Only years of experience under the eyes of the media stopped him from actually doing so.

Dummy looked stricken; Tony’s mouth tasted like ashes. Everyone else looked rather peculiar as well – probably them realizing that he wasn’t the archangel they claimed he’d been.

Fingers tightening on his tablet, Tony managed to dredge up a blank grin, making sure his face was otherwise smoothened out. “So, this has been a great time and all, but I’m gonna go and do some important work.”

Steve moved first, leaning forward. “No, Tony, wait. You don’t—”

“Have to go? Actually, I do. There’s a lot I need to catch up on.” Tony kept talking, kept moving, because otherwise he’d have to stop and fully take in and analyze the expressions everyone was wearing (and face their disappointment because he wasn’t who they wanted – could never be that person). He disentangled himself from Dummy and Butterfingers, taking his tablet with him. “It’s been great, but I’ll be down in the shop. Don’t wait up.” He slipped past Thor and Loki before anyone else could react, making a beeline to the elevator.

He made an educated guess as to the floor his workshop was on and was sorely relieved when the
doors opened to that heavenly sight.

Dropping the tablet on a table, Tony came to a stop in front of the suit everyone called Iron Man. Except for the team, S.H.I.E.L.D., and Pepper and Rhodey, no one knew Tony Stark (Gabriel) and Iron Man were one and the same. He wasn’t sure just why the angel who’d been playing as Tony Stark had kept it a secret; it didn’t really seem like Tony’s style. He would’ve screamed it from the rooftops (I am Iron Man) because no one would’ve believed that billionaire playboy Tony Stark could be a superhero (and he’d prove them all wrong). And then there wouldn’t have been any of that vigilante stuff for three years.

He traced the seams of the suit, fingers coming to play at the edges of the arc reactor. Three years, and he was sure technology had improved in leaps and bounds since then. The tablet was only a small mark of that. The arc reactor had been further improved and released to the public to promote green energy. Stark Industries was at the forefront of the green energy movement and sponsoring anyone who had a brilliant idea. That was something he could see an archangel doing (but they weren’t fluffy-winged and sweet, something whispered inside him; they were light and fury and destruction and death in one terrifying package).

Blinking, Tony jolted back to himself, dropping his hand from where it had splayed out over the round shape of the arc reactor. Unconsciously, he reached up to his own chest, where not a sign remained of the reactor he’d had in there. Jarvis had said nothing about it, and Tony didn’t know if anyone else knew about it. If Gabriel had been riding around in his body, he’d probably taken care of it all.

There was a mirror hanging in the bathroom he had down here, and Tony went up to it, flicking on the light as he did so he could stare at his reflection.

He didn’t see anything different about himself. There weren’t more wrinkles, gray hairs, or spots to show for several years having passed. It was like he’d just jumped from 2009 right into 2012, not even dropping into the intervening years. Had Gabriel halted his aging?

Keeping his breathing calm, Tony slowly pulled off his sweater, slipping it off his arms. He pressed fingers into his sternum, where he last remembered a metal obstruction being (and wires trailing out of a goddamn hole in his chest to a car battery). Tony blinked, fingers pressing hard into the skin for a moment before he pulled them away. No scars. Nothing there to show for shrapnel, the deaths of soldiers, and Yinsen’s work.

Not wanting to see his unmarred chest anymore, Tony pulled his sweater back on and flicked the light off, heading back into the workshop.

There was a rather large cot set up against a wall, and there were three pillows and blankets on it and what looked like stuffed toys. Nothing to show that Tony slept there.

Maybe angels didn’t need sleep.

Swallowing hard, Tony turned his back to the cot and sat down in a chair, fingers itching to do something.

He’d heard the story from Jarvis, and then he’d gotten the official news stories to get an outsider’s perspective. But what about visual confirmation?

Tongue darting out to wet his lips in nervous anticipation, Tony quietly asked, “JARVIS?”

There wasn’t even a pause before the familiar voice responded, and Tony almost wilted in relief that
this one thing hadn’t changed despite everything. “Sir?”

Tony swallowed, heart beating nervously in his chest. “Do you have video footage from when I”—
he stuttered mentally—“he came back from Afghanistan?”

There wasn’t a verbal response, but a blue screen popped up in front of him, showing a single frame
with a play button superimposed over it. Heart in mouth, Tony pressed it.

The video started with a dark room – the Malibu house. A figure walked in, lights turning on as he
entered the room. Tony’s breath caught as he saw himself walk and talk to JARVIS.
There were no physical differences between the person in the video and the person watching it now,
but Tony couldn’t remember a thing.

He watched as his past self – Gabriel – walked down into the workshop and greet the bots – who
were still bots at that point.

His other self stood still and studied Dummy for a long moment, face blank. It terrified Tony that he
couldn’t read his own face.

Then: “Blasphemy.”

And the person on screen transformed. It was still Tony (Gabriel), but the mannerisms – the way he
talked, the way he moved – they were all different. The base was still Tony, but there was just
something more.

The next several minutes of the video were confusing as Gabriel/Tony spoke cryptically and dropped
angelic names like it was old hat. JARVIS sounded wary, but Dummy seemed right at home with
Gabriel/Tony.

When the video finally finished on Gabriel/Tony beginning to throw together a new suit, Tony found
himself stunned, mind spinning with new information.

“‘I am Gabriel, that stand in the presence of God.’”

He’d said it first, and Jarvis had quoted it back at him just that morning.

And Gabriel…he’d died. Died and recovered this “grace” of his, which had put him in Tony’s body.
But now he was gone because of what had happened with the Leviathans.

“Martyred,” as Tony had heard someone put it when they thought he hadn’t been listening. And that
left Tony in the lurch with a bunch of people who all had their own preconceptions about how he
was supposed to act. And he couldn’t do that. He couldn’t be the person he’d just watched in the
video.

Swallowing, Tony discarded the screen, having seen enough. He was sure there was more footage
lying around, but he couldn’t stomach seeing that stranger in his skin walking around like nothing
was wrong.

“Sir?” JARVIS sounded cautious.

“I’m good, J.” The nickname left his mouth without conscious thought, and Tony had to stop himself
from flinching. “Just…cue up some music?”

There was a beat, and then the welcome chords of ACDC filled the ringing silence in his head.
Closing his eyes, Tony bowed his head, letting the familiar music fill his senses.

He could do this. He had to.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so, next chapter will be up next week on Friday. Here's to hoping that this chapter hasn't disappointed you all too badly after the prologue...
Chapter Notes

So a lot of you guys have been wondering about Castiel and Tony and Gabriel and how this all fits together, so all I can say is patience, little grasshopper. There is a master plan. An evil master plan. It remains to be seen if you love or hate this master plan. But we'll see when we get there.

In any case, enjoy this week's chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony didn’t sleep that night, too buzzed on anxiety and dread and the fear of nightmares. What he did instead was look into who everyone was because he was at a critical disadvantage here, and he didn’t like that (screams in the air and the sound of gunfire and shrapnel narrowing in on his heart).

JARVIS helped him out, giving him small notes that the actual files didn’t have, although Tony could tell there was so much more that he wasn’t saying.

Not that he blamed him for withholding the information. There was a time and place for everything, and right now Tony was relearning how to swim in a brand new ocean. Unneeded information now would just make things harder.

When it was eight in the morning, Tony finally called a stop to his researching and had his music shut off. He had what he needed.

Still, despite his preparations, Tony didn’t expect to find everyone in the kitchen on his floor. He knew for a fact that they all had kitchens on their individual floors, so why did they converge on his?

If there was one thing Tony did know, it was that he didn’t tend to get along well with people unless they had a thick skin and knew most of what he said was pure bullshit. And it wasn’t likely that they all had the requirements for getting along with him.

There were three people at the table whom he didn’t recognize. One brown-haired young woman sat next to Thor, talking quietly with him. The second young woman wore a soft looking muffler and didn’t seem at all perturbed to be the only one wearing a hat at the table. The third was an older man who seemed rather distressed to be sitting right next to Loki.

Considering what Tony had learned about Loki’s first days on Earth, this wasn’t surprising. From his research last night, he guessed the man was Erik Selvig, and the two ladies Jane Foster and Darcy Lewis. Jane was doubtlessly the one whispering with Thor, leaving Darcy to be the one wearing the hat.

“Tony,” Rhodey said, not sounding at all surprised to see him, “good to see you. Thought you might have decided to spend the next week down there.”

Tony slowly pulled a chair out, sitting down between Rhodey and Pepper. “I do that often now?” he asked carefully.

“You do tend to flit off to places,” Clint said, swilling his glass of orange juice around.
Tony didn’t deign to respond, accidentally catching Dummy’s eye and getting a blinding smile in return. Uncomfortable, he turned to Rhodey. “How long do you have until you have to go back?”

“I have no idea,” Rhodey said. “The Leviathans took a lot of high-profile people with them, one of them being my superior. They’re still working out what the hell happened.” He grinned wryly. “And the ones in the know aren’t telling.”

Tony had guessed as much from all the articles he’d been reading. Just about the only reason there wasn’t mass panic was because the President was still there and the Avengers had very publicly assured everyone they would take care of any threats. There was still panic, but not as much as there could be. Tony couldn’t say the same for the rest of the world.

“I trust last night went well?” Jarvis asked, giving Tony a concerned look.

Tony shot him a glance, wondering if he was connected to JARVIS. “Yep. Fine.” Then, because he did feel vaguely guilty about the way he’d run off last night, he added, “Sorry about running off like that.”

“It’s fine,” Steve said, turning the heat off the stove. The weird thing was that he sounded totally earnest about it, like it really was 100% fine Tony had just skedaddled like a bat out of hell.

“So I’ve always wondered about this,” Darcy started casually, fingers twiddling with a pencil. “Does God really exist?”

It took Tony a few seconds to realize the question had been directed at him and not anybody else. “You’re asking me?”

Darcy looked like this was a foregone conclusion. “Well, yeah.”

“Mr. Stark has always been a devout atheist,” Jarvis said.

“Ironic because you can’t really be devout if you’re an atheist,” Tony said unthinkingly.

There was a short pause from the kids and Jarvis, who all looked rather stricken. It took Tony a second to rewind what he’d just said and remember with a mental wince that he’d watched Gabriel say the same.

He refused to meet anyone’s eyes, a heavy weight in his stomach. In a subtle effort (not blatant at all) to hide his discomfort, he barreled on, “So, no, I don’t believe in Him.”

Clint snorted. “Unbelievable.”

“Clint,” Natasha sighed, pinching her nose.

“I’ve gotta agree with him,” Darcy said, ignoring the look Jane shot her. “An angel saying God doesn’t exist? Kinda hard to believe.”

Tony stiffened, jaw tightening. He wasn’t an angel.

Before he could say something that he would probably end up deeply regretting, Thor spoke up. “I must return to Asgard.”

Tony remembered with a jolt that Thor had introduced himself as king of Asgard. Which was a mythical place in Norse mythology that apparently wasn’t so mythological anymore.

“Do you know when you’ll be back?” Steve asked.
“No.” Thor smiled ruefully. “I am king now, Steven. The role bears with it responsibilities I cannot abandon lightly. But worry not. If Midgard ever falls under threat again, I will be here to offer my aid and that of Asgard’s.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Steve said.

“You do have a place here,” Tony interjected despite his better judgment. He didn’t flinch when all eyes landed on him. “Empty floor and all that from what I can tell on the floor plan. So you’re welcome back anytime.”

Thor inclined his head. “Thank you, Gabriel.”

This time Tony did flinch, although he managed to quickly cover it up with a weak smile. “Tony, please.”

Thor gave an amused smile. “Of course.”

“He’s all proper like that with everyone,” Clint told Tony, eyes sharp.

“It’s just the Allspeak,” Jane said.

“Allspeak?” Tony asked interestedly before he could stop himself. “Is that exactly what it sounds like?”

“To a t,” Jane confirmed, giving a small smile.

“Huh.” That put a whole new spin on the way Thor and Loki sounded when they spoke.

“I will be leaving as well,” Loki said quietly, green eyes on Tony. “I have my own duties to attend to.”

“Advisor to the king?” Bruce said. “Involve anything new?”

“It is a new position,” Loki said. “Therefore, nothing has been done before.”

“It is exactly as Loki wishes,” Thor said, sounding fond. “He has always done best with forging his own path.”


“You’re both leaving?” Tony asked, eyes darting between Thor and Loki.

“Yes,” Thor answered evenly, tilting his head slightly.

Loki took a moment longer to answer, eyes keen as he studied Tony. “I will return,” he promised eventually. “Asgard requires a liaison with Midgard.”

“Heaven save us all,” Jarvis said dryly. “Loki the Liesmith serving as liaison?”

“The key word is Liesmith,” Loki pointed out, mouth twitching slightly at the corners.

“My brother’s silver tongue is talented,” Thor assured them all, apparently not caring of the innuendo in his words, although Darcy snorted loudly. “He will do a most excellent job.”

“That’s something I really didn’t need to know,” Clint muttered, wrinkling his nose.
Erik looked highly doubtful of Loki’s capabilities but said nothing.

Loki and Thor stood up at the same time, Thor giving Jane a lingering kiss.

Loki didn’t look away from Tony. “Gabriel – Anthony, I would speak with you.”

Anthony wasn’t much better than Gabriel, but Tony figured he’d take what he could get. At least Loki had amended it.

“Sure,” Tony said with a casualty he didn’t feel. He led Loki into the living room, stopping to stand in the middle and turning to face Loki.

Loki’s hands were clasped behind his back and his brow furrowed. “Gabriel,” he started again, eyes narrowing when Tony couldn’t help the reflexive flinch. “Anthony,” he tried, head inclining imperceptibly, “are you all right?”

The question was so out of the ballpark Tony foundered for a moment, lost for words. Was he all right? No, no, he wasn’t.

But… “I’m fine.”

Loki’s mouth twisted oddly. “As you say,” he said quietly. “It’s fine…to not be all right. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Tony said quickly, too quickly. “It’s all good,” he added. “Really.”

“Hm.” Loki didn’t sound convinced.

“You didn’t just want to ask me that, did you?” Tony asked uncomfortably, folding his arms.

Loki seemed to abandon the former subject with great reluctance. “No,” he conceded. “Simply this…I know what it is like to be conflicted with one’s identity. But keep in mind, Gabriel, you are who you are. Nothing can change that.”

Except he wasn’t him. He wasn’t Gabriel.

He wasn’t an all-powerful archangel who’d single-handedly saved the universe mere days ago.

“Yeah,” Tony said, nodding once.

“Your sword is on the mantel,” Loki said, eyes flicking to the mantel where the odd sword was propped.

“Yeah,” Tony repeated, forcing a smile. “Got that. That all?”

“Yes,” Loki said, looking too knowing for Tony’s taste. “For now. I will see you, Gabriel.”

He wasn’t Gabriel. But Tony said nothing, clamping his mouth shut.

Thor emerged from the kitchen. “Are you ready, Loki?”

Finally, Loki looked away from Tony. “I am. Have you bid your lover farewell?”

“Jane is no simple lover,” Thor said regally, frowning rather disapprovingly.

“Then is she your betrothed?”
Thor tilted his head to the side. “Not yet.” The words were quiet.

Loki frowned slightly at that, but he said nothing more.

Tony stepped back as Thor came up to Loki, eyes meeting the rest of the group who were hovering in the doorway of the kitchen. He turned away from them, focusing on the two Norse deities currently making their way to the balcony.

Once they were outside, they turned to face the others and incline their heads regally.

Then Thor looked up at the sky. “Heimdall, open the Bifrost.”

Tony had all of a second to wonder what the hell was up with Thor talking to the sky before he felt something shift and a torrent of rainbow light engulfed Thor and Loki, obscuring them from view. He followed the light up as it vanished into the sky, exhaling sharply when he felt that strange shift again. Then it was gone, and there was nothing remaining of Thor and Loki.

“Amazing, isn’t it?” Jane asked from right behind Tony, startling him. “An Einstein-Rosen bridge, and it’s right on Asgard.”

“More like a rainbow bridge,” Tony said unthinkingly. “Mixture of vibranium and magic and watched over by an all-seeing Æsir.” It was the last unfamiliar word that had him jolt back to himself, and he looked back at the others, seeing them all stare at him.

Tony’s mouth went dry, and he scrambled for something to say, something that would relax the atmosphere, when Darcy cleared her throat and said casually, “Mind if we crash here for the next few months?”

“We can’t,” Erik said immediately, looking down at Darcy.

“It’s not like we can go back,” Darcy said. “Thor just barged in and grabbed us before we could give notice.”

Jane shook herself. “I’ll figure something out,” she said, giving Tony one last strange look.

“Stay if you want,” Tony finally managed, folding his arms across his chest. “I’ve got the space.”

“We’re not building another floor,” Pepper said immediately.

Tony gave her an odd look. “The tower’s finished.”

For some reason, that had Pepper press her lips together. “Right.”

Ugh. What had he gone and said now?

Tony forced a casual-looking shrug. “I’m gonna head down to the shop again. Still got a bit more work to do.”

“If you don’t mind,” Bruce said, “could you stop by my lab in a few hours? There’s something I need you to check on.”

Tony paused. “You know I’m not in your field, right?”

“Just a second opinion sort of thing,” Bruce explained. “You understand those graphs of yours better than me.”
"Those graphs are supposed to be easy to read."

"You keep tweaking them." Bruce smiled wryly, holding his hand up to show a small distance between his index and thumb. "Quite a bit."

"I'll be down," Tony promised.

"And like always," Rhodey said, "I reserve the right to haul your ass out of there if you don't come up for air."

"If there was no air down there, I think you'd know by now."

"Ooh, science jokes," Darcy said. "Can I join?"

Tony didn't even have to think about what to answer to that. He just rolled his eyes and left.

The entire thing almost gave him hives. The atmosphere was so uneasy around him.

The best thing Tony could do was remove himself from it.

Removing himself from the situation only worked for a few hours because then Steve came down with a sketchpad and plopped himself on the couch in the corner of the workshop. With him came the kids, although Jarvis was thankfully not with them. Tony didn't know what he would do with both JARVIS and Jarvis. He hadn't yet tried to address JARVIS outside of the workshop.

It was growing more likely that Jarvis was actually JARVIS personified, but Tony didn't feel comfortable with him. Jarvis seemed too knowing for Tony’s comfort, and there was something in his eyes that Tony didn’t want to read into. The kids were simply…less. Easier for Tony to handle.

Even if that wasn’t by much.

Dummy came up to Tony’s side, peering up at the glowing holographs. “Whatcha doing?” he asked.


“Oh.” Dummy sobered at the reminder that Tony didn’t remember a thing.

“So…” Tony wiped a hand on his shirt, looking down at Dummy. “How you liking it? Being human?”

“We're technically artificial intelligences,” Dummy said, pronouncing the words as if they were a scientific term. “But humanoid.”

“Right,” Tony said, wetting his lips. “Makes sense.”

“You don’t remember at all,” Butterfingers noted, voice hushed.

“No.” Tony didn’t look at her, but his eyes fell on Steve. The man seemed utterly absorbed in his sketchpad, though Tony would bet one of his cars that the man was paying attention.

You said something that Tony didn’t understand, the words running together in the way that a foreign language sounded like to those who didn’t know it.

Tony inhaled shakily. “I didn’t understand that.”
You didn’t look too bothered as he said in English, “But you’re here.”

“It’s all we wanted,” Dummy said, fingers curling in the hem of Tony’s shirt.

Tony didn’t know what to say beyond the automatic “I’m sorry” that sprang to mind, although he didn’t voice it. Instead, he hesitantly patted Dummy’s head and returned his attention to the screen.

He had his email open, looking through what the board members had been sending him over the past few days. Apparently Pepper had released a memo saying he’d been ill, thus saving him the trouble of finding an excuse as to why he’d been incognito for the last several days.

Flicking back to the company’s data, Tony continued looking through the changes Gabriel had implemented during his tenure in Tony’s body. It frustrated him that he couldn’t find anything wrong with what Gabriel had done. It was everything he would’ve done had he come back from Afghanistan whole – had he been more responsible to begin with.

Tony’s hand unconsciously came up to rub at his chest, exactly at the spot where the arc reactor had been scant days (years) ago.

He caught the look Steve sent him – concerned and curious all at once – and he stopped, letting his hand drop. No one knew he’d had the reactor in his chest, and he intended to keep it that way.

He could feel the nightmares clawing at the edges of his mind, and he fully intended to keep them off as long as possible.

“Dad,” Dummy said quietly, the word freezing Tony in place, “are you okay?”

_Dad. Dad, are you okay?_

“I need to go.”

Tony was gone before anyone could react.

“Dad, are you okay?”

Tony had enough presence of mind to change into something more suited for business before he barged into his office, startling Pepper into dropping the pen she’d been writing with.

“Tony!” Pepper sounded startled. “What are you doing here?”

Tony frowned at her, skin feeling uncomfortably tight. “What am I doing here?” He gestured widely. “I’m here to work.” He shot Pepper a sharp look. “Will that be a problem, Ms. Potts?”

Pepper’s mouth dropped slightly open. “To – Mr. Stark, you don’t have——”

“I’m here,” Tony interrupted. “I’m better,” he added, referring to the memo Pepper had sent out. “You’ve always been after me to do my work, and now that I’m actually here you don’t want me?”

“You haven’t——” Pepper stopped, biting her lip. She took a breath. “I know this has been an adjustment for you,” she started quietly. “The company’s fine right now. You can take some time to adjust, get used to things.”

Tony couldn’t help a short laugh. “Have you seen the news? I…I’m the CEO of this company. I need to set an example. I – _he’s_ been responsible for these years. It’d be bad if that suddenly changed.”
“Not entirely responsible,” Pepper said, smiling wryly. “There have never been so many pranks.”

The reminder that Tony hadn’t been Tony (but rather Gabriel) sat heavily in his stomach. He kept his face blank and walked into his office, taking a seat behind his desk and starting up his computer.

His eyes flicked up to see Pepper close the door behind her as she entered. She was as beautiful as always, he noted absently. But…

There was nothing.

Tony swallowed, looking back down at the screen. Maybe it was a fluke.

“I know you’re not all right, Tony,” Pepper said softly, coming up to the desk. “You don’t have to pretend.”

“At least I’m not secretly dying of palladium poisoning and making you CEO and giving Rhodemy the armor because I only have weeks left to live,” Tony said absently.

Pepper paused. “That’s…oddly specific.”

Tony stopped, rewinding what he’d just said. It was. Strangely so, and yet it rang true. With his old reactor running on palladium, some kind of poisoning would’ve been inevitable. But Gabriel had discovered vibranium and made the reactor completely clean. Tony had looked over those notes, and he still wasn’t entirely certain as to how Gabriel had come across that element.

It was probably due to his angelic nature.

“Maybe,” Tony finally said, opening up his e-mail. “Will that be all, Ms. Potts?”

Pepper looked just a bit taken aback at the abrupt dismissal. Her eyes pinched in worry, but she nodded crisply. “Yes, Mr. Stark.”

Tony barely noticed as Pepper left, too busy sorting through his emails and figuring out what was complete junk and what had to be checked over to be ignored later.

He’d just dumped out half of his Inbox – most of those emails being from the military demanding to know just what was going on (probably because of Rhodemy) – when a new one made him pause. He wasn’t familiar with the sender, but the last name sounded vaguely familiar.

Fujikawa… From the information in the files Tony had looked over briefly, it was a Japanese business that Stark Industries had begun to do business with very recently.

It wasn’t any different from any of the other emails he’d dumped from his Inbox, except for that subject line. The subject line had only two words, but they were words that shook Tony to the core for a reason he couldn’t explain.

Hello, Brother

Who was this Rumiko Fujikawa?

Lips pressed tightly together, Tony opened the e-mail.

Dear Mr. Stark,

I’ve not heard from you in light of recent events, and I trust that this message finds you in good health. I am sorry that I was unable to help you in your time of need, but you
have always been incredibly resourceful. Your plan was not what I anticipated, but perhaps I should have considering your nature.

Recent events in my family’s company have greatly pressed me for time, and I regret that I am not able to join you now.

If there is anything at all that I can do, please let me know.

Sincerely,

Fujikawa Rumiko

That…had not been what he expected. Tony frowned, perusing the body of the e-mail again. It contained no hint as to why the subject line had addressed him so familiarly, and there was nothing else that could tell him just why Gabriel had asked her for help. Or why an archangel would even need to ask someone like her for help.

One thing was clear: she knew what was really up with the Leviathans, and she knew that Gabriel had been responsible for taking care of them.

Tony just didn’t know what to do about it.

He propped his chin up with a hand, mind whirring furiously. He’d never heard of Fujikawa outside of the business ventures SI were doing with their company, and that was only recently. They’d definitely not done any business ventures before Afghanistan, so Gabriel had been the one to set the ball rolling.

This Rumiko hadn’t said anything signifying that she was the CEO of her company, but a quick Google search showed that her parents had vanished and that left her in charge of the company now. A company that she couldn’t leave to join Gabriel even though she obviously wanted to.

And Tony was pathetically grateful for that. He didn’t need another complete stranger to deal with on top of everything else.

But he couldn’t just not reply to this email. That would raise flags.

So how should he do this?

After a few more long minutes of thought, some of which were spent looking over the paperwork Pepper had left him, Tony settled on an ambiguous reply that wouldn’t give anything away.

He sent it off before he could overthink the problem, and then he turned his attention to the dreaded paperwork. For some reason, Pepper had left a pink post-it note attached to the entire pile that forbade him from leaving any lewd jokes in the footnotes.

What the hell had Gabriel gotten up to?

Due to luck and the fact that Tony didn’t leave his office until late into the night, he didn’t run into anyone he didn’t want to. Even then he only left because he was getting timed texts from Pepper nagging at him to leave.

Which he did. Eventually.

But not for sleep, even though it had already been about two days since he’d last slept and his mind was hazy with exhaustion. It was nothing a good cup of coffee wouldn’t fix, so that was what he
made himself upon reaching his penthouse.

He didn’t expect Natasha to join him while he was waiting on the coffee. She said nothing for the first few minutes, simply leaning back against the counter next to Tony, arms folded across her chest. She was dressed in sweatpants and loose-fitting shirt that showed off her arms and collarbone. A necklace with a silver arrow charm hugged her neck, and Tony remembered that Clint was an archer.

He turned his attention back to the coffee machine, worry churning in his stomach. Natasha was beautiful. She was everything he would have gone for before.

And he felt nothing.

He could admit she was gorgeous, but there was nothing that pulled him to flirt with her or even try to get her in bed. Even if she hadn’t been somewhat involved with Clint, Tony couldn’t picture doing it.

Maybe it was a fluke – the fact that Pepper and Natasha were too close to him.

Rubbing the bridge of his nose with a thumb, Tony took the finished coffee and poured the steaming liquid into his mug. He added some cream and sugar, but kept it mostly black, needing the caffeine jolt.

It wasn’t until he took his first sip that Natasha spoke, voice quiet. “I know what it’s like to be unmade.”

Tony almost choked on his coffee. It was only luck that allowed him to swallow without it going down the wrong tube. “What?”

“It was a long time ago.” Natasha didn’t meet his eyes, instead looking off at the other side of the kitchen. “What I learned was that you need to know who you are before you can form your identity. Know it and hold onto it.”

Holding onto his identity wasn’t the problem. Tony knew who he was. But did they?

“They miss you,” Natasha said, finally meeting Tony’s eyes.

Tony took a moment to answer. “It’s not me they miss.”

“You and he are the same,” Natasha answered quietly.

“I’m not,” Tony bit out, irked.

Natasha’s lips quirked up into a small smile. “The first time I met you, you drew me into a competition, engaging me in Latin, French, Italian, and Russian. I had no idea what to think of you. You’d already thrown off all my expectations. I didn’t find out until later who you really were.”

“That wasn’t me,” Tony repeated, taking a swig of his coffee, wishing it was alcohol. He was too sober for this.

“That wasn’t me,” Tony repeated, taking a swig of his coffee, wishing it was alcohol. He was too sober for this.

“He was a facet of you,” Natasha said. “I know you’ve seen some of the footage. You and he are very alike.”

Tony looked to the side, refusing to meet her eyes. “He’s different.”

“Not so different,” Natasha noted, eyes soft.
“I can’t be him,” Tony said, preferring to look at Natasha’s nose rather than her eyes. It was safer.

“We don’t expect you to be,” Natasha said.

Tony didn’t immediately snort and call bullshit, but it was a close thing.

“You’re not the same as him,” Natasha continued, “but you’ve changed. So have I. That doesn’t mean we can’t find facets of our old selves inside us.”

Tony swirled his coffee around, looking down into the dark liquid. He didn’t point out that he didn’t remember a thing. He didn’t point out that for him, several days ago he’d still been in Afghanistan. He didn’t point out that seeing Gabriel in his body terrified him so much he couldn’t stand watching the rest of the footage JARVIS had compiled. Because that hadn’t been him. It had been someone he didn’t recognize in his body.

Gabriel wasn’t an old self. He was a new one that Tony didn’t recognize. He was one who’d built this entire family around himself, and Tony didn’t know what to do with it.

He said none of this. Instead, he simply gave her a bland smile, tipped the mug in her direction in a mocking salute, and wandered down into his workshop.

To avoid his nightmares, he had better work.

He couldn’t breathe. There were rough hands pushing his head down into the tepid water, and it was rushing down his nose and into his mouth and he couldn’t breathe. He desperately tried to keep the car battery out of reach of the water displaced by his frantic struggling, but someone pushed him from behind and it bumped into the barrel and shorted out, shocking his chest—

“So you’re a man who has everything…and nothing.”

The heavy weight of the arc reactor, radiating pain through his chest and pressing down on his lungs so he could never get a good breath and it hurt but he couldn’t stop and whine about it because he needed to get out—

The giant tree in front of him and the burning sand under his worn shoes and he was so tired but he couldn’t stop because something was just tugging and tugging at him, so he lugged himself forward on tired legs and through hazy vision because he still couldn’t breathe and he needed it so, so desperately and then he was at the tree, reaching out and touching it and—

Gabriel was there in his visage, smirking down at him and saying, “This is my show now,” and reaching down to rip the reactor right from his chest—

With a strangled gasp, Tony hit the floor hard, slapping away the hands that reached for him and scrambling back, scrabbling at his chest and panicking when he couldn’t find it – he couldn’t find the reactor.

“Where is it? Where is it?” The words were breathless, filled with panic, and Tony couldn’t stop them from falling out senselessly. “Where is it? The reactor – where is it?”

“Tony, Tony, calm down! Breathe, Tony, breathe—”

How could he breathe without the damn reactor? “I-I can’t – the reactor—”

The hands were pulling his away, stopping him from ripping his shirt open in search of something
that wasn’t there but should have been. “Shh, Tony, calm down. It’s all right. Just breathe.” His hands were pulled to a warm, solid chest. “Breathe with me, Tony. In – out. Come on, Tony. Follow my lead.”

And so help him, Tony did. He followed the rhythm of the movements under his hands, his panicky breaths gradually evening out to something more even-keeled. And he could feel his heartbeat – steady and perfect – slowing down. The rush of blood in his ears faded out until he could bring himself to focus on the person in front of him.

It was Steve. Steve, who was rubbing his thumbs over Tony’s hands and still keeping up a calm stream of words that washed over Tony, pulling him out of the well of panic he’d fallen into.

His breath hitched. “Steve?”

Steve’s eyes crinkled in concern. “You with me, Tony?”

That was when Tony realized he was still in his workshop, lying at the side of one of his tables, having fallen asleep while working. And he’d had a nightmare, woken up in the grips of a panic attack, and needed Steve Rogers to pull him out of it.

“Oh – oh shit.” Tony tried to pull his hands away, only to find his fingers curling desperately into Steve’s shirt.

“Shh, Tony.” Steve pulled him into a warm hug, strong arms enveloping Tony. “It’s all right.”

It took a moment for Tony’s scrambled brain to really register that he was being hugged rather firmly by Steve, but even then he couldn’t figure out why.

“Wha – Steve.” He shuddered once, vestiges of panic still at the fringes of his mind.

“It’s okay. You had a nightmare.” The words were quiet.

“No shit, Sherlock.” Tony inhaled, shuddering, once – twice. And then he just slumped into Steve’s hold, fully aware that he wasn’t getting out of this one easy.

They sat there, twined together, for several minutes by Tony’s internal clock. In that time the last remnants of the panic attack he’d suffered faded away, and the silence in his head was held off by the reassuring beat of Steve’s heart.

Tony was just becoming rather drowsy when Steve spoke, his voice soft. “Do you want to talk about it?”

The words jolted Tony out of his haze, and he pulled away from Steve, relieved that the other let him. “No.”

Steve let go of Tony’s hands, letting his own drop to his knees. “Talking helps,” he said quietly.

“In my experience, alcohol does, too.”

Steve quirked an eyebrow, pursing his lips. “I think you should,” he said eventually. “I know this can’t be easy for you.”

“What tipped you off, Einstein?”

Steve’s smile was wistful. “A lot.” His eyes dropped to Tony’s chest. “Do you want to at least tell me why you were talking about the arc reactor? You mentioned it before – right after you woke up
Tony breathed, taking in a deep breath and letting it out, relishing in the action he couldn’t have done only mere days ago in his memory. His eyes darted to the side, where the suit stood with the arc reactor glowing softly in its chest. He shouldn’t – he really shouldn’t.

But he was also so tired. Tired of hiding most of what he remembered and felt. And Steve… Steve felt warmer in a way the others didn’t. He’d only gotten this feeling from Pepper and Rhodey before. And while the bots who weren’t bots anymore cared (and might even love him), Tony didn’t feel comfortable sharing something like this with them.

“I got hit with shrapnel from one of my bombs,” Tony blurted out before he could reconsider. “I – there was an operation. End result – walked away with an arc reactor in the chest.” After a car battery and Tony receiving a revelation during water torture, but he wasn’t ready to talk about that.

Steve exhaled sharply in horror. “In your chest?”

Tony shrugged very, very casually. “Yeah. No big deal. Though”—he took another deep breath—“I am glad it’s out. One good thing Gabriel did for me.”

“That – that the only thing?” Steve said it cautiously, as if he suspected what Tony’s answer would be.

“I wake up and I don’t know anyone,” Tony said. “And those I do know expect more of me that I don’t have to give.”

“You don’t have to,” Steve said immediately.

“Don’t lie.” Tony grabbed hold of the edge of the desk and pulled himself upright, patting Steve’s shoulder once as he walked by him. “I know what they’re looking for when they look at me, but I don’t have it.”

“But you do.” Steve stood as well, gently touching Tony’s shoulder. “Just…be you.”

Tony really couldn’t help the snort he gave this time. “That’s not who they’re looking for. I’ve seen Gabriel in the act, and that’s not me.”

He made to brush Steve off, but the sound of Steve taking a deep breath and blurting out, “I see him in you” made him freeze.

Tony kept his words carefully even. “Is there supposed to be a distinction?”

“He’s just a part of you,” Steve said. “Just a part. You make up the rest.”

Tony looked hard at him, eyes scanning over his face. It didn’t take him long to realize Steve meant every word. “You really believe that.” His voice was quiet.

“I do.”

Tony smiled, a painful twist of the lips. “You’d be only one who does.”
“That’s not true,” Steve said heatedly. “They all want to know you.”

“This me? Or Gabriel me? Because you’ve only got me for now.” Tony rapped his fingers on the table, sitting back on it. “And it looks like you’re stuck with me.”

“That’s fine,” Steve said. “You’re still you.”

Tony stared at him. “Oh, good God.” He huffed out a disbelieving laugh. “You’re adorable.”

Steve’s brow furrowed. “You don’t believe me.”

“I believe you believe you. But you don’t speak for the others.” Tony picked up a spanner, twirling it around carelessly. “I’m a businessman, Steve. I read people. And them?” He pointed up with the spanner. “They look at me, and they see someone else. And the moment I open my mouth – the moment I do something – they know.” He tightened his lips, looking down at the spanner. “That’s not something I can fix.”

“It’s not something you need to,” Steve said. He sighed softly, reaching out to stop Tony’s anxious fidgeting with the spanner, gently prying it from his fingers. “I woke up seventy years in the future,” he started quietly. “I was lost and alone. And you – Gabriel – he gave me a home. He was just as lost and alone as I was. So I… I know what this is like. Being displaced in time – feeling out of sorts. I know.” He set the spanner down, looking down at their hands before slowly letting go. “And I…I’d like to help you. Please.”

Tony looked hard at him, eyes flickering between Steve’s hands and face. “You’re not doing this out of pity.”

Steve seemed vaguely insulted Tony would even suggest that. “No.”

Tony made a considering noise. “Because you really want to help.”

Steve gazed steadily at him, eyes implacable.

Tony blew out a gust of air, shrugging once. “Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Okay,” Tony repeated, smiling wryly.

Steve smiled broadly, glancing down at his feet before meeting Tony’s eyes. His ears looked just a bit pink.

Tony kept smiling, head tilting slightly as he studied the other man.

He didn’t. …Did he?

Tony didn’t know what he’d expected the next morning, but it wasn’t Steve not saying anything about what had happened. He’d thought for sure that Steve would’ve said something to one of the others – something that told them Tony wasn’t quite as all right as he was pretending to be.

But nada. Nothing.

It was a relief that he didn’t have to worry about it, and he felt guilty that he’d even thought that Steve would do such a thing. This was Captain America, a man who wouldn’t betray the confidence of another. And he was so different from anything Howard had ever told Tony, so there wasn’t even
that resentment that had smoldered for so long inside Tony. How could he resent a man who looked at Tony for who he was and didn’t look for someone else?

So Tony thought he could at least try and return the favor by not thinking that Steve was looking for someone else (looking for Gabriel) when he was looking at Tony. It was more difficult to make that change for the others, because they really were looking for Gabriel (regardless of what Steve had insisted).

Especially the kids.

The most experience Tony had with kids was high school and the university lectures he gave on occasion, and those weren’t kids. They were also human. His – these kids definitely weren’t.

So Tony did what he did best: avoid.

And he could do that by working. The only person capable of giving him a disappointed or searching look then was Pepper, and Tony had plenty of experience ignoring those. He’d soon get used to ignoring the others as well.

For now, he’d focus on his work, giving it a level of concentration he usually only afforded his pet projects. He couldn’t slack off, though, since he had a standard to live up to (his other self).

He’d gotten no response from Rumiko to his email, but he hadn’t really expected one. Her email had sounded like nothing other than a courtesy, and in the world of business, courtesy emails were responded to by the other party and then left at that.

He had no idea how many others had known that he hadn’t been quite human for the last few years. The fewer people he had to deal with, the better. It was already difficult enough with the ones he was living with.

Then there was Iron Man. Tony was not dropping that regardless of what the others thought. It was the one thing that seemed like him in this nightmare. No, he was going to hold onto it, anonymously or not.

Most likely anonymously, since Gabriel probably had a point with keeping it a secret. Still, Tony had no idea how the secret hadn’t gotten out yet. He suspected JARVIS.

It was probably a good thing that the world didn’t know he was Iron Man, what with what was going on. The U.S. military was in utter calamity, a hell of a lot of officials and generals and majors missing. The same applied for the rest of the world, and people were demanding answers that only a few had.

And the ones who had them weren’t sharing.

There was no proof save for a giant crater in the middle of the U.S. that hadn’t been there before to show that anything supernatural had been involved, and that wasn’t going to convince people. So that meant they were terrified, and terrified people made bad decisions.

As a public figure in the world, Tony needed to remain on top of things, no matter how he might be falling apart on the inside.

Anything else was unacceptable.
I hope you enjoyed it! Let me know what you thought!

(And, please, trust that I know what I'm doing when it comes to this pairing, okay? Okay.)
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

So you think you know what the pairing will be, but it's not as straightforward as that. So trust me, okay? Probably asking a lot of you here, but I do know what I'm doing.

In any case, this chapter is a bit more lighthearted in tone. It's mostly domestic fluff and stuff, and I think we can use that. Happy reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The second night Tony spent at work and ignoring the Avengers and bots-turned-human in his tower, Rhodey actually came into his office and hauled him out, ignoring all his protests.

“Nope, no can do,” Rhodey said after the fifth time Tony complained about being in the middle of something important. “You need to lighten up, buddy, and as your best bro, it’s my duty to do that.”

“This better not involve any light bulbs,” Tony said, wrenching his jacket out of Rhodey’s grip and straightening it, definitely not sulking.

“Your sense of humor is as atrocious as always,” Rhodey said cheerfully, wrapping an arm around Tony’s shoulders. “Now come on. You and I have got some quality time with a bottle of fine wine coming up.”

“This isn’t a date.”

“Whiskey then,” Rhodey said, shrugging. “The point is, it’s just you and me.”

That had Tony pulling up short, wondering how obvious it must be for Rhodey to intervene like this. “Didn’t know you wanted me alone like that,” he managed, keeping his tone light.

“You got me, Tones,” Rhodey teased, eyes on the steadily increasing numbers. “That’s all I want.”

“What’d you pay the others to leave?”

“Blackmail photos,” Rhodey said candidly, promptly earning himself a betrayed look.

“That’s not happening,” Tony objected.

“A bottle of whiskey and anything else you’ve got tells me otherwise,” Rhodey responded easily, tugging Tony along as the door slid open. “I’ve even got a camera.”

To Tony’s horror and amusement, Rhodey did. It looked brand spanking new and just sat there on the counter, glistening innocently.

“Why don’t we go out instead?” Tony tried, pulling back against Rhodey’s arm futilely. Flirting with people at bars would at least be normal for him, even if the bar wasn’t as classy as his usual dive.

“Probably not a good idea,” Rhodey said, tone still casual but no longer jovial. “Not with what happened. It’s been slightly crazy out there.” His eyes were bleak.
Tony said nothing, shame and guilt nestling in his chest. He’d been so mired in his own issues that he hadn’t even noticed how bad things were on a non-political level. Politically things were so fucked it wasn’t funny; a lot of his international branches were floundering with valuable personnel missing or panicking because of missing family members. He hadn’t even been paying attention to what things were like outside his window.

“Not your fault, Tones,” Rhodey said, so clearly lying.

Knowing that he’d need a heavy dose of alcohol for this, Tony poured both of them generous glasses of whiskey. “If I – he hadn’t done what he did, then this wouldn’t have happened.”

“No, because then we’d all be dead,” Rhodey said bluntly, knocking back his drink in one long swallow before silently asking for another. “Those bastards weren’t sunshine and daisies, Tony. One was my superior, and I was in a meeting with him – it before you had Thor haul me out.” He shook his head, grimacing. “I got real lucky, Tony.”

“I just can’t do anything,” Tony confessed.

“You’re not supposed to,” Rhodey said, tapping Tony’s glass. “Drink up, bud. I’m not the only one getting drunk here tonight.”

“I shouldn’t even be doing this,” Tony said, automatically throwing his drink back. “I should be mopping up my damn mess—”

“You’re doing all you can, Tony,” Rhodey said in a low voice. “You can’t overdo it here.”

“I’ve done worse in longer periods of time,” Tony said, remembering Dummy and JARVIS and years of loneliness and silence.

Rhodey shot him a disapproving look. “Doesn’t mean any of that was healthy. You’re doing all you can, Tony. That’s all any of us can ask.”

Tony gave Rhodey a clipped smile and started pulling out more bottles. If he and Rhodey were going to make a night of this, then they were going to need the good stuff.

“Oh God,” Rhodey groaned come morning. “I’m never drinking again.”

“You said that last time,” Tony pointed out, shamelessly holding a pillow over his face to drown out the too-bright sunlight. Last time had been on the plane to Afghanistan; Rhodey had not been pleased that morning upon having to deal with the bright environment of the desert.

“I stand by it,” Rhodey insisted, sounding muffled from where he was lying next to Tony. He’d probably also grabbed a pillow.

“Then what should I do with the bottle of scotch I got you?”

Tony could practically sense Rhodey perking up. “What bottle?”

“There will be no more drinking,” Pepper’s voice said firmly. She made no move to hide the loud tapping of her heels against the tiles, the sound exacerbating Tony’s headache; judging from Rhodey’s pained groan, he was in similar straits. “Oh God, Tony”—she sounded horrified—“what the hell did you put together?”

Tony snuggled down into the couch, not willing to get up. “Something.”
“An alcohol bomb,” Rhodey answered.

“I’m surprised there isn’t any vomit to clean up,” Pepper said. A second later the pillow was ripped out of Tony’s hands.

“Noooo, Pepper!” Tony whined, clapping his hands over his eyes in a last-ditch effort to avoid the sun.

“It’s noon,” Pepper said without any sympathy. “And you have at most five minutes before the kids dogpile you.”

Tony sat up in alarm, only to instantly regret it as hammers pounded on the inside of his skull and his vision swam. Luckily for Pepper’s shoes, there was no vomit.

Obviously not wanting to chance fate, Pepper shoved a glass of water and a white pill into Tony’s face. “Drink.”

“What about me?” Rhodey asked pitifully as Tony obeyed.

“You brought this on yourself,” Pepper told him.

Tony very wisely kept his mouth shut on the fact that he had been a willing accomplice.

“You told me to have at it!” Rhodey accused her, pulling the pillow back far enough to glare at her with squinty eyes.

“And you listened,” Pepper said, “even though you know that you end up hungover ten times out of ten while drinking with him. Like I said,” she continued sweetly, “you brought this on yourself.”

Rhodey groaned again, covered his face with the pillow, and flipped Pepper off, rolling over onto his stomach to smush his face and pillow to the carpet.

Tony had enough time to feel vaguely sympathetic towards his best friend before a trio of loud voices shrieked in delight and jumped on him.

Flailing, Tony was just able to keep his balance on the couch, but he did find himself stuck to the cushions under the weight of three children who were not as light as they appeared. They scrambled over him, seemingly uncaring of the fact that they almost kneed him in the groin and squashed his ribcage to the point where he couldn’t get a proper breath in.

“Did you have fun?” Dummy demanded, perched right on top of Tony’s chest and blinking down at him innocently.

“I need a little room to breathe there,” Tony wheezed, managing to pry his arms free from under Butterfingers and You to grab hold of Dummy’s waist and push him further down so that he could properly inhale.

“We wanted to join you, but Aunt Pepper said it wasn’t a good idea,” Butterfingers informed him solemnly.

You said something that Tony didn’t understand, then looked at Tony as if he’d expected him to comprehend.

Tony floundered for one endless second before taking a shot in the dark and saying, “You’re a bit young to join the adult parties.”
You scrunched his eyebrows together, evidently displeased. “No,” he said slowly and thankfully in English. “Alcohol isn’t good for adults either.” Now he fixed Tony with a stern glare.

Tony stared back. “That depends on the adult.”

“And that means all adults!” Butterfingers said cheerfully, reaching around Dummy to pat Tony’s cheek. She moved to climb off him, almost kneeing him in the groin before Tony managed to twist out of the way.

“She does have a point,” Pepper said, sounding amused.

“When I’m older I want to try it,” Dummy declared, a mulish expression on his face.

“A lot older,” Tony said before he could think it through.

Dummy made a displeased face. “How much older?”

“How does twenty-one sound to you?”

“Eighteen,” Dummy countered, eyes narrowed.

“Not in the U.S.,” Tony shot back.

“Then we’ll go to Puerto Rico,” Butterfingers said easily, smiling brightly down at Tony.

Rhodey made a sound that sounded like a strangled laugh. “They’re definitely your kids.”

“Was there ever any doubt?” Pepper asked dryly.

“They could’ve been adopted.”

“I want a kitten,” You said randomly, bouncing up and down on Tony’s knees, which protested at the mistreatment.

A moment later You’s weight was relieved from Tony’s knees by slender arms, and Jarvis bopped You’s nose while saying, “Until you are able to keep any and all fish you have sequestered in your room alive, there will be no kittens.”

“They’re alive!” You protested.

“Then I didn’t see Dummy flushing one down the toilet last month?” Jarvis teased gently, smiling.

“All pipes lead to the ocean!” Dummy announced, pouting. “He wanted to be free!”

“Pipes don’t do that,” Butterfingers informed him. “I told you before. You just sent Mr. Fizzles to the sewer system to live in poop.”

Tony was unable to resist saying, “Actually, since the tower is pretty much self-sustaining, all the water is recycled, meaning the fish just ended up being assimilated into the greater whole.” It took him a few seconds to realize that he probably shouldn’t have said that as almost everyone was staring at him with rather perturbed looks (Jarvis just looked long-suffering, while Dummy looked rather horrified), and even Rhodey had lifted his head from the pillow long enough to give Tony a disgusted look.

“Bit too much information there, Tony,” Rhodey complained. “I’m not gonna want to take a shower now.”
“The water’s filtered separately depending on what it’s being used for,” Tony tried to explain.

“Please stop while you’re ahead, Tony,” Pepper said gently. “I’ve already learned more about the plumbing in this building than I wanted to. But that does explain why you insisted on doing the blueprints yourself…”

“You know what,” Clint said from the doorway, “this is why eavesdropping is frowned upon. I don’t think I’ll look at any faucets the same way. What if Mr. Fizzles is inside it?”

“No!” Dummy gasped, hands clapping over his mouth.

“Mr. Fizzles won’t be around anymore if you flushed him down last month,” Tony tried to reassure him, only to receive woebegone eyes in response and trembling lips.

“I didn’t mean to!” Dummy said, looking down at his lap. “I just wanted him to be happy! And now he’s dead and he didn’t even get to see the ocean!”

“He was a freshwater fish,” Butterfingers pointed out. “He would’ve died in minutes. I did the research,” she added unnecessarily.

“He’s in Heaven, isn’t he?” Dummy demanded, leaning forward into Tony’s space.

Tony’s first response was to say he had no idea since he was an atheist and he didn’t believe, but then he reconsidered in light of Dummy’s watery eyes. “He is,” he lied, making sure to smile reassuringly. “I’m sure he’s forgiven you for the mistake.”

“See, it wasn’t my fault!” You was telling Jarvis, patting him on the arm. “Can I have a kitten?”

“We’ll see,” Jarvis said ambiguously, giving Tony a relieved smile as his eyes flicked between Dummy and Tony.

“I’m all for kittens,” Clint said, now having crouched down beside Rhodey to poke him in the side. “I love kittens.”

“I thought you were a dog person,” Natasha said, appearing out of literally nowhere to stare disapprovingly down at Clint.

“Yeah, but you like cats.”

“Where did you get that impression?”

Clint grinned up at her, eyes bright. “You didn’t deny it!”

Natasha heaved a put-on sigh and looked up at Tony. “If you get a cat, make sure it’s black.”

“No one’s getting a cat,” Tony protested, though it was so weak that it was ineffectual.

“Research has shown that pets are a good way to teach kids responsibility,” Butterfingers said, teeth glinting as she grinned brightly.

Tony glanced at Pepper for help, only to find that she was stifling snickers and had abandoned him to it. “I’m not good with pets,” he tried.

“We’d be taking care of it,” Butterfingers said as if he was dumb.

“Please, Dad, please?” Dummy begged, flattening himself on Tony to look up at him pleadingly
from under his eyelashes (why were they so ridiculously long?).

Tony pushed down the kneejerk reflex to hearing a kid call him “Dad,” instead opting for a weak smile. “It’s not just me you have to convince.”

“Don’t worry,” Clint said. “Steve’ll agree in no time.”

“Agree to what?” Steve asked, looking like a deer caught in headlights from where he was standing in the doorway.

“Cats!” Butterfingers bounded over to him, gleefully jumping into his arms without a second thought. “We want one.”

Steve just blinked. “Okay?”

Bruce popped his head around Steve, amused. “I suppose it’s a good thing none of us have allergies.”

“Speak for yourself,” Darcy said, coming out of the kitchen with a granola bar. “Jane breaks out in hives.”

“I do not!” Jane shouted, rushing out after Darcy. She gave everyone else in the room a pleading look. “You can get a kitten. I’m not allergic. Darcy’s just joking.”

“Do I want to know what you two were doing in my kitchen when you have your own?” Tony asked.

“You have a better selection of food,” Darcy said shamelessly, waving her half-eaten granola bar around. “And you looked really cute lying there. I got some great pictures.” Then she held up the camera that Tony had sworn he’d gotten rid of halfway through their drunken bender.

“I’ll give you thirty bucks for those pictures,” Rhodey said from the floor.

“Make it fifty and give me a picture with you in uniform.”

Rhodey didn’t even hesitate. “Done.”

“You and I aren’t friends anymore,” Tony informed him.

The only response was a shrug and an “I’ll live.”

“When can we get the kitten?” Dummy asked, snuggling into Tony.

Fortunately, Tony didn’t have to search for an answer as his stomach made it for him quite vigorously. “Breakfast?”

The word had all three of the kids brightening and screaming “PANCAKES!” before scrambling off whoever had them and then running into the kitchen, nearly bowling over Jane and Darcy.

“I could do with coffee,” Rhodey said mournfully, still looking like he was suffering the hangover from hell.

Tony huffed out a breathless laugh, slumping back into the couch as he heard the distant sounds of the three bots-turned-humans chattering excitedly in the kitchen. The adults hadn’t yet followed them, and Jarvis was looking down at him with a fond expression that Tony didn’t want to inspect too closely, but he was actually pretty damn content for the moment.
He could even deal with a kitten.

After breakfast, Dummy insisted on them finding an animal shelter from which to adopt a kitten. Before Tony could even open a search query, You had brought out all the information he had accumulated on the various animal shelters in New York City and which one would be the best one to adopt from.

It was a very clear sign that You was completely serious about this, not in the least because he had also calculated the costs for buying litter, cat food, cat toys, and all the other little fun things that a kitten would need to be healthy and happy. That some of the writing was also done in pink meant that Butterfingers had also had a hand in it (not that Tony ascribed to gender roles, but he had a strong suspicion that Butterfingers loved pink).

In the end they decided pretty emphatically on a no-kill shelter because no one really had the stomach to be around a bunch of animals who would soon be put down simply because their allotted time had run out.

The next part was making sure that the shelter was even open, and considering what had happened, it most likely wasn’t. But some phone calls and the weight of Tony’s name ensured that someone would be there to meet them. He felt only vaguely guilty for forcing someone to do a job that they didn’t feel safe doing anymore.

That turned out to be the easiest part of it all, mainly because everyone wanted to go the shelter to see what options there were. Pepper was unsure about letting Dummy, Butterfingers, and You out because the media still hadn’t caught wind of the fact that three kids were living with Tony Stark. Jarvis had the easy explanation of being a bodyguard, but the kids were harder to explain.

Tony didn’t know why that problem hadn’t been solved before. If Gabriel was an angel, why hadn’t he manipulated reality or something so that no one thought Tony having kids was weird? It was a crime that they hadn’t been able to go out into public without disguises.

That problem was solved by Rhodey pointing out that the Avengers could hang out around kids with no problem. This also meant the entire team would be coming along, no questions asked.

Tony wasn’t sure if he had any cars that could fit more than four people, and they had thirteen. Limos weren’t really the best option for going to an animal shelter.

Following some more squabbling, the kids, Jarvis, and Steve ended up driving with Tony in one of his bigger cars, although even then Butterfingers ended up sitting in Jarvis’s lap because his biggest car only sat five. The others then divided into smaller groups, taking less flashier rides than what Tony had on hand.

“This is more problematic than it should be,” Tony grumbled, checking that the GPS had the right coordinates.

“Adopting a pet takes time,” Steve said peaceably.

“This is going to be one spoiled pet.”

“Can we race?” Dummy asked from behind Tony.

“No,” Jarvis and Tony said simultaneously.

That was the last of it before Tony left the garage, three other cars driving after him.
Traffic was normal for New York, meaning there were lots of bad drivers and pedestrians who seemed to think they had the right of way even if it wasn’t a crosswalk. It took them about half an hour to make it to the shelter, and parking was an issue because Steve insisted on parking legally and not just in front of the building.

“I don’t care if you can pay the tickets,” Steve told Tony. “Set a good example.”

“I’m setting a good example by paying the tickets,” Tony protested.

“Let’s try not getting the tickets in the first place.”

“Philistine,” Tony grumbled, obeying because he didn’t want to see Steve’s disappointed face. He had a feeling it was awful.

By the time parking was taken care of and they’d reconvened in front of the doors of the animal shelter, they were getting awed looks from pedestrians. Tony could already sense the paparazzi swarming in on the place.

They were greeted by a blonde-haired woman who looked absolutely exhausted and yet pleased to see them.

“Mr. Stark,” she said, shaking his hand. “I’m Elisa. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“Pleasure’s mine,” Tony said easily, well used to this.

Elisa smiled at him, eyes flickering over his shoulder to the Avengers and Steve in particular. “Captain,” she breathed, smile turning watery, “I never thought I’d meet you. My grandmother told me stories of when she met you as a girl in Germany.”

Steve seemed only slightly uncomfortable, and it was possible Elisa didn’t even notice. “I was just doing my job.” He smiled easily, shaking Elisa’s hand when she extended it.

“Thank you,” Elisa said, eyes roving from Steve to the rest of the team. “Thank you for everything you’ve done. I don’t know what would have happened if you weren’t here.”

It wouldn’t have happened at all, Tony knew. At least if he hadn’t been around anyway. The Leviathans – from what he’d understood – were more Gabriel’s shtick than anybody else’s. So if Tony hadn’t been around (if Gabriel hadn’t)? Then nothing.

“We just want to keep you safe,” Steve said, still smiling easily at Elisa. “It’s our job.”

“And I’m grateful for it.” Elisa straightened, gave Steve one last watery smile, and then turned her attention to the kids at Tony’s side, attitude doing a complete 180. “So who’s in charge?” she asked teasingly, smile warming as she bent down to their level.

“I put all the information together,” You informed her, holding a small notebook to his chest.

“We’re just along for the ride,” Tony said, unconsciously brushing a hand over Dummy’s hair, smoothing down the wild mess.

“Quite an entourage,” Elisa said, winking at Butterfingers before standing. “From what I understood, you’re looking for a cat?”

“We’d like a kitten,” Butterfingers explained. “Tony said we could get one.”

“We’re graduating from fish,” Tony said.
“Fish are definitely a good starting point,” Elisa agreed. “They require a lot of care, but not much interaction. I’ll show you to where our cats live.”

As they followed her through the building, Tony could hear some barking from rowdy dogs. There was also a underlying smell of unclean animals that was sort of covered by the stench of sterile chemicals, but it was still discomfiting enough that Tony found himself breathing through his mouth until he could get used to it.

“We’ve been closed since the disappearances,” Elisa said, “but we still get drop-offs. We haven’t really had the space, but we try to accommodate where we can. We haven’t really had interest either since…” She swallowed, face shuttering.

“We understand,” Steve said soothingly, smiling gently. “We appreciate you meeting us here despite that.”

Elisa huffed in amusement. “I would’ve been crazy to refuse the Avengers. What you do is absolutely amazing.”

“Anything you do here is just as amazing,” Natasha said softly.

Elisa blushed lightly, looking away. “Maybe,” she responded noncommittally, opening a door that led to a larger room with glass cubicles lined against the walls.

Each cubicle had several cats in it, a litter box, food and water, and a toy or two. The cats were either sprawled out on their own or piled on top of one another in the case of the kittens. Several looked at the entering humans only briefly before deeming them unworthy of their attention and returning to whatever they’d been doing before.

“Oh my God,” Dummy whispered, vibrating with excitement at Tony’s side.

“Go check ’em out, DJ,” Tony said quietly, using Dummy’s “human” name. “Remember not to tap on the glass or scare them.”

“They’re pretty used to rowdy kids,” Elisa told Dummy, “but they’ll appreciate you being quiet. Let me know if you want to take one out, okay?”

“Okay!” Dummy slipped his hand out of Tony’s and ran off to the side, squatting down to peer at an orange tabby that blinked lazily at him.

Butterfingers and You walked off to a group of kittens, crowding around You’s notebook to most likely begin debating which kitten would be the best option considering their choices.

“You’d best go and see yourself, Tony,” Pepper said, nudging him pointedly. “Otherwise you’ll end up with a cat that hates you.”

“I see how it is,” Tony said, pretending to be affronted. He walked off before anyone else could prod or poke him into looking at the cats. Natasha had already been drawn to a lone black cat curled up under a box next to where Dummy was crouched, so he went to the opposite side of the room.

He could hear a small conversation being struck up between Pepper and Elisa as to the running of the animal shelter while the rest of the Avengers spread out within the room to look at the cats. Steve had tagged along behind Tony, staying several steps behind him.

“Any preferences?” Tony asked quietly, glancing between a description and the cat it described. The cat in question was a fat long-haired white one with squinty blue eyes that gave Tony a mouthful of
teeth in an obnoxious yawn. “Maybe not that one.”

“The fur might be problematic,” Steve agreed. “I read that long fur requires a lot of upkeep.”

“So you also wanted a cat?”

“Could never get one before,” Steve admitted softly. “Allergies.” He shrugged lightly. “So why not? Pets can be therapeutic, too. I might’ve gotten a dog before, but then I met you.” He smiled at Tony, eyes crinkling in the corners.

Tony swallowed down his first reflex, which was to shrink away at the reminder that Steve had met Gabriel first. “You saying I’m as good as a pet?”

“Better,” Steve teased, nudging Tony’s shoulder gently. “I can talk with you.”

“You’re gonna make me blush,” Tony retorted, glancing aside to make sure that he really wasn’t blushing. There was a reason he tried not to blush in public, and that was because it made him look too soft.

“Fair’s fair.” Steve sounded amused. “I’ve lost count of how many times you’ve made me blush.”

“That can’t be too hard, considering how pale you are.” Tony gave Steve a small grin before he turned his back to the last adult cat that had curled up into a tight ball and was resolutely ignoring anybody on the outside. There were some kittens in smaller cages lined up in the middle of the room in stacks, and that was what the goal was, wasn’t it?

Kittens were easier to take care of than adult cats anyway. (Or so Tony suspected.)

A few kittens were literally buried under blankets, only tiny paws poking out. One was playing with another kitten’s tail. Another had literally fallen asleep with its head in the food bowl. One cage had a three kittens piled on top of another in the bed, the two largest burying the smallest under them. They were all purring so loudly Tony could hear them two feet away.

But it was the two lone kittens in the last cage that caught his attention. According to the descriptions, their names were Skittles and Milky Way (he wanted to throttle the person that had named them after candy brands because those weren’t even good candy brands), and they were both two months old. The smaller one was black (and thus appropriately named Milky Way), and his eyes were shut in sleep. The slightly larger one was beautiful tortoiseshell, so Tony could see why a staff member had named her Skittles (if in a vague sort of way that was removed from the horror of seeing a kitten named Skittles).

He had no idea why these two in particular had caught his attention, but it might’ve been the way Skittles was hovering protectively over her brother, large greenish-yellow eyes watching Tony warily. Something about that image struck a chord in Tony, an echo of something long forgotten and longed for.

Tony hunched his shoulders slightly, unprepared for the feeling and what it meant. He felt distinctly unattached from Gabriel and all that had been associated with the being, but at the same time he was peripherally aware of the fact that he had been that otherworldly being. He just couldn’t remember it.

And, somehow, these two little kittens had brought some echo of Gabriel back even when his new family couldn’t.

“She’s really pretty,” Dummy said, suddenly appearing at Tony’s side to peer into the cage. He squinted up at the paper on the cage. “Why’s she named Skittles?”
“Probably because of her fur colors,” Steve said charitably, not saying what was on Tony’s mind.

“Are you interested in them?” Elisa asked from behind Tony. She looked slightly worried.

Tony bit back his instinctive response of yes, instead looking down at Dummy. “Are you?”

Dummy looked at him with too-wise eyes, mouth curling slightly in the corner in a small smile. “Yeah, I am.”

Elisa looked at the two kittens in the cage, her smile wavering slightly. “You should know,” she started quietly, “that Milky Way has lost his sight. He came in with an eye infection that had progressed too far to be treated.”

Tony studied Milky Way again, narrowing in on the black kitten’s eyes. He couldn’t tell that they had been sewn together, but they obviously were if Milky Way didn’t have eyes anymore. What must it be like living in a world of darkness? To go from light to the darkest black with no hope for the light of the sun to warm the night?

“He won’t be adopted easily,” Natasha said softly from the other side of the cage, meeting Tony’s eyes through the bars.

Tony understood what Natasha wasn’t saying: Milky Way was both black and without sight; not many would want to take on the responsibility of a blind kitten even if they weren’t superstitious.

“Are they siblings?” Butterfingers asked Elisa.

“They came in together,” Elisa answered, “so it’s more likely that they’re from the same litter.”

Skittles was still crouched over Milky Way, and the protective stance made more sense now considering that Milky Way was blind. The larger and healthier sibling protecting the weaker, as it should be.

Tony unconsciously rubbed at his chest, uncomfortable with the old longing that had risen. It felt like an old ache, one that had never truly gone away but only been forgotten.

They needed to be together, that much was clear. And it would never happen.

Unless…

“We’ll take them both,” Tony said unthinkingly, glancing back at a startled Elisa.

She blinked, nonplussed. “Are – are you sure?”

Tony gave a small smile, glancing down a stunned Dummy, who blinked up at him. “Yeah. Let’s give them a home.”

“Can we change their names?” Dummy asked. “They don’t look like a Milky Way and Skittles.”

“That’s because they’re not candy,” Butterfingers said. “I like Suzie.”

“Dustin,” You added, bouncing up and down in excitement.

“I’m picking out the toys then,” Dummy informed them imperiously.

“As long as they’re pink,” Butterfingers demanded.
Dummy screwed his nose up. “One toy,” he allowed eventually. Then he looked back up at an amused Tony, tugging at his hand. “Can we?”

“Sounds good, DJ,” Tony said, ignoring the fond grin Steve sported in favor of turning to Elisa. “I’m guessing there’s paperwork to fill out?”

Elisa still looked slightly gobsmacked, almost as if she expected this to be a joke. “Oh…yes. There are some forms I’ll need you to fill in, along with the requisite paperwork for vaccinations. There’ll also be the spaying and neutering to take care of once they’re a little older and Milky Way has been taken off his antibiotics.”

“I have the information here,” You told Tony, pushing the notebook into the hand Dummy wasn’t holding.

“Thanks,” Tony said, bemused at how thoroughly You had apparently researched this. It was quite a stretch from how clumsy he could be as a bot.

It would also be great for taking care of two kittens, especially since Tony hadn’t had any pets at all growing up.

Giving the two kittens one last glance, Tony followed Elisa to procure the necessary paperwork. His chest still ached, but it had subsided slightly, almost as if by giving these two lost kittens a home, he’d somehow assuaged his own longing.

He didn’t know what it said about Gabriel, but he wasn’t going to ask. Gabriel wasn’t him. Not anymore.

Once they were in the pet store to pick up supplies, Darcy, who had been suspiciously quiet in the shelter, immediately hauled Dummy around to start picking out toys and collars and anything else that You had put on his list. You pulled Jarvis over to the fish tanks and then started whispering conspiratorially. Clint had sulked about losing the coin toss with Pepper and Rhodey about who would stay in the car with the kittens, but had cheered up upon finding the birds and was now involved in a staring contest with a particularly zealous parakeet.

Natasha and Jane had been taken by Butterfingers to squeal over the hamsters and mice. That left Tony with Steve, and the two had been left with the cart that was rapidly filling up with toys, cat litter, and other paraphernalia that two kittens would need. After the third time of almost clipping Darcy’s ankles, they’d been ordered to just stand in the store and look pretty while guarding the cart.

Tony had no problems with complying with that order, having no idea what was needed to keep two kittens happy. He assumed food and water was on the list, but judging from all the toys Dummy and Darcy kept throwing into the cart, that wasn’t everything.

“I don’t think they’ll need this many toys,” Steve said after the third feathery toy Darcy threw their way.

Tony was almost hit in the face by a bouncy ball Dummy had found. “I have no idea,” he admitted, catching the ball and dropping onto a soft bed. “It’s not like I can’t afford it.”

Steve frowned slightly. “Doesn’t mean you should have to.”

Not knowing what to say in response to that, Tony just shrugged, keeping a watchful eye out for any other flying objects that could potentially assault him.
Five minutes later, Darcy and Dummy came walking over carrying a large box with an elaborate litter box that looked more like a tent than a box. Steve waited until they’d disappeared into another aisle before hefting the box out like it weighed nothing and hiding it in the dog food aisle.

“I get the feeling they’ll do more sleeping in it than anything else,” Steve explained once he came back. “Besides, we already have two litter boxes that’ll work just fine.” The two litter boxes in question were both a dark blue and currently hiding under the large bed that Dummy had carried over.

“It’s probably not the best idea considering Dustin,” Tony mused, using the name the kids had insisted on in place of Milky Way. Skittles had hence been renamed Suzie, a much more fitting name for the poor thing.

Steve was silent for a moment. “Can you do anything about that?” he asked eventually.

“Make him eyes, you mean?” Tony made a face, folding his arms across his chest as he rocked back on his heels. “I’m not that kind of a doctor – I mean, I am a doctor considering I have several PhDs – but not that kind of doctor. It’d require knowhow I don’t have at the moment, and even then there’s no guarantee anything would work. Dustin’s young enough that he should adjust with no problems as long as we make sure that the environment’s safe.”

Steve didn’t respond immediately, and he had a funny look on his face that Tony didn’t quite recognize. A second later he shook his head, brow furrowing. “How many PhDs do you have?”

Not wanting to ask what had put that look on Steve’s face (and suspecting that he knew the answer anyway, and it wasn’t one that he wanted to hear), Tony cracked a grin. “Seven.”

“Seven?”

“I got bored.” Tony wished he had some gum to pop because it was the perfect moment for that sound. Since he didn’t, he just settled for a shrug.

“What degrees did you get?” Steve asked curiously. “Engineering’s one of them, I suppose?”

“Mechanical engineering,” Tony confirmed. “That’s the one I got from MIT back when I was seventeen; my thesis was Dummy. He was supposed to be an intelligent helper bot that turned out to be less intelligent than I wanted, but still totally awesome.” Dummy was thankfully nowhere in earshot as he said this. “I also got a degree in electrical engineering since they’re not that different. Then physics, mathematics, business, computer programming, and theater.”


Tony shrugged, smirking. “Pepper and Rhodey were always complaining about how I was too dramatic for my good. I just went and got the degree to back it up.”

“The scary thing is that I can see you doing that, but what I’m having trouble with is the fact that you can get a doctorate in theater. Is that even a thing?”

“With the right pitch, you can get a doctorate in just about anything.” Tony could so very fondly remember the spiel he had given the grad school where he’d picked up that particular degree.

“That doesn’t really impress me.”

“It should. It means that the really good people with awesome degrees were the ones best able to persuade a committee to seeing things their way and that their chosen avenue of study was actually a
good idea for a doctorate.” Tony gave him a bright grin. “It’s also a damn shame, because those people are usually holed up in some corner.”

Steve returned the grin. “And you’re one of those people.”

“Me? Pfft.” Tony waved a dismissive hand. “I’m front and center on the stage. Best thing I can do to control what’s out there.” Tony had learned that the hard way very early on, no matter how much he preferred to hole himself up in the workshop and just be by himself.

Not immediately responding, Steve’s gaze was soft as he gently nudged Tony’s shoulder. “Yeah,” he said quietly. “I get that.”

The best part was that Steve probably did.

That was the point where Dummy tripped over his feet and bowled Tony over with the gigantic stuffed toy he’d found somewhere in the store.

The toy ended up being refused on principle that it was obnoxiously pink and glittery and also because Steve gave everyone disappointed eyes when they tried to insist it needed to be included on the list. Half of what was in the cart suffered the same fate, and then they made their way to the checkout.

You was waiting at the front door with Jarvis and had a fish bag in hand with a multicolored fish with gorgeous fins.

Butterfingers bounced over to him, bending over to peer into the bag to inspect the fish. “What’s his name?”

“Mr. Fizzles the Second,” You answered solemnly. He shot Dummy a frown. “This one isn’t going to the ocean.”

Dummy made a horrified face, shaking his head. “I won’t do that again!”

“You got another fish?” Tony asked. “Who paid?”

“I did,” You informed him. “I write papers for students who’re too stupid to do it themselves and should be donated to community colleges.”

“Oh my God,” Steve breathed, sounding absolutely horrified.

“Hot damn,” Clint said, “where’d that insult come from?”

Tony fought down a mortified blush, all too aware of all the times he’d threatened Dummy with that exact same—

“It’s Dad’s favorite threat,” Dummy said before Tony could stop him. “He always likes to bring it out if I break something.”

Now everyone save for Jarvis and the kids was giving Tony disapproving looks.

“It’s not like I would’ve done it,” Tony said defensively, hunching his shoulders. Desperate to change the subject, he looked down at You. “You should let me look at some of those papers you write. I’d like to see what you do.”

You’s smile was incandescent, and he pushed Mr. Fizzles the Second into Butterfingers’ hands before throwing himself at Tony and wrapping his arms around his waist, shoving his face into
Tony’s stomach.

It was instinct more than anything that had Tony wrapping his arms around You. He very deliberately didn’t meet anybody’s eyes, not wanting to see what he would find there.

The least he could do was not mess this up.

Steve had messed up. He’d forgotten for a few minutes that Tony wasn’t the same man he’d gotten to know. He’d forgotten and asked if he could fix Dustin’s eyes, only to be reminded rather brutally of the fact when Tony hadn’t answered the way he’d expected. Thank God Tony hadn’t noticed – had only answered the question and not noticed Steve mentally stumbling.

It was something Steve would have to be careful not to repeat. He knew all too well how uncomfortable Tony was right now, and he didn’t want to stop being a safe place for Tony.

Steve wanted Tony to be able to talk to him. It was one way he could repay Tony’s kindness and the fact that he’d given Steve a home that no one else had been able to.

And, more selfishly, he didn’t want Tony to avoid him the way he’d been avoiding his kids and the rest of the team. He was jealous of how easily Tony had fallen back into his friendship with Pepper and Rhodey, even if there had been some awkwardness initially. It wasn’t right that he was jealous, since Tony had known them before any of this had happened.

He should at least have them on his side, but Steve so very badly wanted to be on that side, too. He and Tony had been close before, and he’d enjoyed spending that time with him. Being in the animal shelter and pet store with him had felt normal, causing Steve to drop his guard.

Tony didn’t like to be reminded that he’d also been Gabriel and that there was history he couldn’t remember, and Steve had almost brought that up.

He would be careful not to do it again. It would be easier now anyway. They were back home with all the supplies they’d bought and with Dustin and Suzie in hand. The kids and Pepper went off to set the kittens up with a litter box in a bathroom as per You’s notebook. Until they were certain the two were litter trained, they’d stay in a confined space to minimize messes.

Steve had expected Jarvis to help with the kittens, but instead the other approached Steve with an expression that said he desperately needed to say something in private. Steve ducked into the kitchen to give them that, and Jarvis followed him with a relieved face.

“What is it?” Steve asked softly.

“I have been fending off calls from Reed Richards as of this morning,” Jarvis answered. “Despite my insistence that Mr. Stark is busy, he continues to call.”

“Shit.” Steve rubbed a hand over his face. He’d forgotten about Reed and his family. They didn’t know about Tony – who he really was. They just knew that he was something. Steve was surprised that they hadn’t called earlier.

He couldn’t have Reed talk to Tony. It was low of him, but he wasn’t willing to betray Tony’s confidence like that. If he hadn’t told Reed who he really was, then Steve was going to keep it like that for as long as possible. He’d have to tell Tony about this, but first he needed to get Reed off Tony’s back.

“Direct his next call to my cell,” Steve said finally, looking back up at Jarvis. “I’ll handle it from
Jarvis’s brow pinched, but he didn’t argue. “His last call was ten minutes ago. Extrapolating from his current pattern, his next one should be in five minutes.”

“I’ll be in my room,” Steve said, sighing. “Can you make an excuse or something?”

“I may not be the most adept at emotional expressions, but I can lie,” Jarvis said dryly. He nodded once, expression softening. “I’ll take care of it, Captain.”

“Steve,” Steve said for the hundredth time.

“Perhaps one day,” Jarvis responded evenly, smirking now. His eyes took on that faraway cast that meant he was accessing something electronic in the tower before he inclined his head and left.

Steve stood there for a long moment, inexplicably tired. Eventually he pulled himself together long enough to go to the elevator. Thankfully he didn’t run into anyone, meaning he didn’t have to lie, as he was an absolutely terrible liar. Tony had more than once poked fun at him for having a terrible poker face.

His phone went off once he was inside, and he picked it up after three rings. “Rogers.”

“This isn’t Tony?” Reed sounded surprised.

“You should know better considering what Jarvis has been telling you,” Steve said, his tone mildly reprimanding. “I had him forward your call to me.”

Reed’s tone changed to concern. “Is he all right?”

“Physically he’s fine.”

There was a short pause before Sue’s voice said hesitantly, “What about otherwise?”

Steve sat down heavily in his favorite squashy armchair. “What were you calling for?”

There was another brief pause, then Reed spoke. “About what happened. I—”

“We,” Johnny’s voice interjected.

Reed continued as if he hadn’t spoken. “—was hoping to get more answers, especially after the disappearances.”

Steve’s chin sunk to his chest as he dug his thumb into the space between his eyebrows, rubbing hard as if that could ward off the tension headache that would never form. “You won’t get those,” he answered eventually.


“Because the man who has them doesn’t remember,” Steve said tiredly. “I can only tell you what he told us, and it’s probably not the entire story.”

“Is he – is Tony all right?” Sue asked.

“He’s physically fine,” Steve repeated. “But he doesn’t remember, and it won’t do any good to ask him questions. It’ll just upset him.”
“What happened?” Reed pressed.

“That’s something I can’t tell you.” Steve felt rather guilty about it.

“Those – those monsters, Steve,” Sue began, tone wavering, “are they...gone?”

That Steve could answer. “Yes.”

There were various sighs and mutters of relief on the line at this answer.

Reed spoke first. “So he took care of them, and then lost his memory.”

“Just about,” was all Steve said. “I won’t tell you anymore, Reed. If – when he remembers, you can ask him all the questions you want.”

“So he’ll remember?”

Steve took a moment to answer, the words lodging painfully in his throat. “We don’t know.”

“But you hope he will,” Sue said gently. “We understand, Steve.” There was a rustling sound that was probably Sue punching or shoving Reed. “We wanted to call last week, but then the disappearances happened and I thought it’d be best if we wait.”

“Thank you for that,” Steve said. “It’d be best if you don’t contact him unless it’s for something unrelated to asking questions.”

“And risk upsetting him, I know,” Sue agreed. “But there’s something else that we thought would be a good idea. We need to put together a show of good faith for the country, something involving the superheroes—”

“And fancy CEOs,” Johnny interjected again.

“Those, too,” Sue conceded, sounding vaguely disgusted. “Let me start again. We’re going to be hosting a charity gala to which the U.S.’s most influential people are invited to pool together their resources to help out the people hardest hit by what’s happened. You’re all invited, Steve. Can you pass the news on to Tony?”

Steve glanced up at the ceiling, a silent question for JARVIS. “When is it?”

“A week,” Sue said, sounding apologetic. “I know it’s short notice, but everyone we’ve been in contact with has insisted this happen quickly so they can get on with other matters.” Her tone had turned distinctly frosty at this.

“Give me a moment.” Covering the mouthpiece, Steve asked JARVIS, “What do you think?”

“There will be no objections on Mr. Stark’s part,” JARVIS answered quietly.

“But is it a good idea?”

“It is one of their better ones.”

Suppressing a smirk at the disdain in JARVIS’s voice, Steve uncovered the mouthpiece. “We’ll be there. Email us the details or leave them with JARVIS.”

“We’ll do that, Steve,” Sue promised. “Give Tony our best, will you? No, Reed—” She hung up preemptively to stop what would have most likely been an intrusive question of sorts.
The end of the call was abrupt enough that Steve was left sitting there with a phone to his head for several seconds too long before he thumbed the phone screen off. Then he slumped over his knees, head in his hands.

This was a conversation he wasn’t really looking forward to having, not in the least because he didn’t know how Tony would react.

Later that day, Tony was nothing but relieved to finally be in his workshop. Dustin and Suzie had been comfortably set up in the largest bathroom in the tower, and since all the bathrooms were pretty damn large, that was something. It also meant they were in his bathroom, as Tony had the largest one. He wasn’t really looking forward to sharing his bedtime rituals with two little fur balls.

Maybe he could stay in the workshop and not go up at all—

“Tony.”

Or maybe someone would come and join him down here. That was also completely plausible.

“Steve.” Tony’s smile was halfhearted at best, and he nodded once, only to stop short at Steve’s tight eyes. “What is it?”

Steve sighed, rubbing a hand over the back of his head and mussing up his hair. “You’re probably not going to like it.” His tone was unhappy.

“I generally don’t like a lot of news,” Tony said, sighing as well. He leaned back against a table, gesturing broadly for Steve to take a seat. “Just lay it on me.”

Steve didn’t take the seat. “I had a call from Reed after we got back.”

Tony furrowed his brow. “Reed? What’s he been up to?”

“He wanted to get some answers,” Steve said. “Answers that we don’t have or aren’t willing to give.”

Tony raised a skeptical eyebrow. “Reed usually doesn’t take no for an answer when it concerns science.”

“It wasn’t science that he was curious about,” Steve said. “It was you and the Leviathans. And I’m not telling him more than necessary because I don’t know how much you want me to tell him.”

Pressing his lips together, Tony tilted his head back to inspect the ceiling for several long moments. “So tell me,” he started eventually, “why didn’t Reed call me?” Slowly returning his gaze to Steve, he waited patiently for an answer.

Steve at least had the decency to look ashamed of himself. “He tried to,” he admitted. “Jarvis was blocking his calls until he told me, and then I told him to divert the next one to me. I – I probably shouldn’t have done it, but I’m not sorry about it.”

“At least you’re honest,” Tony said dryly, the tone causing Steve to flinch. He sighed a second later, already feeling slightly guilty for putting that look on Steve’s face. “No, I understand why you did it.” And he did. Steve was well aware of how uncomfortable Tony felt about being referred to as Gabriel, and he just wanted to make things easier for him.

“You do?” Steve seemed surprised.
Tony shrugged noncommittally, not willing to elaborate further. “Anything else?”

Steve made a face now. “Yeah, and this is for all of us. Sue will be sending us the details later.”

“Oh God, it’s not some fancy shindig, is it?” Tony groaned. “I just knew something would be coming up given the shit storm out there.”

“You said it, not me.” Steve’s tone was amused. “It’s in a week, and the Fantastic Four and the Avengers will be in attendance.”

“Along with every other bigwig that Sue and Reed will be able to get their hands on, and that’s a lot,” Tony said, sighing heavily. “Okay, great. Awesome.” He clapped his hands once. “I can totally do that. Big time schmoozing for a good cause. Done and done.”

“This isn’t going to be fun,” Steve noted, sounding faintly alarmed.

“Aw hell, Steve.” Tony walked by him, clapping him briefly on the shoulder and flashing him a bright smile. “It’ll have to be fun, otherwise we’ll all be making our excuses to get out there after five minutes. Best thing to do is either picture everyone naked or try and see how many sexual innuendos you can fit into a conversation without the other person noticing.”

Steve snorted. “Why is everything about sex?”

Tony hesitated for a brief second (when was the last time he’d even thought about getting laid or hitting up a gorgeous guy like Steve?), before grinning widely and waggling his eyebrows, leaning in conspiratorially. “You want to know why?” he breathed.

Steve went a bright red, the color going straight down into his shirt (making Tony really curious as to whether Steve was a full body blusher). “I think I know why,” he managed in a rather squeaky voice.

Taking pity on him, Tony backed off a bit, only to see a flash of what could’ve been disappointment in Steve’s face. It was gone as quickly as it had come, though, so he wasn’t sure if it was what he’d thought it was. “Trust me,” he said, keeping his tone gentle, “until you’ve had someone who rocks your world, you really don’t.”

Steve looked down at his feet, shuffling slightly in a way that brought him closer to Tony. “I’ll keep that in mind.” His voice was soft, and he glanced askance at Tony, a shy smile curving at his lips.

Tony felt abruptly uncomfortable, having no further desire to pursue this avenue of conversation. It was downright jarring, since usually he’d be the first to continue flirting with an interested party in hopes of it leading to something more. But not only did he seem to have absolutely zero libido since waking up in a hospital room in this new time, he also felt zero attraction to Steve beyond noting rather abstractly that Steve was really freaking gorgeous.

Still, not wanting to put Steve off and hurt his feelings, Tony kept smiling, even if Steve started frowning slightly.

“Why don’t we go upstairs?” Tony suggested before he could overthink it. “Just to be sure that no one’s accidentally killed one of our new pets.”

The distraction seemed to have worked. Steve looked appropriately scandalized. “They wouldn’t do that!” he protested.

Tony gently guided to the elevator. “Steve, I know Dummy. He can be incredibly sweet, but also the
clumsiest bot I’ve ever seen. And this is coming from the man who made him.”

“I’m pretty sure Jarvis would stop him.”

“Jarvis has such a giant spot for him – don’t even get me started. Every single time a blender got trashed and I swore that that would be the last one, another popped up the next freaking day, and I sure hadn’t put the order in…”

Dustin  Suzie

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Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed that! Again, I know what I'm doing, so please just have faith and trust in me. That'll be the last time I say it unless something changes and I get hate for making this anything other than simply gen.

Also, the kittens were not planned. The characters sprang that on me and before I knew it, they'd adopted two kittens.

Let me know what you thought!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

After the domestic fun times of the last chapter, this one is a bit of a downer... But there's also plotty stuff! It's where the ball starts rolling.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He was in an opulent dining room, dead bodies strewn all around him, the stench of fear and anger permeating the atmosphere. Terror and determination streaked through his Grace, and not for the first time he wondered what the hell he was doing. He should be running, not making a stand like an absolute idiot. He was no match for his brother.

And his brother knew it, a sly smirk on his ruined face, the vessel no match for the archangel inside it.

But he had a point to make, a reason for why he was doing this. Because of humanity, because of the man – the human – who’d looked down on an archangel for abandoning his family. The human who’d been the best and worst example of humanity, the human that one of his siblings was Falling for.

“Lucifer, you’re my brother and I love you, but you are a great big bag of dicks.”

Nothing he was saying was getting through to his brother. He was too hurt, too wounded by the years locked in a Cage with nothing but his own fury and betrayal feeding him and stoking the fires of revenge higher and higher.

So it all came down to a crucial play, and if he could pull it off right, then it could all. Be. Over—

A quick twist of the body and a hand grabbed hold of his wrist, shoving his own sword through his heart and writing his own death sentence.

“Amateur hocus pocus,” his brother said, hand coming up to embrace the side of his face, the touch icy cold. “Don’t forget; you learned all your tricks from me, little brother.”

He’d failed, but he had to try, he had to try—

Fire burst through him, consuming his Grace and extinguishing all he was—

With a strangled gasp and a choked cry that cut off before it could escape his throat, Tony jolted awake, panting heavily. Half-remembered terror still coursed through him along with adrenaline, fueling his rapid heartbeat and breathing. He could faintly hear concerned meowing from the bathroom where Dustin and Suzie had been locked in for the night, but he had neither the energy nor the desire to console them.

It took him a few long minutes of panting and his heart gradually slowing down for him to realize that his sheets were soaked through with sweat and that his nightclothes were in an even worst state.
Flinging the blankets off him, Tony sat upright, twisting his legs over to set his feet on the carpet. The air of the room felt chilled against his skin, and he shivered unconsciously, toes curling. The dream was still sharp and clear in his mind, crisp in a way that no normal dream usually was.

It hadn’t been like the nightmare Steve had woken him from – that had definitely started getting fuzzy as the hours passed and the terror of his panic attack had subsided. This one was crisp and clear only in a way that a memory could be.

Fisting his hands in his hair, Tony inhaled deeply, not wanting to think too much on just why he’d had this memory and not anything else. He hadn’t faced down a bro – an angel here. No, just Leviathans. So that must’ve been from before – the other life he’d led before apparently being reincarnated or something. No one really knew all the details of that; Gabriel hadn’t been inclined to share all that much.

And no wonder, given the brief glimpse Tony had just gotten into the guy’s mind (his Grace). It had been brief, but Tony had felt everything that Gabriel had been feeling at the moment. His terror, his steely determination that had felt all too familiar, his iron will, his faint hope, and a mountain of self-loathing for being such a coward and not doing this before.

And then…the pain. The pain of dying, of a sword being pierced through his heart and light being extinguished from the inside out.

It took a moment before Tony realized that he was touching his heart, the spot where he could still feel the echoes of a sword. It hadn’t happened – it hadn’t.

But that sword was lying on a mantle in his living room, clear evidence of the fact that it was all true and he was really fooling himself. Tony Stark was no fool, but he didn’t want to admit that he wasn’t really himself. That he was missing something.

It was something that he’d always suspected through the years. No one else had echoing silence in their head; no one else felt like they were missing something essential to their being.

But to know now that what he was missing was memories and an entirely different self that felt so completely alien from himself (because Gabriel hadn’t felt like Tony – not really; the bones were there, but he was alien, utterly different from humanity) was something that Tony had never expected. It felt wrong (and yet right).

Rubbing his hands through his hair and cringing at the drying sweat he could feel, Tony took another deep breath. There was nothing he could do about it. Either his memories and other sense of self (Gabriel) would come back, or they wouldn’t. It would do him no good to worry about it now at…five-thirty in the morning judging from the clock.

There was no way he was getting back to sleep now. Remnants of terror and adrenaline still coursed through him, and he felt too disgusting to roll back between the sheets and try to relax. He’d have to change them, and that was something else he didn’t want to deal with at the moment. No, the smart thing to do would be to take a shower and then get a hot cup of coffee.

Leaving his bed behind without a second glance, Tony cracked the bathroom door open, checked that neither Suzie nor Dustin would be making a run for it, and edged inside. Both kittens were awake, and both were staring right at Tony, Dustin’s blindness notwithstanding.

Suzie hopped down from the bathroom counter, making her way to Tony’s ankles to wind her way through them with a faint meow that Tony swore sounded concerned.
Dustin hopped down as well, his landing as graceful as his sister’s, only to almost face-plant as he took his next step.

Sighing to himself, Tony reached down to pick him and Suzie up, depositing both of them in their very soft bed before he turned to the shower.

Thirty comfortable minutes later, Tony stepped out of the heat, only to nearly go flying backwards as he almost stepped on Suzie’s tail. She gave him a thoroughly disgusted look as he reached for a towel.

“Who’s the one standing in front of the shower?” Tony grumbled, giving her the stink eye. She didn’t seem to care, tilting her head and slanting her eyes at him.

“Why the hell am I talking to a cat?” Continuing to mutter to himself, Tony picked his way across the bathroom and into his bedroom because he’d forgotten to take his clothes in with him.

Not wanting to chance another close accident with Suzie and Dustin, Tony left his towel on his disgusting bed and headed to the kitchen in hopes for a warm cup of coffee to chase away the last of his nightmare.

The faint feeling of having a sword shoved through his chest had dissipated by now, but he could still very clearly remember the visceral feelings of terror and pain of dying at the hands of his own brother.

Man, say what one would about Tony, but that family was fucked. Who killed their own brother, even if they were the Devil?

…He’d probably just answered that question.

Absorbed as he was in his thoughts, it took Tony a few seconds too long to realize that A) his kitchen wasn’t empty and B) he had no clue who the guy was.

Freezing in the doorway at the sight of a gaunt-faced black-haired man sitting at his kitchen table and helping himself to a plate of eggs and bacon, Tony quickly ran through all his weapon possibilities. He could get JARVIS to send the suit up ASAP, since that was now a possibility given the advances he’d done, but JARVIS hadn’t even noticed the stranger eating breakfast in a private kitchen. That left the shiny sword sitting on the mantel in the living room, but Tony hadn’t the faintest idea how to use it other than thrust and stab, and it was too late anyway since the stranger had just noticed Tony standing there like an idiot—

“Hello, Tony,” the stranger said, smiling up at him.

Tony kept his voice even through sheer force of will, even as his knuckles clenched tight on the doorframe. “Who are you?”

The man didn’t respond immediately, chewing through the mouthful of eggs he’d taken after speaking. After wiping his mouth clean with a napkin, he said, “Death.”

Tony’s brain stuttered and rolled to a halt. Death? He had Death sitting in his kitchen eating?

“Don’t just stand there,” Death said mildly, gesturing at a chair across the table from him. “It’s rude while people are eating.” He paused. “There is coffee brewing.”

“Of course there is,” Tony managed, thankful that he didn’t sound as stunned as he felt. Not wanting to piss off the very dangerous being in his kitchen, he slowly maneuvered to the coffee machine,
pleased and just a bit surprised that Death had spoken the truth. The coffee was almost done, so he pulled out a mug, hesitating only briefly before asking, “Do you want some?”

“Please,” Death said. “It has been a while since I’ve had a good cup of coffee. Starbucks simply isn’t the same.”

“It’s mass manufactured crap,” Tony said before he could stop himself.

“But it is convenient,” Death said.

Tony closed his eyes, taking a calming breath. “That it is,” he agreed, faintly wondering at the fact that he was having a civil conversation with Death. Who did not look as skeletal as he would’ve imagined the Grim Reaper to be.

Once the coffee was done, Tony took both steaming mugs to the table and set one down in front of Death. “Milk or sugar?”

“Black’s fine.”

Since Tony didn’t really care how he drank his as long as it was coffee with caffeine, he just sat down across from Death and tried his best not to completely freak out.

After a few more bites of his eggs and a strip of bacon, Death spoke again. “You are remarkably calm.”

Tony blinked at him, nervous energy coiling in the pit of his stomach. “No, not really,” he answered. “Just really good at faking it.” He didn’t think it was a good idea to lie to this being.

“Hm.” Death said nothing more, his inscrutable eyes studying Tony.

“Can I – do you mind if I ask what you’re doing in my kitchen?” Tony asked, keeping his tone as far from confrontational as possible.

“Straight to the point,” Death observed, not sounding upset by the fact. “As expected, I suppose.”

Feeling slightly braver now, Tony pointed out, “That’s not an answer.”

“No, I suppose it isn’t.” Death gave him a bland smile. “How are you doing, Tony?”

“Right this moment or in general?” Tony took a sip of coffee to mask his discomfort. “I’m kind of freaked out right now.”

“A completely reasonable reaction to finding a stranger in your kitchen in the morning after a nightmare,” Death agreed.

Tony froze. “How’d you know about that?” The words were a whisper.

“My presence has certain effects,” Death said slowly, delicately picking up a strip of bacon to pull it into halves, “particularly on beings that I have touched before.”

“You mean people who were dead and aren’t anymore.”

“Crude but accurate.” Death stacked the bacon strips on top of one another and ate them. “And not entirely by my choice either. There is a certain order to things.”

“And I’ve violated that,” Tony said.
“As have others, but there’s only so much I can do when your Father has plans,” Death said, sounding rather displeased about the fact. “I’d fully intended on keeping you after the last time, Gabriel”—the use of that name was jarring enough that Tony flinched—“but it wasn’t to be. And here you are.”

Tony hunched his shoulders slightly, eyes on the dark liquid in his blue mug. “Do you know why?” The question was soft.

There was a faint clatter of utensils from the other side of the table before the answer came. “Your Father has a great many plans that He doesn’t see fit to share with others. I have neither the time nor the desire to deal with the intricacies of such plans, save for cleaning up the messes that result. And you have been very messy in so many ways.”

Death tolls flashed through Tony’s mind, memories of all the ways he’d wrecked destruction on this world before ever reaching Afghanistan and leaving a changed man. “I’m sorry.”

“Good intentions are messy,” Death said, sighing, and Tony looked up at him to find him staring at a wall over Tony’s head. “I’m not angry with you, Tony.”

“I have a feeling I wouldn’t be sitting here if you were,” Tony murmured, smiling weakly.

“Most likely not.” Death gave him an even smile that was all the more chilling for the ancient inhumanity in his eyes. “As for your Father and His plans…the answer would lie in your Grace.”

“Which I don’t have.”

“No, you don’t.”

Tony waited for further elaboration, only to be disappointed when it didn’t come. He risked pressing for more. “Can I find it?”

Death just shrugged, finishing off the last of his eggs and patting his mouth clean before lining up his fork and knife next to each other on the plate.

Realizing with a sinking feeling that Death wasn’t going to answer that particular question, Tony went for a different one. “You’re here for a reason.”

“I am,” Death acknowledged, bony fingers stretched out next to his plate, a large ornate ring on his left hand. There was a dark cane hanging over his chair.

Tony was about to ask what that reason was when Clint stepped in, rubbing his bleary eyes and yawning out a greeting. “G’morning, Tony. What’s for – holy shit!” He was completely awake in two seconds, a remarkable feat that had Tony jealous. Eyes sweeping over the sight of Death and Tony sitting in chairs opposite each other, Clint carefully asked Tony, his eyes never leaving Death, “You having guests?”

Tony inclined his head, seeing Death watching him implacably. “This is Death,” he said evenly.

“You don’t say,” Clint answered faintly, paling. He’d shifted back to press against the doorway.

“Good morning, Mr. Barton,” Death said politely.

Clint’s answer was more of a squeak than anything else.

“Do take a seat,” Death said, nodding towards another empty chair next to Tony.
“Yeah, okay.” Clint carefully shifted toward Tony, slowly edging the chair out from the table and sitting down, eyes fixed on Death. He cleared his throat. “Is there a reason for the visit from – ah – Death?”

“Yeah,” Tony answered, the word more of a sigh than anything else. “He hasn’t told me yet.”

“Patience,” Death said, only mild reprimand in his tone.

Tony barely restrained a flinch, keeping his attention focused on his coffee.

Death continued speaking, addressing Clint now. “I admire your work. Your skills as an archer are unparalleled.”

Clint’s response seemed hesitant. “Thanks?”

“And the lovely Ms. Romanov’s skills at subterfuge and killing are second to none,” Death said softly. “Do come and join us.”

Tony started, head jerking up in time to catch Natasha’s stunned face in the doorway. Steve was behind her, Rhodey and Bruce at his shoulders.

Steve spoke first, voice firm. “Tony, Jarvis called us when he noticed the kitchen was blind to his sensors.”

Tony didn’t answer, swallowing as his gaze flickered to Death. Something about mentioning Jarvis in front of this being had a stone lodge in his throat and terror surge through him.

Death shot him a disapproving look. “You have nothing to fear from me, Tony. I do not share the same views as your family.”

The statement told Tony nothing, especially since he didn’t really know what he feared.

“Your children are marvelous creations,” Death continued calmly. “It has been a long time since I have seen new souls join Creation.” He smiled enigmatically. “Especially such bright ones.”

The terror receded slightly, but wasn’t entirely gone. “Thanks,” he managed.

“I would like to meet them.” It was worded as a request, but it was undeniably clear that it wasn’t.

Tony swallowed thickly, taking in a shuddering breath before saying softly, “JARVIS, if you could join us with the others?”

It took only a few minutes before Jarvis joined them in the kitchen, Dummy, Butterfingers, and You hovering around his sides, nervous expressions on their faces. Only Jarvis looked stoic, though even Tony could see the tension in his tall frame.

Death studied the four for a long moment, the tense quiet spiking the anxiety in Tony. When he finally spoke, it was in a softly reverent tone, “Quite remarkable, especially for a human.”

The words punctured Tony like a balloon, all the anxiety and tension seeping out of him at once and leaving him wrung out. From a being such as Death, who must’ve been around since forever, it was quite something. “Thank you.”

Death’s ancient gaze swept around all the people amassed in the kitchen. “Do sit,” he invited everyone.
Steve shot Tony a concerned glance before returning his eyes to Death. He took the other seat next to Tony, the rest of the team gradually filling the rest of the chairs. Natasha took the chair closest to Death, Rhodey and Bruce following her. It was instantly apparent why they had done so, as it left the remaining chairs free for the kids and Jarvis.

“I take it this isn’t a social call?” Steve asked, voice carefully even.

“You would be correct, Captain,” Death said. His eyes met Tony’s. “I came to ask for a phone.”

The request was inane enough that it left Tony floundering for words. “A phone?” he repeated dumbly.

“The latest prototype that you have,” Death agreed.

Business Tony could talk, even if it was with Death. “Do you mean the latest one on the market or the one I’m still tweaking?”

“The one you currently have lying in your workshop,” Death clarified.

Tony’s mouth was dry as he swallowed, nodding once. He hated leaving the others to talk with Death on their own, but he’d obviously postponed the request until now for a reason.

“I’ll go get it,” Tony muttered, giving the others one last concerned glance before standing and leaving.

The sooner he got the damn phone, the sooner he could come back.

The silence that fell on the kitchen after Tony left was tense, and Steve wished for only half a second that Tony was here before pushing it away and focusing on Death.

They’d come up in time to hear that it was apparently Death sitting in the kitchen, and then their attempts at subterfuge had failed when Death had sensed them. Clint had unfortunately been the only one to get a rude awakening, having already been on the way to the kitchen by the time Jarvis had alerted Steve, who had been with Natasha and Rhodey in the gym. They’d run into Bruce on the way, who had just finished an all-nighter.

Steve was thankful that Jane, Darcy, and Pepper weren’t here. Erik had left the day before, citing the need to return to his work and make sure everything was in order.

“You have something to say to us,” Natasha addressed Death first, eyes sharp. “You could’ve had Tony get the phone earlier and leave without ever meeting us, but you waited.”

“I did.”

“Why?”

“Do you have something to say to us?” Steve asked before he could stop himself, that too knowing look in Death’s eyes unnerving him. It even covered the embarrassment of practically repeating what Natasha had just said.

Death was silent for a moment. Then, “There are very few things that I would have to say to humans, but you are right in this case. I do have a message of sorts to impart.”

It was extremely apparent that Death was chillingly inhuman. “What is it?”
“Free will is a choice, one that not everyone will take,” Death said calmly. “It’s what one does with the choice that decides the war.” And that was it. He said nothing else.

“Cryptic much?” Rhodey snarked, only to blanch a second later. His eyes skittered away from the look Death turned on him.

“It is what I have to say,” Death responded evenly, returning his gaze to Steve. “Do what you will with it.”

“Does it have to do with – with his memories?” Steve asked, heart in his throat. “A way to get them back?”

Death tilted his head to the side, face blank. When he finally spoke, it wasn’t what Steve expected. “He can’t love you,” he said calmly to Steve, those ancient eyes seeing far too much. “Not the way you want.”

Steve felt his ears burn slightly at the glances the others shot him, but he ignored them. What did that mean? That if Tony got his Grace back – became Gabriel in all the ways that mattered – it threw all chances out the window?

“He’s human now, isn’t he?” he demanded, hating himself for even asking it. For even hoping. Because Tony was in pain, and Steve shouldn’t want to prolong it if there was even a chance.

“Not just a human,” Death said. “Fallen angels never are, and Tony even less so now than before. Gabriel did a horribly crude job when separating his human soul from his Grace. There are still tendrils of Grace clinging to his soul.”

“Why did he do it anyway?” Rhodey asked.

“The phrase is crude but apt enough: he was too human.” Death looked around the room before meeting Steve’s eyes again. “Far too human for what he had to do.”

“And now he’s not human enough?” Bruce sounded darkly amused.

“He never was,” Death said bluntly.

“So you’re saying,” Dummy started slowly, speaking for the first time, “that he doesn’t love us?”

“Oh, they love,” Death disagreed. “But their love isn’t like yours. They love unconditionally, powerfully, with their entire beings.”

“You’re saying humans don’t love like that?” Rhodey asked, frowning slightly.

Death didn’t look over at him. “You can’t.”

“I’ve seen people love like that,” Rhodey protested, looking more and more insulted as the conversation progressed.

Death’s scoff was dismissive. “Have you truly? I doubt it.”

“You haven’t said why,” Steve said quietly, still refusing to believe. Tony – Gabriel – had been human in all the ways that mattered. What was different about this?

Death tilted his head slightly. “Can you imagine?” he asked softly. “All that love, all that devotion, fixed on one being? I’ve seen lesser angels than Gabriel do terrible things in the name of love. An angel’s devotion is a powerful thing, Captain. Powerful, but terrifying. You wouldn’t want it.”
Steve’s throat went dry. He swallowed, painfully, and looked away, unable to meet the other’s eyes.

“But they love,” Jarvis pointed out, voice quiet.

“Yes.” Death’s voice was somber. “They love. And Gabriel died for it. He loved you all too much.”

The silence that fell was thick. Steve kept his eyes on Tony’s mug, which was still standing on the table, the coffee inside long gone cold. He was unable to meet anyone’s eyes, too aware of how his feelings had been displayed on a silver platter for all to see.

And Tony, wonderful Tony who was human but not enough so, noticed when he came back minutes later. His eyes narrowed, but he thankfully said nothing, only holding out the phone Death had requested.

“It’s the newest prototype,” Tony said, words clipped. “I double checked for any bugs, but you’re good.”

“Does it have your number?” Death asked.

Tony’s brow furrowed slightly. He tapped at the phone for a minute before handing it over, saying, “Now it does.”

Death took the phone, looking it over and nodding once as if to himself. He tucked it away in his coat, standing. “Very good. I’ll take my leave now. Thank you for your hospitality, Tony. We’ll see each other again.”

“Hopefully in death?” Tony drawled, eyebrow raised. It seemed that his time away from Death had given him the cheek that had been missing earlier. It relieved Steve to see it.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Death said enigmatically. He met Steve’s eyes, inclining his head in acknowledgment. “Captain.” Then he was gone.

No one moved for several moments.

Tony eventually broke the silence, sighing lightly. “What happened? You all look like someone died.”

Steve met Tony’s eyes before he could stop himself. They were filled with concern that Tony would never admit to, not now. He sounded and acted so much like the old Tony had, but he wasn’t the same.

“He loved you all too much.”

And so did Steve, but it wasn’t the same.

Steve forced a smile. “He took us a bit off guard, that’s all.”

Tony made an unconvinced sound.

“Death, really?” Clint’s laugh sounded almost hysterical. “Having some trouble wrapping my mind around that one.”

“He’s the oldest,” Tony said, and he blinked and frowned a moment later as if the words he’d just spoken surprised him.

“Oldest and wisest, hm?” Natasha hummed in consideration.
“I don’t like him,” Butterfingers said softly, a small scowl on her face.

Tony cracked a smile. “Might not want to say that to his face.”

“We’ll put it in writing,” Dummy said seriously, sounding so much like his father that Steve wanted to laugh – or cry – he wasn’t sure which.

“Somehow I don’t think he has an address, bud,” Tony said, smile turning strained.

Rhodey heaved out a breath, still looking rather upset from Death’s earlier insinuations. “It’s a bit much for a morning.”

“You were all as surprised as I was,” Tony admitted, now frowning down at his coffee. “I expected a relaxing cup of coffee, not a conversation with Death.”

“Somehow I don’t think anyone expects a conversation with Death,” Bruce said dryly. “It boggles the imagination.”

“I thought he’d be a skeleton,” You said, kicking the air. “You know – Death.”

“I get the feeling that it doesn’t really matter,” Tony said slowly, dumping the coffee out in the sink, his back turned to the others. “Whatever form he’s in, all things come to pass.” His tone was strange as he said it. “Death is the last, unknown journey, and it’s why he was locked up for so long. Fear of the unknown strikes terror even in the heart of angels.” There was a cadence to the words that Steve recognized, a sign that Gabriel had come more to the forefront, and it was something that he had sorely missed.

“Locked up?” Natasha asked.

Tony shook his head, turning to the side so Steve could see that his hand was pressed to his chest. “What?” His tone had changed again, turning back to normal.

Steve shot Natasha a quelling look, his own heart sinking in his chest. It wasn’t the first time that this had happened, but it was simultaneously thrilling and worrying whenever it did. Tony was obviously distressed after it was over, and Steve hated seeing that look on his face.

“I need…” Tony’s eyes skittered around the room. “I’ll be in my office.” He left the room before anyone could protest.

Steve was left staring at the spot where he’d been standing, heart pounding painfully. After a moment, he buried his face in his hands, fingers curling in his hair.

Thankfully no one spoke to him, recognizing his need to be left alone.

“An angel’s devotion is a powerful thing, Captain. Powerful, but terrifying. You wouldn’t want it.”

But what if he did? What if he did?
They put on a good show, trying to act normal, but it didn’t fool him. Tony had perfected acting normal, turned it into an art form that was just one of his many specialties. So no matter how talented Natasha was at acting, she wasn’t good enough to hide it from him. None of them were.

Steve seemed to be the worst off, even with accounting for his absolutely terrible poker face and inability to lie.

Death had told them all something that he hadn’t wanted Tony around for, and now none of them knew how to act. Worst of all, Tony wasn’t even sure what to do.

He was a man of action, and it irked him that this was one thing that he could do nothing about. Not without potentially making things even worse.

It sucked balls that the only two beings in the tower that felt remotely comfortable around him were Suzie and Dustin. Even though the kids spent the most time with the kittens after they were released from the bathroom and allowed reign of the penthouse, the two were for some strange reason terribly attached to Tony. It got to the point that Dustin would follow Tony around whenever he was present and then curl up next to him or on his lap when he was sitting. The same went for Suzie, although she didn’t follow him around so much as she popped up out of nowhere to wind around his ankles and demand affection.

It confused Tony, and not in the least because he wasn’t even really a cat person. He’d probably interacted the least with the two outside of the private moments they’d shared in his bathroom and the near misses he had by almost tripping over one of them when they sat by his feet.

Still, he wasn’t heartless. He indulged Dustin whenever he curled up next to or on Tony and made sure to keep an eye out for Suzie so she wouldn’t accidentally get hurt.

The two kittens were probably the bright spot of his week, especially since the shindig of the Fantastic Four was fast approaching.

Tony dreaded it. Despite what the public thought, he wasn’t actually a complete drama queen. He preferred his privacy, and splashing his antics over the papers was only one way he kept private what was most important to him. It was a case of showing only the cards he wanted to, even if it drove his PR team and Pepper nuts.

It was a method he had become all too used to over the years, to the point where even he doubted whether it was actually a mask or who he really was. At the moment, it was undoubtedly a mask, and he was actually going to do his damn best to lay low. He had an image to maintain as the sponsor for the Avengers, so he couldn’t afford to act like he used to.

It was one less thing Pepper had to worry about when it came to ulcers and blood pressure.

The rest of the team seemed to range from utterly calm to nervous wrecks at the thought of attending the event. Natasha and Clint seemed to be as cool as cucumbers, evidently used to such things during their years as S.H.I.E.L.D. agents. Steve was somewhere in the middle, seeming utterly resigned to his fate. Bruce was a complete and utter wreck, hiding whenever the tailor in charge of their suits tried to get his measurements and also bouncing around Tony’s workshop chatting about anything in an attempt to get his mind off what he would need to do.

“You can just hide in a corner behind a plant,” Tony had finally suggested the day before.

“I’ll probably throw up,” Bruce had answered, making a face.

Jarvis didn’t seem to care at all, even if he was attending as one of Tony’s incognito bodyguards. He
was the most public of the AIs, if only because he was an adult and knew how to act.

When the day eventually rolled around and they were getting prepared, Tony made sure that everyone had everything they needed, even going so far to properly do Bruce’s tie because he kept dropping it. Steve’s tie was actually clip-on, and he scowled heavily at it before putting it on. There was obviously a story as to why he had a clip-on and not an actual tie, but Tony wasn’t going to ask.

He could always look it up later.

Right now he needed to put on his game face and prepare to schmooze. There was a lot of money involved in this, and it was just one way that Tony could begin to make amends for whatever the hell Gabriel had done to Earth in the process of getting rid of the Leviathans. Sure, it was localized to the States because the rest of the world was just too paranoid to risk sending anyone high profile to other countries, but it was a start.

Baxter Building was smarming with paparazzi, shiny cars, and well-dressed people by the time their limousine pulled up. Tony gave Happy a consolatory pat on the shoulder since he had to actually snake his way back out of this mess before he slid out of the car after Steve, the white lights of cameras nearly blinding him.

Steve was completely stiff next to him, and Tony laid a gentle hand at the small of his back, whispering, “Easy, Steve. Just smile and move forward.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Steve did, his walk stiffer than usual but just a bit more fluid than it had been seconds ago. Natasha followed smoothly after him, her dark red dress absolutely captivating on her figure. Clint had her arm, being her “date” for the event. Bruce was sweating nervously next to Tony and had his face tucked down.

Tony followed last with Jarvis at his side, giving everyone who snapped a picture either his practiced grin or a carefully placid look. Those met with the latter typically stopped snapping shots for only a second, momentarily taken off guard for the critical moment where they could get a good photograph before Tony moved on.

It was a move he’d perfected for the paparazzi he really couldn’t stand, and it never failed.

By the time he joined the rest of the team, he was already tired of the entire affair and just wanted to duck inside.

“Can we make that excuse?” Steve whispered into his ear, ducking in close so Tony could hear.

“It hasn’t yet been five minutes,” Tony responded, managing a grin that made the photograph of the reporter who snagged the opportunity.

“I’ve found a plant,” Bruce informed Tony, disappearing promptly the moment Tony registered it.

Steve blinked after him. “Is he…going to take a plant home?”

“Hide behind it,” Tony reassured him. “Come on.” He took Steve’s elbow and pulled him inside and away from the crowd outside. Inside was equally crowded, but at least there weren’t countless flashes as cameras went off.

“I think dividing and conquering might be a good choice for this,” Natasha said to Clint.

“Sounds good.” Clint clapped Tony on the shoulder. “See ya, Tony.” He vanished after Natasha, blending seamlessly with the mass of filthy rich people who were only in this for the fame and the
boost it would give their reputation.

“Do you want to do the same thing or—”

“God, no,” Steve said abruptly, not even letting Tony finish. “I hate these things.”

“Good reason,” Tony said, only slightly taken aback by his disgust. “Let’s hit the bar. Always a good place to meet people.”

“I don’t want to meet people,” Steve complained, trailing after Tony as he wound his way through the crowded room, nodding and smiling at vaguely familiar faces.

“Slap on a patriotic smile and wave,” Tony told him, elbowing him in the stomach after the third time a woman tried to strike up a conversation with Steve only to be given the cold shoulder. “Or at least say hi. We need to put up a good impression. You scowling is not going to cut it.”

“This is stupid.” Steve muttered once they’d reached the bar.

“Give me the strongest drink you’ve got for my friend,” Tony said to the bartender. “He needs to lighten up.”

“I can’t get drunk,” Steve protested.

“Just roll with it,” Tony said, giving him a quick smile before turning his attention to a pretty brunette who was trying to get his attention.

She actually wanted nothing more than small talk, the boring kind that put Tony to sleep. She also added some flirting, which spiced the conversation some but not enough to really engross him. He just couldn’t get into it.

On his other side, Steve was desperately trying to put off the advances of several aggressive women and one guy who kept trying to touch his chest. Jarvis eventually took pity on him and pulled the guy off, leaving Steve with the women since all they were really doing was just flirting really badly.

Finally one woman actually managed to get Steve to agree to a dance and hauled him off before he could realize what he’d agreed to and change his mind. Steve shot Tony one last panicked look before disappearing onto the dance floor; Tony just waved him off with a cheesy grin. His own conversational partner had left in disgust since he’d been completely disinterested in keeping up his end of it.

Tony wasn’t even sorry. She would find better companionship than him anyway.

Taking his scotch on the rocks and tipping the bartender, Tony headed back into the fray, catching sight of a terrified looking Jarvis also being pulled into a dance by a redhead. Despite how much he didn’t want to, he needed to mingle. A drink would at least help smooth over the rough edges.

He’d just caught sight of Bruce doing an absolutely marvelous job of hiding behind a potted plant when someone took hold of his elbow and held him still. Tony turned, only to find just a hand and a stretched out arm.

“Nice, Reed.” Tony sighed, despairing of his fellow scientist’s social skills.

The man popped up quickly enough, his arm retracting back to a normal size as he drew closer. “Tony!”
“You couldn’t just say hello like a normal person?” Tony asked, gazing down pointedly at Reed’s hand.

“You’re not normal,” Reed said, not looking at all apologetic.

“Thank you for that stunning assessment.” Tony took Reed’s hand off.

“I’ve tried praying to Gabriel,” Reed started abruptly, frowning. “but nothing happens.”

Freezing, Tony’s fingers clenched tight around his glass. “Is that so?” he managed in a remarkably even tone.

“Steve tells me you don’t remember,” Reed continued blithely. “You were responsible for what happened, weren’t you?”

Tony plastered on a small smile. “That depends on what you’re referring to.”

“I also wanted to get a look at your wings,” Reed said inanely.

Now Tony was just confused. “What?”

“That kind of transportation is remarkable, and it would be amazing if it could be mass produced—”

“Reed!” Sue thankfully appeared, a forbidding expression on her face. “I thought we discussed this!”

“I had questions,” Reed protested.

“That you weren’t supposed to ask!” Sue glared. “There will be no cuddling for a week!”

Tony privately thought the threat would’ve held more water if it involved sex, but it seemed to be horrifying enough for Reed since his eyes went wide.

“Sue—” Reed started, apparently trying to smooth this mess over and earn his cuddling privileges back.

“No!” Sue grabbed hold of the back of his jacket, only stopping to give Tony a kind smile. “Tony, it’s good to see you. I’m sorry for Reed. Enjoy the party. I’ll make sure this one doesn’t bother you again.” After a farewell nod, she dragged Reed away.

Tony was left staring after them, privately wondering what the hell had just happened.

It probably had something to do with that phone call Steve had told him about, but still. It was undoubtedly a good thing that Sue had grabbed Reed before he could ask anymore probing questions in the middle of a crowded room. The man had no sense of privacy or decorum, and Tony was saying this as a longtime acquaintance-sometimes-friend.

Shaking his head, Tony switched the hand that was holding his scotch, allowing his cramping fingers the chance to relax. Reed had known about Gabriel, but not the details. That was something Steve hadn’t told Tony, so he probably hadn’t known about that. It didn’t exactly reassure Tony because if that was true, it was doubly likely that there were more people out there who knew about Gabriel.

It was highly likely that some of those people were also in this room.

Tony really hated math sometimes. He could’ve used the whole “ignorance is bliss” thing at the moment.
Fully intending on going back to the bar to get a much stronger drink than the watered down scotch he was holding, Tony almost ran into two men who suddenly appeared in his way.

He recognized one of them as Tiberius Stone, an old college buddy that had rubbed Tony the wrong way too often for them to be good friends despite Tiberius’s best efforts. It was weird, because Tiberius had felt simultaneously familiar while off-putting. It was an odd dichotomy that had caused Tony to spend more time with him than he really should have.

The other man accompanying Tiberius wasn’t one Tony recognized, but he did seem vaguely familiar in the sense that Tony had probably met him at some point in his eventful life. He hoped he hadn’t pissed him off in some way because he’d been drunk or something.

Tiberius had a large grin on his face that was all too familiar. “Tony!”

Tony smiled back uneasily. “Tiberius.”

“Ty, please, Tony.” Tiberius’s smile didn’t waver. “How long’s it been?”

“At least a decade,” Tony said, smile sharpening. And not fucking long enough. Tiberius was one of the sleaziest examples when it came to the business world, and Tony had practically no regrets about dropping him the moment he could. “I had no idea you were here.”

Tiberius laughed like Tony had told a great joke, white teeth glinting. “Neither did I! Sue’s an old friend.”

More like Tiberius had tried to sleep with her at some point. “Who’s your friend?” he asked instead.

The other man smiled tightly at Tony, the sight discomfiting. It was almost like he’d once known how to smile but had forgotten and was now operating on muscle memory. “Aldrich Killian,” he introduced himself, stretching a hand out for Tony to shake. “We met. Once.” His smile was stiff.

Tony shook the proffered hand, dropping it as quickly as he could while being polite. “Charmed. Again.” He flashed his own smile, keeping it as pleasant as possible.

“You left me on a rooftop.”

“Well, that…” Tony floundered for a brief second. “…seems awfully rude of me.”

“It’s the world of business, Aldrich,” Tiberius said, chuckling. He clapped Aldrich on the shoulder, squeezing it. He addressed Tony next. “He’s just starting up his own company; I’m helping him get on his feet.”

“Awfully charitable of you, Ty,” Tony said.

“You know me, Tony.” Tiberius grinned.

“You finally decided to show your face?” Aldrich asked, the words sharp.

Tony tilted his head to the side. “I’ve been public. Unless you’re talking about what happened during the…?” He gestured vaguely around the room to signal what he was referring to. “I was sick.”

Aldrich’s smile turned even stiffer if that was possible. “I don’t doubt it.”

Tiberius laughed, obviously trying to put them at ease but failing. “He’s referring to the weapons division of your company. Word on the street’s that you’re thinking of reopening it.”
Spine stiffening, Tony gave Tiberius a frozen smile. “That’s not in consideration. My company’s never making a single weapon again.” One of the only good decisions Gabriel had made during his stint as Tony, and he was not going to change it.

“Quite a big change of heart from what you preached during your college years,” Tiberius noted, eyes flashing with something indiscernible.

“People change,” Tony responded softly, not looking away from him. “I had my eyes opened in Afghanistan.”

“In more ways than one, hm?” Aldrich’s eyes glittered.

“Undoubtedly.”

Aldrich drew himself upright, looking down his nose at Tony. “You always were a coward.”

“Whoa there.” Tiberius gave Aldrich a quelling look. “That’s enough, Aldrich.” He shot Tony an apologetic glance. “He’s still a bit touchy about that brush off you gave him back in ninety-eight.”

1998? That…conference in Bern?

“We met once, you know, at a technical conference in Bern.”

“…I don’t remember.”

“No, you wouldn’t. If I had been that drunk, I wouldn’t have been able to stand, much less give a lecture on integrated circuits.”

With a blink, Tony pulled himself out of that dark memory, the first he had of Yinsen. And now, apparently, he’d met Aldrich at this same conference?

“I’d apologize,” Tony said eventually, evenly meeting Aldrich’s eyes, “but the world of business is pretty cutthroat. I’m sure Ty’s already told you.”

“Trust me,” Aldrich said despite Tiberius’s warning glare, “where I come from things were even more cutthroat.” He bared his teeth in a brutal grin. “Literally, in a lot of cases.”

Tony eyed him speculatively, not entirely sure what he was getting at. “Interesting.”

“Oh yeah.” Tiberius’s grin was slightly uneasy now, and his hand was visibly gripping Aldrich’s shoulder tightly. “You hear about the new stuff my company’s churning out with Aldrich’s here? It’ll be revolutionary, biologically speaking.”

Over Tiberius’s shoulder, Tony caught sight of Steve winding his way determinedly to him, and relief blossomed in his chest. “I’ll be sure to keep an eye on it. Now if you’ll please excuse me…” He made to push past the two of them. “Ty, always great to see you—”

Aldrich’s hand clamped down on Tony’s wrist, his grip like iron. “I’m sure we’ll be seeing each other soon, Mr. Stark,” he said, eyes cold as he met Tony’s.

Tony didn’t wince at the tight grip Aldrich had on his wrist, simply returning his icy stare. “Undoubtedly,” he said pleasantly.

Steve was at his side now, eyes darting down to Aldrich’s hand on Tony’s wrist. “Everything all right?”
“Just fine,” Tiberius said heartily, eyes scanning Steve’s striking figure. “Aldrich was just wishing Tony well here.”

“Could he cut it short?” Steve asked, tone only moderately polite. “We have to make our way out.”

Tiberius made a disappointed face. “So soon? I was hoping to chat with you, Captain. I’m a huge fan —”

“Steve Rogers, nice to meet you,” Steve cut him off rudely, taking Tony’s other arm and tugging him away from Aldrich. “And now I’m saying goodbye. Come on, Tony.”

Gobsmacked at Steve’s rudeness and utterly speechless, Tony followed after him, only vaguely surprised when it turned out that they really were leaving. The limo had already been pulled up to the curb and the others were sitting inside.

The moment they were seated inside, Tony found his voice in time to demand, “What the hell was that?”

Steve’s jaw tensed, and he looked away. “I didn’t like them.”

Tony huffed out a disbelieving laugh. “Yeah, Ty’s a dick, and Aldrich’s not much better, but I can handle them. That wasn’t you not liking them. That was something else.”

“I didn’t like how they were looking at you,” Steve snapped, eyes flying up to meet Tony’s, anger burning in them. “It wasn’t right.”

Tony settled back in his seat, arms folded over his chest and eyes narrowing. His voice was hard as he said, “I’ve dealt with a lot worse in my time, and keeping up amiable pretenses is one part of being a good businessman. You’ve just blown all efforts I made at playing nice with those two assholes out of the water.”

Steve’s mouth twisted. “Tony—”

“I don’t care what your relationship was with Gabriel,” Tony cut him off bluntly. “It doesn’t matter. But what does matter is that you listen and follow my lead when it’s necessary. We needed to do this for a hell of a lot of reasons, and I hope that you didn’t just fuck all of them up because you were jealous.”

Flinching back at the last word, Steve blanched, eyes snapping away from Tony’s. He hunched his shoulders, ducking his head.

The burning stares from the others were boring holes in the side of Tony’s skull, but he refused to show any weakness. Guilt and regret for what he’d just said were already churning in his stomach, sickening him.

Tightening his jaw, Tony turned his head to look out the window at the city.

The ride back to the tower was spent in awkward silence.

Tony spent every single second of it wishing he’d bitten off his tongue.

Once back in the tower, Tony made a direct beeline to his room, shutting the door behind him and locking it. He threw his suit jacket over a chair, untied his tie, untucked his shirt, and rolled up his sleeves before sinking down to the floor by the bed, knees curled to his chest.
The room was dark save for the bluish lights of the clock and the sterile city lights filtering in through the cracks in the curtains. It was exactly what Tony needed right now. He couldn’t stand to look at himself, not and see something else.

It was his face, but he felt at odds with himself, sometimes too big for his body, his skin confining him. Right now, he felt nothing but small, the harsh words he’d spoken to Steve echoing in his mind.

They had been uncalled for, no matter how rude Steve had been. He’d only done it to help Tony out, and Tony had repaid it by being cruel.

Tugging at his hair hard enough to feel the pain, Tony took a deep breath, hoping to alleviate the sick feeling in his chest and failing. Guilt wasn’t so easily dispersed at that, and it was something Tony had a lot of experience with.

There was a faint meow next to him, and a small body rubbed against his thigh. Tony pulled his face out of his hands long enough to give a surprised glance to where Suzie was rubbing her head against him.

“What are you doing here?” His voice was hoarse.

Dustin crawled out from under the bed next, practically climbing over Suzie to get to Tony. His tiny claws dug into Tony’s expensive pants, flexing as he evidently considered whether to climb up to get to his lap.

Tony had absolutely no idea how the two had snuck into his room without him noticing. The door had been closed, and there was no other way inside.

Dustin grumbled in discontent as he wiggled his way up Tony’s legs and then jumped onto Tony’s shoulder, crouching right next to his ear and starting to purr. It was simultaneously annoying and comforting, and Tony had no desire to brush him off because that would be inordinately cruel to do to a kitten who only wanted to comfort him.

“You’re not gonna join him, are you?” he asked Suzie in a low voice.

She didn’t respond, but she did flop down onto her side and stretch out, claws hooking into Tony’s pants.

Now Tony had two purring kittens surrounding him, and absolutely no idea how they’d gotten in.

He wasn’t left in this state for long, as ten minutes later there was a curt knock on the door that wasn’t Pepper or Rhodey. They’d just walk in heedless of what could be going on (even Rhodey walking in on Tony masturbating hadn’t broken him of the habit, though that had been an awkward conversation after).

There was no desire to answer the door, but apparently the person on the other side expected it, since there was another knock that actually sounded irritated.

Huffing out a sigh, Tony pushed himself to his feet, half-expecting Dustin to jump off and mildly impressed when all Dustin did was dig his claws in and readjust himself to sit more comfortably.

There was another knock at the door, this one angrier than the one before, when Tony went to open it. The moment he did, he was met with an absolutely furious Natasha who shoved him back into the room, the force of which sent him stumbling backwards and almost dislodged Dustin from his shoulder.
“You’ve got some nerve talking to Steve like that!” Natasha spat, shoving him again.

Tony raised one hand to keep Dustin from falling off and blinked at her.

“I won’t pretend I entirely understand what this is like for you,” Natasha continued angrily, “but that doesn’t excuse your behavior. That was cruel, and I wouldn’t have given you that, but it seems that even I can be wrong. How you’re feeling right now is no excuse for treating us like this, Gabriel—”

“That’s enough!” Tony shouted.

The words were out before Tony could stop them, their sharpness causing Natasha to flinch. The guilt was buried now, taken over by the white-hot anger towards Natasha, towards Gabriel, towards every damn thing that had put him in this position.

He took Dustin off his shoulder to carefully cradle him in one hand, not wanting to risk him falling. “That’s enough, Natasha,” he repeated, keeping his voice calm.

Blinking rapidly, Natasha slowly recovered from her shock, a red tinge filling her cheeks as her eyes narrowed. Her shoulders lifted up almost to her ears before they dropped and her hands clenched into fists at her sides. “Is it?” she hissed, fury coloring her tone.

“I’m not Gabriel.” He struggled to keep the words calm, even as the force of his own helplessness and anger threatened to overwhelm him. “And I won’t pretend to be. The man that you knew isn’t here anymore. You’ve got me, and you’ll have to deal with it, flaws and all.”

“Do you think that somehow excuses you from treating Steve like this?” Natasha asked in a dangerously low tone.

“Let’s get this straight,” Tony snarled, feeling the last vestiges of his restraint disappear like ashes. “You are not my friends. I barely know you beyond what I’ve scrimmaged together from videos and classified files. I don’t owe you anything, do you understand? I woke up several years in the future, strangers around me expecting me to know who they are and what our relationships were, and every time you look at me you’re seeing someone else – someone I’m not. Someone I can’t be.”

“You are one and the same,” Natasha retorted, her head held high. “It’s what you’ve repeatedly insisted—”

“Fuck that,” Tony sharply interrupted. “I don’t know what Gabriel was smoking, but we’re not the same. He might’ve known how to act like me, but we’re not the same person. The sooner you all get that through your heads, the better off we’ll all be.”

Natasha seemed to have stopped breathing, her eyes glittering strangely in the dim light of the room. Her eyes scanned Tony’s face, taking in every aspect of it.

Finally, she squared her shoulders, voice low as she insisted, “You are Gabriel. Just because you can’t remember it now doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

“I’m not him!” Tony shouted, the volume of his words causing Natasha to flinch backwards, mouth parting in a sharp gasp. “I won’t ever be him, and you need to stop looking for him! I can’t be what you’re looking for because he and I are two different people. Is it my fault that he went off on an egotistical suicide mission that dumped me here with you?”

Natasha rallied, eyes flashing angrily. “Don’t say that!”

“Say what? That Gabriel was a jackass who was too hyped up on the size of his own ego to think of
another solution other than blowing himself up? He was a fucking archangel and the only thing he could think of was using himself as a self-made bomb to destroy the Leviathans? He didn’t think that maybe there was another way that didn’t involve killing himself and leaving me here stuck with you when you don’t even want me! You want him, and sorry to tell you this now, but I can’t ever be him! You’re stuck with me – like it or not – as plain old Tony Stark, and guess what? I’m human and an asshole, and you don’t want me.” It was Natasha’s blanched face that stopped him from saying anything more, and he cut himself off with a ragged inhale.

He closed his eyes against the rest of the vitriol that wanted to spill out into the open, rubbing his face tiredly. “You don’t want me,” he repeated in quieter tone. “And I’m sorry that I can’t be who you want.”

Natasha curled in on herself, jaw tensing. Her eyes remained fixed on Tony’s face, evidently searching for something that she wasn’t going to find. Finally, she took a long breath, her eyes closing. Her shoulders slumped until they looked like she had the weight of the world on them. “I’m sorry you feel that way.” The words were quiet, all previous anger gone. She sounded utterly defeated.

Tony stayed silent.

Natasha slowly opened her eyes and unwaveringly met his. “You might not consider us friends,” she continued softly, “but we consider you one.” She stepped backwards so she was standing outside the room; one hand curved around the doorframe. Hesitating briefly, she nodded once at Tony and then left, her dark red dress glittering.

There was no one waiting, but Tony stood there for several minutes, staring at the opposite wall.

Still in Tony’s hand, Dustin meowed, distracting him from the disgust, guilt, and simmering remnants of his anger.

Sighing, Tony dropped his head to the doorframe, eyes squeezed shut. “I’m such an idiot,” he whispered, thumb stroking once over the soft fur of Dustin’s side.

Suzie butted her head against Tony’s leg before proceeding to knead at Tony’s socked foot.

A small tugged at his lips against his will, and his heart softened at the sight. “That a sign I should be getting into bed?” He shot a glance to the bathroom, where he still had a litter box and water for the kittens. “You can stay,” he allowed, crouching to let Dustin down by his sister. “But just for the night.”

It was doubtful that he’d be getting any sleep tonight. He could at least have the company of two beings who wouldn’t judge him.
Chapter End Notes

I'd like to thank kurowrites for her invaluable help in getting that confrontation between Natasha and Tony just right. It wouldn't have worked out without her help.

I was never particularly fond of the actress who played Sue in the Fantastic Four movies in the 2000s, and Tiberius Stone has absolutely no role in MCU at all. So now you guys can see who I had in mind when writing these characters.

Thoughts? I hope you enjoyed today's chapter! And have an absolutely awesome weekend! Stay safe wherever you are.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Now, the chapter a lot of you guys have been waiting for!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He didn’t want to do this. He didn’t. It was anathema to him – something that should not be considered.

But, oh, he had to. He had no other choice, because anything else meant destruction, and he would not let that happen here. No more, not again, not to his new family and home.

So if it meant saving everything...then, yes, he would sacrifice it. Sacrifice it so he could do what he needed.

Anything else hadn’t worked, his senses too dulled to sense what was older than him - what exceeded him. He needed to be more than he was right now, even if that meant cutting out bits of himself at the same time.

The tree was right there, glowing with the aftereffects of having been Grace for nearly forty years. It would be a perfect receptacle for what had to be torn out.

Taking a deep breath and fortifying himself, he turned inward, isolating every piece that he couldn’t afford to have and packing it into a dense ball that he could grip. Unwilling to prolong the agony, he ripped it out.

Then, there was nothing. But. Pain—

With a strangled cry, Tony jerked awake, body burning in half-remembered pain as the sensation of having torn something out of his core burned. His heart beat frantically against his ribs, his lungs fighting to get oxygen.

With a soft sob, Tony turned onto his side and curled up into a ball in a futile attempt at lessening the hole that seemed to have torn open in him, his hands fist in his hair. He could still feel the love Gabriel had had for his family and home – love that had caused him to tear something out of him (tear Tony out).

Breath hitching in quiet sobs, one hand came down to clutch at the sweat-soaked shirt covering his chest. The burning sensation was gradually dissipating, but the hole remained, a stark reminder of what Tony was missing.

This dream (memory) was worse than the last one, because this time it was Gabriel hurting himself, not an older brother.

What had driven him to do that? How had something had enough power to force him to?

No answers were forthcoming, and Tony was left a shuddering lump under his covers, half-remembered pain still streaking through him.
It was almost a shock when he heard a soft whisper of “Oh, Tony,” before a body lay down next to him, the familiar smell of Pepper filling his senses as she folded him into her arms.

He almost didn’t notice a second person joining them, Rhodey’s larger body filling the empty space behind Tony. His arm went over Tony’s waist, wrapping around him comfortingly.

“Pepper…” Tony whispered hoarsely. “What—?”

“Jarvis called us up,” Pepper answered quietly, breath tickling Tony’s hair. She was silent for several breaths. “Did you have a nightmare?”

Tony shuddered as he remembered the dream; Rhodey’s arm tightened. He remembered what had happened last time he’d had a memory hidden in a dream. “There’s…no one strange in the kitchen?”

“Not when I was there,” Rhodey answered soothingly. “What is it, Tones?”

“A memory,” Tony breathed, feeling them stiffen on either side of him. “In Afghanistan…”

Rhodey’s tone was cautious as he asked, “When?”

Tony laughed, though it sounded more like a sob. “I don’t know. Or maybe I do. Before he did that whole suicide spiel.”

Pepper’s tone was sad. “You remember that?”

“No – not the actual event, no. He…he tore something – me out. He tore me out of himself – out of his Grace. I was…weakening him?” Tony clenched his eyes shut at the memory, at the roiling horror and screaming denial that had surged through Gabriel at that point. “He didn’t want to do it.” His voice broke.

“Christ,” Rhodey whispered, pressing his face in the space between Tony’s shoulder blades. His next word was muffled, but it was undoubtedly another curse.

Pepper’s chest hitched under Tony’s head, but her voice was steady as she spoke. “He didn’t tell us exactly what he had to do, but we guessed. It was… He looked…lost. I’d not seen him look like that before.”

“He wasn’t supposed to do it, but he had to,” Tony murmured.

“What do you mean?” Pepper asked.

“It – it’s not something you should do,” he said, trying to find the right words to put together what he’d gotten from Gabriel. “Either everything, or not at all, and not just a part of yourself, because then you might as well not be you.” He shook his head. “But he had no choice, because the only other option was the one thing he wouldn’t let happen.”

Rhodey had turned his face from Tony’s back, so his voice was audible as he asked, “What?”


Neither Pepper nor Rhodey had anything to say to that, although they did slide closer to him in an attempt at offering comfort.

Tony stayed silent for several minutes, just breathing in the scent of Pepper and absorbing Rhodey’s warmth at his back. Two soft weights lay at his feet, signaling where Dustin and Suzie had decided to stay the night.
Eventually, unable to stand the silence anymore, Tony asked softly, “How mad are they?”

Pepper hummed lightly. “I haven’t seen Steve or Bruce, and Natasha looked ready to spit fire when I saw her this morning. Clint didn’t look much happier.”

“Shit.”

“You have to do that last night?” Rhodey asked.

“I just…lost it,” Tony admitted miserably. “He didn’t deserve it.”

“No, he didn’t,” Pepper agreed. “But I think he understands.”

“I practically shot him in the heart myself,” Tony said, scoffing. “What part of that makes him likely to understand?”

“The part where he loves you, idiot,” Pepper chastised him softly. “The part where he’s been your best friend.”

“What am I?” Rhodey sounded affronted. “Chopped liver?”

Tony could just sense the unimpressed look Pepper was shooting Rhodey. “The point is,” she continued, gently stroking fingers through Tony’s hair, “that those who love and care for us understand when we say things that we don’t mean, even if they hurt.”

“I did mean it,” Tony confessed.

“He knows you did. He also knows that what he did wasn’t right either.”

Sighing, Tony twisted his face to the side to look down the length of the bed to where Pepper’s and Rhodey’s socked feet lay next to where his were under the blanket. Suzie and Dustin were curled up right next to each other under his toes. “It wasn’t worth it.” The words were a whisper.

Rhodey shifted behind him, scooting up so his head was on the pillow above Tony’s. “What changed your mind?” His tone was neutral. “You’re usually not so apologetic the morning after; it takes weeks for us to pull an apology out of you.”

Tony didn’t even pretend to be insulted; it was true. Not responding immediately, he took the time to formulate his answer. “I…felt what he did – Gabriel. I was him – in his head. The one thing that I felt”—other than the sheer terror of what he’d been about to do—“was this…love. For all of you.”

Rhodey’s fingers flexed on Tony’s stomach, but he otherwise didn’t react.

“And that made you realize you were wrong,” Pepper guessed.

“Yes – no.” Tony sighed, rolling over slightly so he was on his back. He pressed a hand to his forehead, covering his eyes. “I felt like shit last night already. This just made it worse.”

“Feelings will do that to a person,” Pepper said blandly.

Swallowing, Tony moved his hand down, tilting his head back to look Pepper in the eyes. He found no judgment in them, and that, more than anything, gave him the courage to ask, “What happened between us?”

Pepper blinked, surprised by the change in subject. “What do you mean?”
Tony kept his voice even. “I thought we had something going.”

“Oh.” Pepper’s mouth ticked up in a small smile, her eyes dimming. “There was still flirting, but nothing more. He never pushed the boundaries of what had already been established, and I think…some of his flirting was a bit…odd? He didn’t seem to take it seriously, but just as a part of our friendship.”

“He flirted with everything, though,” Rhodey added casually. “Including me, and there’s nothing happening after that one kiss we had back in grad school.”

That was understandable. Flirting was something Tony could do easily – like breathing. He just hadn’t really had that pull to do so, though. It was more habitual than anything else now, something he did in response to a beautiful woman trying to talk to him. There was no desire to follow through.

“He didn’t really sleep with anyone either,” Pepper continued thoughtfully, catching Tony’s attention again. “Not that I noticed, and I wasn’t really paying attention beyond trying to stop him from prankng the board members. That just stopped, and I thought it was odd until I found out who he was.”

“Not really human, you mean?” Tony gave a small grin.

“An archangel,” Pepper agreed, returning his grin.

“He wasn’t celibate,” Rhodey disagreed. “There were a few times he dragged me out to a night on the town and I know for a fact he pulled some people of both genders. That was after making sure I wouldn’t be alone,” he added after a bit more consideration.

“Angels can have sex?” Didn’t the Church frown down on extramarital stuff?

“He said it didn’t matter,” Pepper explained. “Not as long as it was consensual.”

“Said he had a relationship with the god Kali,” Rhodey said, sounding amazed.

Tony was rather ashamed to admit he didn’t know which god that was. “I would’ve thought that’d be blasphemous.”

“Most of what he did would be considered blasphemous by the Church,” Rhodey said wryly. “His default answer to that was that the scribe who he had to dictate the Bible to was practically deaf and stoned most of the time.”

“And the numerous translations and revisions that the book went through afterward didn’t help either,” Pepper added.

“I knew that thing was a hunk of junk,” Tony muttered, vindictively pleased in retrospect at every religious bible-thumper who’d ever thought to condemn his “hedonistic lifestyle that would send him to hell to rot for eternity.”

Rhodey patted his hip. “Yeah, like you’ve said before, Tones.”

“But I think,” Pepper said in a softer tone, not meeting Tony’s eyes, “the most important thing for him was love. Something Jarvis told me about what he said in the beginning: ‘love is love, regardless of form.’ So for him…to do what he did in the end…it hurt all of us, but we understood.” She smiled sadly at Tony, reaching out to brush away unruly strands of hair from his forehead. “And it’s why Steve understands. You hurt him, but he understands because he knows you’re hurting, too.”
“Doesn’t make it right, but it’s understandable,” Rhodey said bluntly. “You do owe him an apology.”

Tony dropped his eyes, that familiar feeling of guilt rising in him. “I know.”

“And, Tony…” Pepper tapped the side of his head to indicate he should look at her. “We don’t care if you’re Gabriel or Tony because you’ll always be just Tony to us. Whether you remember or not, we’ll be here.”

“Always,” Rhodey promised in a low tone, his eyes solemn.

Heart in his throat, Tony managed to choke out a hoarse “Thank you” before burying his face in Pepper’s chest, Rhodey turning with the motion to hug him from behind.

Even the emptiness from the memory wasn’t as bad with his two best friends lying right here with him.

Despite Tony’s best efforts, he didn’t actually get to apologize to Steve after Pepper and Rhodey finally pushed him out of bed. This time it wasn’t his fault. He’d really intended on apologizing, but there was the little problem of Steve having blocked all access to his floor.

Tony was a dick, but he wasn’t that much of a dick that he’d force his way into someone’s private space just for his own peace of mind. So all he ended up doing was gazing forlornly at Steve’s floor number and the little red ACCESS DENIED stamped next to it before sighing and hitting the button for his workshop. He had no desire to see Natasha or Clint, especially after last night.

He felt vaguely guilty for not even saying good morning to the kids, but he was sure that they wouldn’t notice his absence (this was a big fat lie, but Tony was good at ignoring those when it concerned himself). It wouldn’t be worth subjecting himself to Natasha’s icy glares or Clint’s stony silence, since he was sure that the two had ways to make him feel like dirt.

Tony could sometimes be masochistic, but he wasn’t that masochistic. It was healthier for him to hide in his workshop until he could talk to Steve. His only problem was that his workshop didn’t seem to have much in the way of food or beverages aside from the candy bars he kept finding stashed all around. He did love candy, but it was a bit much to find a Snickers bar hidden in a gauntlet of the Iron Man armor.

Either Gabriel had a hell of a sweet tooth or someone thought this would be a great prank.

Resigned to a sugar high sometime in the next couple hours, Tony unwrapped the Snickers bar and started munching on it as he took a closer look at the suit’s inner workings. He would need to know how it operated if he was ever going to take a joy ride in it without JARVIS locking him down. He hadn’t had the time before to do so properly, but with hours of free time stretching out before him, there was nothing else for him to do.

An undetermined amount of time later, Tony was jolted out of a coding haze by the annoying sound of his phone ringing. Since almost no one had his personal number and those who did were actually living in the same tower and could just pop down to talk if they wanted, his first thought was that an annoying telemarketer had finally found his number.

His second was that wasn’t possible because he’d barricaded his number from any and all such lists since he’d had a cell. That only left one option, and it wasn’t one he was exactly keen to think of.

Looking at the phone screen confirmed it, and it didn’t take much extra deliberation to answer the
call. “So are you going to make a habit of calling instead of randomly appearing unannounced in my kitchen? Because that’s something I can definitely get behind.”

There was no immediate answer, and for a second Tony feared that he’d been too insolent before there was an audible inhale and a deep, unfamiliar voice spoke. “Gabriel, brother…” There was a hitch that sounded like the other was trying not to break down. “I need your help.”

He double-checked the caller ID, only to find that it was indeed still the number of that prototype phone he’d given Death. But the caller pretty obviously wasn’t Death, so he wasn’t sure what was going on here.

Preferring to keep his cards close to his chest, Tony gestured for JARVIS to open a map and start tracking the phone’s GPS chip. “Where are you?”

The other person heaved a relieved sigh, the sound crackling like static over the line. “I don’t know. I don’t – they’ve all Fallen, Gabriel, all of them. The gates have closed, and it’s my fault—”

“Hey, calm down,” Tony interrupted, keeping his tone soothing. “It’ll be all right. I’m tracking you right now. Stay where you are, and I’ll come pick you up.” He paused, waiting for an affirmation. When there was nothing forthcoming, he pressed further. “Okay?”

“…Okay.”

Tony hung up without saying goodbye, eyes fixed on the location of the phone that the unknown caller had somehow gotten his hands on. It was just outside of Central Park, meaning Tony had at least twenty minutes of driving to do, not counting traffic.

“Are you certain about this, sir?” JARVIS asked quietly, sounding concerned.

Tony smiled wryly, glancing down at his clothes to make sure he was decent for the public. An old sweatshirt and grungy jeans would have to do the trick. “Certain? Hell, no. But I need to do this.”

“Would you like some company for the drive?” JARVIS’s tone strongly insinuated that this was not up for debate.

Tony rolled his eyes, smiling fondly. “If I say no, you’ll just pop up in the car anyway.”

JARVIS sounded notably happier as he said, “I’ll meet you in the garage.”

Saving his work, Tony turned the lights down and left the workshop, doubt and concern warring inside him. He had no idea who the unknown caller was, only that he had sounded guilty as hell and absolutely devastated. Tony would’ve hung up and left it at that if it wasn’t for that “brother.” This man, whoever he was, had called Tony for help because Gabriel had been his brother. Regardless of the current state of affairs, Tony wasn’t going to leave one of Gabriel’s family members high and dry, not after the memory he’d had last night.

Once in the garage, Tony opted for one of his less ostentatious cars. It was also one that afforded Jarvis more leg room as he insisted on sitting in the back.

“Still uncertain, sir?” Jarvis asked as Tony input the phone’s coordinates into the GPS.

“You know me, Jarvis,” Tony said as the GPS pulled up the directions. “Besides, anything goes wrong, I have you to kick ass.”

“Thank you for your confidence.” Jarvis had a small, pleased smile on his face.
Returning the small smile, Tony pulled out of the parking spot and drove to the exit. The GPS would guide him away from traffic jams, but it was still a twenty-five minute drive considering the one-way streets and pedestrian traffic.

The little dot that showed the phone’s location hadn’t moved on Tony’s phone screen, which meant the other guy had listened to his order not to move. Considering that most people tended to try and move around at least a little when in a strange place, Tony was reluctantly impressed.

As they drew closer to the coordinates, Tony flicked to the “return call” option, ready to call again so he could more easily find the person.

It turned out to be unnecessary, as Tony picked the man out instantly once he turned onto the street. There were dozens of other people walking around and scurrying back and forth, but this man was the only one standing still against a wall. He also seemed rather shell-shocked, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground. The most noticeable quality was his tan trench coat.

Putting his blinker on, Tony pulled up to the curb and rolled the passenger window down so he could call to get the man’s attention. “Hey!”

The man’s head snapped up immediately, his startling blue eyes meeting Tony’s. His lips parted, and Tony could almost hear the “Gabriel” that was lost to the din of the street.

“Get in,” Tony ordered, gesturing meaningfully to the door. “I’m taking you back.”

The man moved oddly, almost as if his skin didn’t quite fit him right. It was a sensation Tony had become uncomfortably familiar with.

He had no trouble folding himself into the seat, and that was when Tony realized that he was only a few inches shorter than Jarvis.

Checking traffic, Tony smoothly merged back into the lane, rolling up the window as he did.

There was silence for a few minutes before the man broke it, his deep voice hoarse. “Thank you for picking me up.”

Tony glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, taking in the messy, dark brown hair and the scruff on the cheeks. “No problem,” he said evenly. “How’d you get your hands on the phone?”

The man blinked, looking down at said phone in his hand. “I…don’t know.” He turned it over as if seeing it for the first time. “I found it in my coat. Your number was the only one in it.”

“Huh.” Tony tapped his fingers against the steering wheel, briefly meeting Jarvis’s eyes in the mirror. “I gave it to Death; I guess he gave it to you.”

“You saw Death?” The man sounded surprised.

“You saw Death?” The man sounded surprised.

“You saw Death?” The man sounded surprised.

“Showed up in my kitchen.”

“I see.” The man was frowning now, thumb rubbing the screen of the phone. “Where am I?” he asked eventually.

Tony glanced at him. “New York?”

He made an impatient sound. “I know this is New York, Gabriel.” He didn’t seem to notice Tony’s flinch. “I meant where am I? Which universe?”
“My own?” Tony’s voice liftedquestioningly at the end despite his best efforts. Any moment now this man was going to realize that he wasn’t actually speaking to Gabriel but instead the poor sap who had been left in the wake of Gabriel’s mess.

“This is where you’ve been?” the man asked, turning to look out the window at the tall buildings.

Tony had no other idea where he would be if not this place. But maybe the guy was referring to wherever he came from? “Yep. This is where I live.”

“So you returned here.” The man shot Tony a look, eyebrows furrowed. His eyes looked up to the mirror and caught sight of Jarvis sitting silently in the backseat. Biting his lower lip, he turned back to the window, fingers digging into his thighs.

The tension radiating off the poor guy was palpable, and Tony didn’t know how to alleviate it. Jarvis clearly had no opinion on the matter other than apparently trying to bore holes through the guy’s skull. If he was trying to be intimidating, it was working on Tony.

After three more minutes of silence, the man whipped his head back around to Tony and demanded, “Why haven’t you said anything?”

Tony was very thankful that he was at a traffic light and not driving. “What?”

“I told you that our brothers and sisters have Fallen from Heaven, that the gates have been closed, and you don’t care?” the man continued angrily, eyes flashing. “You’ve said nothing about what we should do! Or how I’ve come to be here, and I thought that you would help me, Gabriel!”

“Um, yeah, about that…” He gave the man a sheepish grin. “I don’t have any idea who you are.”

The man’s eyes barely had time to widen before Tony continued, “Not that it’s your fault; I just don’t remember.”

After a few painful seconds, the man croaked out a soft, “What?” His eyes flashed to Jarvis and back to Tony. “You don’t…” He leaned forward, coming uncomfortably close to Tony’s face. “What happened with the Leviathan?”

“Personal space?” Tony pushed him away with a hand on his chest, hearing an angry honk from the car behind him. The light had been green for the last five seconds, so Tony eased his foot onto the gas pedal. “You know about them?”

Thankfully returning to his side of the car, the man frowned, eyes scanning the side of Tony’s face. “Of course,” he answered finally. “They…it was my fault.” He swallowed, glancing out the windshield. “You were just cleaning up after me.”

“Hm.” Tony wasn’t quite sure what that meant. “Like I said, I don’t remember, but apparently there’s a giant crater in Nebraska showing what happened.”

“What?” The man’s eyes snapped back to Tony’s.

From the backseat, Jarvis cleared his throat, catching the man’s attention. “Gabriel put all the Leviathans in a warded warehouse.” His voice was quiet. “There was some sort of explosion following that, but the warehouse and all cameras were annihilated. And the Leviathans gone.”

The man’s gaze returned to Tony, and his voice was slightly awed as he said, “The might of an archangel… What did you do, Gabriel?”

“I don’t know,” Tony repeated, irritated. They were about five minutes from the tower now. “And
can you please not call me that? It’s Tony.”

The man tilted his head in confusion, eyes narrowing. “Tony?”

“Yeah, my name. It’s not Gabriel.” Tony shot him an irritated glance. “What’s yours?”

The man sighed, face dropping. “Castiel. My name is Castiel.”

The name didn’t sound familiar to Tony. “All right, Castiel. Nice to meet you.” He offered the other a consolatory smile for not being who he had expected.

Castiel’s answering smile was weak and disappeared as quickly as it had come. Turning his gaze to his hands, he twisted his fingers together. “I promised him I’d stay,” he whispered.

Disconcerted at this non sequitur, Tony frowned, turning into the entry for the parking garage under his tower. “Who?”

“Dean.” Castiel’s voice was strained. “I promised him I’d stay – that we’d work this out together.”

“You can’t contact him?”

“I’m not in the same universe, and…” Castiel closed his eyes, expression pained. “I’m no longer an angel,” he confessed.

“Good Lord,” Jarvis muttered from the backseat, sounding stunned.

Tony slid into his parking spot, leaving the engine idling as he turned to look at Castiel. “I’m guessing it’s not on purpose.”

“No.” Castiel’s shoulders hunched forward as if he was ashamed. “No,” he repeated forlornly. “But it was my fault that it happened. He used my Grace to cast the spell.” He turned eyes that were shining with tears to Tony. “He closed the gates to Heaven with my Grace, casting out every single one of our brothers and sisters. All of them Fallen, and I’m here, unable to help—”

“Hey!” Tony had a hand on his shoulder before he could think the better of it. It did the trick, though, catching Castiel’s attention. “Hey”—he gentled his tone—“it’ll be all right. We’ll figure it out, okay? You got here someway; I’m sure we can get you back.”

Castiel didn’t seem at all reassured by this statement. “I don’t know how,” he whispered, eyes squeezed shut.

Castiel’s obvious depression was pulling Tony down into the dumps, and he shared a helpless look with Jarvis, who seemed just as lost. “We’ll figure it out,” he repeated finally, rubbing Castiel’s shoulder briefly before squeezing it and dropping his hand. “Come on; I’m sure a shower’ll do you good.”

Head snapping up, Castiel blinked at him owlishly. “A shower?”

“Yep.” Tony turned the car off, opening his door. “Let’s go, Castiel. Warm water and fresh clothes await you.”

Castiel popped up over the hood of the car five seconds later, gazing down at his clothes. “Aren’t these clothes fine?”

“You don’t want to at least run them through the wash?” Tony wasn’t quite sure how the laundry worked, but he could figure it out.
“I’ll take care of it,” Jarvis assured Castiel, eyeing Tony exasperatedly. “If he does it, then it’s far more likely that your clothes will turn out pink.”

Castiel’s brow furrowed. “That makes no sense, unless he washes my white shirt with a completely red piece of clothing and in warm water—”

“I mean to say that he has no concept of laundry,” Jarvis interrupted him hastily.

“I resent that,” Tony muttered, locking the car and heading to the elevator. “I know how to iron stuff.”

“You set your shirt on fire the last time you insisted on trying,” Jarvis said.

Tony frowned. “I…don’t remember that.”

Jarvis was silent only for a moment before saying softly, “It was a week after we moved here, and several of your suits had not made it in perfect shape. Rather than have someone else take care of the problem or solve it any other way, you insisted on ‘doing it the human way.’ Five minutes later the shirt and the ironing board were both on fire and Dummy went running for the water.”

Castiel snorted, face blanking the moment Tony looked back at him. “That does sound rather like you,” he offered.

Unable to resist smiling in the face of Castiel’s hidden amusement, Tony shuffled uncomfortably. “I’m not that person anymore,” he muttered as the elevator doors opened.

Neither Castiel nor Jarvis said anything more thankfully. Tony wasn’t sure what his reaction would’ve been otherwise. The memories he’d had twice now were muddling the waters, because in those memories/dreams, he felt undeniably like Gabriel, felt whole, but then he woke up, and…was lost.

Even given the opportunity to regain the memories, Tony wasn’t sure if he wanted to; if he wanted to become the person everyone here knew. This completely different entity that was so much more than what he was right now.

“There anyone up there right now?” Tony asked Jarvis, fiddling nervously with his keys.

“No,” Jarvis answered, head tilting to the side as his eyes blanked slightly. “Dummy, Butterfingers, and You are currently engaged with Suzie and Dustin on Captain Rogers’s floor, having persuaded him to grant them access. Agents Romanov and Barton have relegated themselves to Ms. Potts’s office, and Dr. Banner is sleeping.”

Tony frowned, scratching the side of his neck. “Bit late for that.”

“He didn’t sleep last night,” Jarvis explained, sounding distinctly disapproving.

“I thought humans required sleep?” Castiel asked perplexedly.

Tony snorted, stepping out onto his floor after the elevator opened its doors. “Yeah, but sometimes we don’t. Too busy or maybe we just forget.”

Castiel made an understanding sound, following closely behind Tony. “I see.”

Tony doubted he really did considering the guy had been an angel until recently but didn’t say anything to that point. He instead pointed Castiel to his bathroom. “I’m assuming you know how to
work the shower. If not, just call for JARVIS and he’ll help you out.” Castiel looked scandalized for all of several seconds before Tony realized his faux pas. “Ah, I mean JARVIS the computer.”

“Greetings,” JARVIS’s voice said from a speaker.

Castiel didn’t jump, only turning his head in fascination. “Fascinating.”

“It sure is, Spock,” Tony was unable to resist saying. “Anyway, I’ll leave you to it. There’ll be clothes waiting for you when you’re done.”

Castiel met his eyes briefly before returning them to the bathroom. “Thank you,” he murmured, ducking his head and stepping inside.

Tony turned around, hearing the door lock shut behind him. Then, sighing, he went off to try and find some clothes that would fit Castiel.

He had some sweatpants that wouldn’t look too bad on Castiel, even taking into account the extra height. Shirts were a bit trickier since he suspected that Castiel was a lot broader than the trench coat made him seem like. He didn’t really have any shirts beyond the casual band shirts that he did not want to give a complete stranger who might stretch them. There were also the more expensive dress shirts, but those were tailored for Tony.

He did have an old sweatshirt from Yale University that Pepper had given him as a joke years ago… It was larger than what he usually tended to wear because the site Pepper ordered it from had accidentally sent the wrong size, and neither of them had ever bothered to have the mistake rectified.

Also including a pair of warm socks since Castiel wasn’t going to be wearing shoes and boxers since he seemed more like a boxers guy than briefs, Tony left the clothes on his bed and headed for the kitchen, intending to cook something for him to eat since Castiel probably hadn’t eaten anything since arriving here.

Or maybe microwave something. His cooking skills were just as bad as his laundry skills.

Half an hour later found Tony sitting at the table watching Jarvis make pasta and tomato sauce and salad. There had been no leftovers for him to microwave, and while he had considered making pancakes or waffles, Jarvis came in before he could try. Tony gratefully relinquished cooking to him.

Castiel wandered into the kitchen as Jarvis was finishing up the salad, Tony’s clothes making him look softer and more approachable. The sweatpants were several inches too short, but the sweatshirt was just the right size. His hair was still damp, looking almost black with the water.

“Good shower?” Tony asked nonchalantly, head propped up on one hand as he watched Jarvis drain the water from the salad.

“Yes, thank you.” Castiel looked uncertainly between Tony and Jarvis.

“Take a seat.” Tony gestured to a chair. “Food’s almost ready.”

“You didn’t need to—” Castiel began to protest.

“I’m guessing you haven’t eaten?” Tony interrupted him.

Castiel hesitated, sitting down before he answered. “No.”

“Then you’ll need to eat something. Humans do.”
Castiel’s face tightened, his eyes dropping to the table.

Feeling rather guilty for putting that look on his face, Tony went to get the plates and glasses. He himself needed to eat something as that Snickers bar had been hours ago.

“How long has it been?” Castiel asked as Tony filled the glasses with water.

Tony glanced over his shoulder to find Castiel still staring at the table. “Since what?”

“Since the Leviathans.”

Tony’s eyes skittered away from Castiel. “Few weeks.”

“Oh.” The sound left Castiel like he’d been punched in the gut.

Swallowing, Tony set the plates and water glasses on the table. “How long’s it been for you?”

“About a year.” The answer was quiet.

“Looks like you’ve had more time to recover from it than we did,” Tony answered evenly, mouth twitching into a small smile.

Castiel shrugged, eyes flickering over to where Jarvis was taking the pots off the stove. “There were no Leviathans to take care of after you came,” he said. “In comparison to that, everything was easy.”

“Perhaps talk of monsters that devour everything can be postponed until after the meal?” Jarvis asked as he set the pots of steaming pasta and tomato sauce down on the table.

“Sure thing, Jarvis,” Tony said, reflexively smiling up at Jarvis. He received a small one in return as Jarvis turned back to the countertop to retrieve the salad.

Castiel was staring at the food as if uncertain just how he should start.

“You can’t go wrong with pasta,” Tony said dryly, helping himself to the noodles and sauce. “Just take some.”

After another moment’s hesitation, Castiel did, eyes flickering between Jarvis and Tony. He took a bit too much sauce, drenching his noodles, but that was a mistake even Tony made when he wasn’t paying attention.

Upon his first bite, Castiel’s eyes widened, and he proceeded to take a second bite immediately afterwards, polishing off his bowl in record time and taking a second helping. Tony was still on his first bowl by the time Castiel took a third, and it was in sort of a stunned amazement that Tony watched him demolish that one just as systematically he’d devoured the first two.

“How hungry?” he finally managed to ask.

Castiel paused momentarily in finishing off his tomato sauce to look up rather sheepishly at Tony. “Yes. It’s very good,” he added, shooting Jarvis a glance.

“Thank you,” Jarvis said affably, salting a slice of cucumber. “Do try the salad when you have a chance.”

Tony doubted Castiel even had space for salad, but his misgivings were laid to rest when Castiel went for that after finishing his last bowl.
Halfway through Castiel tackling his—quite frankly—rather terrifying bowl of salad and vinegar (with only a little bit of oil), Dummy, Butterfingers, and You tumbled into the kitchen, flushed with happiness and all talking at the top of their lungs in a mixture of English and some other language. A second later, Suzie and Dustin appeared on top of the mound of wiggling bodies, Suzie daintily hopping off them and Dustin tripping over Dummy’s ear to tumble gracelessly to the floor.

Tony blinked at them, eyes meeting a grinning Dummy’s. “How much sugar did you have?”

Butterfingers giggled, squirming out from under You to stumble to Tony and sprawl onto his lap. “Nooonnne,” she said, breaking down into hysterical giggles.

Dummy perked up from on top of You, eyes zeroing in on the food. “What’d you make, Jarvis?” he demanded, rolling off You and bounding over to practically pull himself over the top to look into the largest pot.

“Manners, Dummy,” Jarvis scolded, standing to grab hold of Dummy’s pants and haul him off.

“Sorry,” Dummy whined, eyes still on the food.

You had taken Dustin and Suzie in his hands and was standing next to Tony, head tilted to the side as he curiously inspected Castiel. “Who’re you?” he asked.

Castiel wiped at his mouth, getting rid of splotches of vinegar. “Castiel.”

You squinted. “That’s a funny name.”

Tony coughed, desperately trying to restrain a laugh.

“You name is You,” Butterfingers informed You, evidently not sharing Tony’s qualms. “Castiel is perfectly normal.”

“It’s an angel’s name,” You argued, ignoring Suzie’s and Dustin’s protesting squirms. “It has the ‘-el’ suffix, meaning ‘of God.’”

Castiel blinked in surprise at You, a small smile tugging at his lips. “It can be interpreted that way,” he said.

“Castiel is also the angel of Thursday,” You continued, returning his eyes to Castiel. “And since Dad’s an angel, he has angelic siblings, and you’re one of them.”

Castiel seemed rather flummoxed at You’s statement, head tilting to the side as he studied You. “You said your name is You?” he finally asked.

You nodded, finally letting Suzie and Dustin jump down from his arms. Suzie promptly began climbing up Tony’s legs and settled onto Butterfinger’s back, beginning to clean her paws with the air of an offended princess.

“Mine’s Dummy!” Dummy announced, jumping up and down as Jarvis gave him a bowl of pasta.

Castiel had all of a second to look really confused before Butterfingers added, “And I’m Butterfingers.”

Brow furrowed, Castiel turned to fix Tony with an extremely unimpressed face. “Of all the names you could have chosen, you picked those?”

Tony made a face. “I was drunk!”
That didn’t seem to impress Castiel. “Dummy?”

“I’m a bit of a klutz,” Dummy admitted cheerfully, red splatters on his face as he slurped up a noodle.

“That doesn’t mean you should be named Dummy,” Castiel told him, glowering at Tony.

Dummy made a face at Castiel. “It’s my name! I like it!”

“It’s very unique,” Castiel said in a feeble attempt at placating him.

“Dad’s awful at naming stuff,” You said, heedless of any potential heart palpitations that calling Tony “Dad” elicited. “He named JARVIS after his old butler and then insisted it was an acronym of ‘Just A Rather Very Intelligent System’ when people asked.”

“Hey, that’s enough now,” Tony said, squirming in embarrassment. “How’d you find that out anyway?”

“I read your files,” You said, shrugging. He looked up at Jarvis. “Can I have some pasta?”

While Tony absorbed the implications of You having actually broken past his encryptions to read some of his oldest (and most embarrassing) files on his youngest AI, Dummy engaged Castiel, who seemed to be helplessly charmed by his exuberance. Butterfingers dislodged Suzie from her back to twist around and sit properly on Tony’s lap, peering into Tony’s bowl and making a dismayed sound upon finding nothing in it.

Jarvis took pity on her and gave her a bowl of the last of the pasta, which she happily dug into after sneaking some cucumber from the salad.

After several minutes of noisy slurping and messy eating from the kids, Castiel lifted his eyes from Dummy to look back at Tony. “Did you adopt them?” His tone was soft.

The question was obvious considering that Butterfingers and You weren’t even the same race as Tony, and only Dummy looked like he could be Tony’s biological son. For some reason, Tony didn’t feel that same terror he’d felt with Death when it came to discussing his AIs, but he also didn’t feel the need to explain who – or rather what they had been.

“It’s complicated,” he settled on saying, offering a small shrug.

Castiel looked up at Jarvis, who was gazing down at You with a fond expression. “Your name is Jarvis?”

Jarvis looked back at him implacably. “It is.”

“So you’re the butler JARVIS the AI is named after?”

Dummy promptly burst into hysterical giggles, snorting into his bowl. You started coughing on his next mouthful, sounding like he was trying desperately not to laugh and choke. Butterfingers just slumped into a helpless puddle of snickers, only Tony’s arms saving her from a painful collision with the floor.

Castiel looked bewildered at having elicited such a reaction. “What did I say?”

Jarvis gently cuffed Dummy on the back of his head, rubbing You’s back at the same time. “I am a different Jarvis,” he said simply. “The name is an inheritance from the previous butler.”
Castiel looked a bit like he suspected this was a lie but didn’t call Jarvis on it. “That does sound rather like humans,” he said instead.

From behind Castiel, Clint hovered in the doorway of the kitchen, peering rather dubiously at the back of Castiel’s head and scratching his chest through his shirt. “That doesn’t sound like Death, but that wasn’t something a regular guy would say.”

Castiel jumped, head whipping around to look back at Clint.

Clint didn’t seem perturbed at the reaction. “Definitely not Death. Nice to meet you; hope you don’t have anything against us humans. We’re really nice and not assholes at all. Not all of us anyway. Tony’s one just by default. Name’s Clint.” He walked by Dummy, ruffling his hair so it looked like even more of a bird’s nest. “Hey, squirt.”

“I don’t hate humans,” Castiel said, squinting at Clint’s back.

“Good,” Clint said affably, drinking straight out of the orange juice carton much to Tony’s disgust.

“We have glasses for a reason, you cretin,” Tony said, forgetting for a moment that he had been avoiding everyone for a reason.

He was promptly reminded of this by the cold glare Clint fixed him with, chilly enough that Tony flinched back. “I’m not talking to you at the moment,” he informed Tony frostily. He turned back to Castiel, pointedly giving Tony the cold shoulder. “Like I said, Tony’s an ass. What’s your name?”

Castiel frowned, eyes flickering between Clint and a tense Tony. “Castiel,” he repeated for the third time.

“Huh.” Clint made a considering sound. “Sounds…Biblical. Not that I’d know, considering that apparently the Bible was written by a stoner way back when who had no idea what to write.”

“It’s Biblical,” You confirmed, beaming. “He’s an angel!”

Clint’s reaction was probably more dramatic than anyone’s had been up to that point: the half-empty juice carton dropped to the floor. “You’re—?!” His eyes flashed to Tony before flitting back to Castiel. “You are a goddamn angel?”

Castiel shrunk back in his seat, shaking his head. “No…” His voice was soft, lost. “Not anymore.”

He swallowed visibly, ducking his head.

Clint was heedless of the orange juice spreading into a large puddle at his feet. “Ugh, you, too?” he groaned, leaning back against the countertop behind him.

Castiel didn’t respond immediately, but that was probably because he had ducked under the table. He popped up in a second with Dustin in his hands, thumb rubbing gently over Dustin’s face. Pressing two fingers to Dustin’s forehead in a movement that seemed so damn familiar to Tony, he smiled sadly. “Time was I could have healed you, little one,” he whispered. “I’m sorry.”

Aware of the now very uncomfortable atmosphere that had fallen upon the room, Tony slowly said, “It’s not all bad. He’s young enough it won’t bother him.”

Castiel looked up at him, that sad smile still on his face. “It does bother me.” His gaze skittered away to the orange juice soaking into Clint’s socks. “Shouldn’t you clean that?”

Seemingly taken aback at the subject change, Clint followed Castiel’s gaze and then grimaced.
“Aww, juice.”

“I’m not cleaning that,” Jarvis said reprovingly, glowering at Clint.

“That orange juice was mine,” Butterfingers said forlornly, giving Clint puppy dog eyes.

Clint actually dared to say, “I thought you liked milk.”

It was probably not unexpected that Suzie started lapping at the liquid while Butterfingers continued gazing at Clint with the biggest, saddest eyes Tony had ever seen on a girl.

It was also not unexpected that Clint caved not five seconds later and offered to buy another carton while reaching for the paper towels to start mopping it up. Suzie was not pleased.

By the time Clint extracted Suzie from the mess and almost cracked his head open on the tile because he slipped, Tony and Castiel had wisely fled the kitchen.

Chapter End Notes

More to come next time! I hope you enjoyed it! Please let me know what you thought.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

What's this? A chapter on a Monday? No, I haven't confused my calendar. But guess what? The story's finished at 457 pages and over 168,000 words! That means I'm upping my update schedule to Monday/Friday because this story has a total of 23 chapters. Or maybe 24. I'm still iffy on whether 21 should be divided into two different ones. In any case, two chapters a week!

Oh, the irony, it burns. So many of you were upset over how the team's treating Tony, but then a lot of you were doing the same thing. So although it really shouldn't be funny, I was in hysterics half the time I was reading your feedback.

But anyway, thank you for letting me know how you felt. It warms me to know that I'm hitting the right emotional buttons (by which I mean ALL OF THEM), and I want to keep hitting them. So I hope you enjoy this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

If Tony had gotten Castiel’s call yesterday, he honestly didn’t know if he would’ve gone and picked the man – former angel – up. It would’ve been one more association with Gabriel and he had just been so done with it all.

But with the bitter, painful memory of Gabriel ripping Tony out of his Grace, of feeling Gabriel’s love for his family here, of remembering Gabriel’s first death at the hands of his brother – who he still loved despite everything – of feeling heartsick and guilty over the cruel, thoughtless things he’d said to both Steve and Natasha, he really couldn’t have left Castiel out there. Not and be able to live with himself.

Tony still felt separated from Gabriel, still didn’t know how to reconcile himself with the self that Castiel and the team knew, but it was also becoming more and more apparent that he had just been Gabriel. If nothing else, the few times in his dreams when he’d actually been Gabriel and remembered being Gabriel were enough. They were only brief insights into Gabriel and only fleeting in the grand scheme of Gabriel’s overall history, but they gave Tony enough information to know that in those memories, he was whole.

Right now, he wasn’t. And Castiel must be feeling a hundred times worse with the full weight of his memories and the knowledge of what he was missing.

He was also burdened with guilt, and Tony was in no position to be able to accurately say whether or not this guilt was justified. So he kept quiet as Castiel moved to the windows to gaze out at the city, instead focusing on opening his email and clearing out his Inbox so things would be more manageable when he returned to work.

“I’ve never been in New York before,” Castiel said softly several minutes later.

“You’re not really missing much,” Tony muttered, squinting at the blueprints R&D had sent him.

“It’s so human.”
“Like I said,” Tony said, tapping the screen and scribbling a large ELABORATE over the blueprint before sending the email back, “not really missing much.”

Castiel glanced back at him, brow furrowed. “If you don’t like it, why do you live here?”

“I have no fucking clue.” Tony shrugged, giving Castiel a bland smile. “I assume because Gabriel moved here at some point in the last few years. Probably because he got sick of the sun? Or maybe because the team formed and he thought it’d be awesome to house a superhero team in his downtime?”

“The latter does sound plausible,” Castiel mused, turning back to the window. After another few seconds, he asked, “Why don’t you like it?”

“Take your pick: too loud, too busy, too many people – I don’t care. Virtually no privacy. Least in Malibu there were other people to keep the press busy, and I had an isolated house.”

“You could move back.”

He’d considered it, but then discarded it because SI’s board was here and there were too many logistics involved in packing up and relocating the center of the company only several years after the initial move. “Too problematic. I’ll deal with it like I always do.”

The look Castiel gave him now was disconcerted, but he said nothing else as Dummy ran in and threw himself over the sofa to collapse into a heap next to Tony, panting and grinning up at Tony.

“The kitchen’s clean!” Dummy announced happily.

Tony unconsciously smiled down at him. “Were there tears?”

Dummy considered the question, head tilting back to press against Tony’s thigh. “No,” he decided, “but there was lots of cursing.”

Castiel’s expression changed from rather wondering to perplexed. “I was under the impression that adults preferred not to curse around children.”

“I’m not a kid!” Dummy whined, kicking his legs out. “I was built back in the eighties!”

Castiel’s eyes narrowed in confusion. “You don’t look thirty years old.”

“Because he isn’t,” Tony said hastily, squeezing Dummy’s shoulder in warning. “He’s…” He paused upon realizing that he legitimately had no idea how old Dummy was. “How old are you?”

“Almost nine,” Dummy said, pouting up at him.

“Almost nine,” Tony continued, returning his gaze to Castiel. “He’s just getting mixed up with an old bot of mine that I built back when I was in MIT.”

“You were drunk,” Dummy said happily, “and then you started swearing and hitting me with a wrench!” Castiel looked horrified now. “You didn’t seem very happy when I burnt the toast,” he added petulantly, “but I only had a claw and kept throwing the toaster down.” He sat up, beaming at Castiel and waving both hands in the air. “Opposable thumbs are awesome!”

“I don’t understand,” Castiel managed eventually, head tilting to the side.

“Like I said,” Tony started, nudging Dummy meaningfully, “it’s complicated and not something I’d like to get into.”
The welcome arrival of Butterfingers and You stalled any further questions from Castiel in their tracks.

“You were supposed to help me with that coding,” Butterfingers accused Dummy, poking him in the chest.

“I will!” Dummy protested, shooting Tony a pleading look.

“And no making smoothies!” Butterfingers continued, both hands on her hips.

Dummy made a face. “I like smoothies!”

“Chocolate smoothies with spinach are not good,” Butterfingers informed him, nose wrinkled in disgust.

“Ew, really?” Tony was unable to resist asking.

Dummy shot him a woebegone look. “You liked it!”

It was on the tip of Tony’s tongue to say that he’d never liked any such thing and couldn’t even imagine beginning to like such an atrocious combination of flavors, but then he realized that Gabriel had apparently been a complete sap and evidently lied. “I don’t remember,” he settled on saying instead.

“He’s our Dad,” You said as if it was completely obvious. “He’s supposed to like what you make.”

“Right, um…” Tony remembered a little incident with Dummy that had occurred not too long before Afghanistan. “That robot you made out of spam was impressive.”

Dummy’s face flushed beet red at the reminder of his futile attempts at creating a spam robot out of actual spam, while Butterfingers and You both snorted.

“I still have the pictures,” Jarvis added from behind Tony.

“Jarvis,” Dummy whined, sinking down into the cushions. He fell over to the side to bury his face into a pillow, and Tony swore he heard a muffled cry of “Whyyyyy.”

Castiel had thankfully been sufficiently distracted from the question as to how Dummy had been around in the 1980s when he was clearly only physically nine years old. Tony had absolutely no idea how to even begin explaining what Gabriel had done because there weren’t even any videos documenting the process. And he’d looked.

He also didn’t feel entirely comfortable asking Jarvis (or JARVIS) either, so that just left him gazing rather helplessly at the three kids that he’d somehow landed with and the rather implacable man that his most advanced AI had become.

Unfortunately for Tony, Castiel’s distraction had him catch sight of the sword sitting on the fireplace mantel. He went over and picked it up before Tony could even think to say anything.

“This is your sword,” Castiel noted quietly, sharp eyes flashing up to meet Tony’s.

“So they say,” Tony conceded, feeling rather uncomfortable at the sight of Castiel holding it. He couldn’t say why, only that it deeply unsettled something inside him.

“What is it doing here?” Castiel asked, looking down at it as if it was some kind of precious possession instead of the ugly thing it really was.
“I’ve no idea. They handed it to me in the hospital room and that was it.”

“It was found at the location of the warehouse,” Jarvis explained, tone somber. “It was the only thing we had…” He closed his eyes, swallowing visibly. Continuing in a softer tone, he started again, “It was the only thing we had of you until you appeared on the Helicarrier.”

Not knowing what to say, Tony kept quiet, avoiding Jarvis’s eyes so as not to see the pain that he knew was in them.

Castiel looked rather remorseful and turned to gently place the sword back where it had been for the last two weeks. “An archangel’s blade is powerful,” he said after a moment, turning his head to glance back at Tony. “You should keep it safe.”

Tony’s mouth twisted into a half-smile, and he lifted one shoulder in a casual shrug. “Tower’s one of the most protected places on the planet; if it’s not safe there, then it won’t be any safer in a safe.”

“Hm.” Castiel nodded in understanding, thumbing the edges of his sweatshirt and turning back to the mantel to skim over the pictures displayed there.

Tony had spent some time himself looking over the happy images displayed in the frames but had to stop because of how unfamiliar the faces and scenes were. Most didn’t have him in them but instead showed the team or the kids. One was a classic Halloween picture with the kids making faces at the camera and Clint and Natasha standing behind them while dressed up as vampires. Another was a happy Christmas picture with everyone bundled together and red-cheeked, having apparently just come in from outside.

Most of the other pictures were similar in kind, and it was everything Tony didn’t remember and felt uncomfortable looking at, feeling like a voyeur even though he was technically one of the people in them.

Five minutes later, during which Tony received an email from R&D with the elaboration on the blueprints he’d requested, Clint joined them, having changed his socks. Natasha followed him, eyes frosty as they skimmed over Tony. He self-consciously shrank down, keeping his eyes fixed on the phone as he wrote back another email asking just who the idiot had been to put together that particular water filtration system.

It wasn’t nearly as cost effective as it needed to be in order to be installed in the countries Stark Industries was planning to market them to.

“My name’s Natasha,” Natasha was saying to Castiel, her tone neutral. “Clint says you’re an angel?”

“Not anymore,” Castiel answered, completely still except for the way his shoulders hunched in.

“But you remember?”

“I didn’t Fall,” was Castiel’s answer. He opened his mouth, as if to continue, but then shut it, head dropping so he could stare at the floor instead.

“So it’s Falling that causes you to lose your memories?” Natasha sounded curious now.

“That’s usually how it works,” Castiel said, smiling thinly. He shot Tony a glance from over Natasha’s shoulder.

Tony’s only answer was a helpless shrug. After last night, he wasn’t willing to approach Natasha and distract her from Castiel. He wasn’t a coward, but he also wasn’t stupid.
“What about death?”

“Then you’re dead.” Castiel’s response was harsh. He jerked back from Natasha, eyes closing briefly. “I’m sorry. I’m not in the mood to answer such questions.” He shouldered past her, making a direct beeline to the couch and sitting next to Tony on the side that wasn’t occupied by Dummy.

Natasha had turned to look at the both of them, and her eyes were narrowed, flickering between Tony and Castiel.

Not wanting to read more into Natasha’s gaze than was probably there, Tony turned back to his emails, saw he hadn’t yet gotten a response from R&D, and turned to the next item on his agenda: forwarding all emails from the board to Pepper. That was one thing he still refused to deal with.

While he focused on doing this, he overheard Clint asking Natasha, “Steve still in his room?”

“He’s coming up to meet Castiel,” Natasha answered quietly, words barely distinguishable to Tony. “Otherwise he would…” The rest was an indiscernible murmur.

Clint’s response was a disgusted sounding snort. “Just awesome. I get that it’s difficult for him, but did he have to say that?”

It took Tony a few seconds to realize that he was grinding his teeth and another second to stop. His fingers had tightened on his phone, and he accidentally deleted the next email he’d been about to forward. Impatiently switching the screen off, Tony pressed the pad of his thumb into the screen, trying to use the pressure as a point to focus on.

He could feel Castiel shoot him a curious glance, but thankfully the other didn’t ask what was wrong.

Tony didn’t have any idea what he would’ve said anyway. Steve was coming up, and Tony didn’t know what he was going to do. He didn’t want to apologize to him in such a public forum. This was something that really had to be said privately, and it wasn’t because of Tony’s pride.

He’d accused Steve of being jealous, using his own suspicions of Steve’s feelings and hurting Steve with them. It wasn’t something he was proud of doing, but the damage was done. Tony’s only hope was that he could somehow fix what he’d done.

But not in public. Steve deserved better than that.

Further thoughts on the matter were scrapped when he heard the sound of elevator opening and Steve’s familiar footsteps. His head unconsciously lifted up, and he caught sight of Steve approaching them, his eyes very carefully not looking at Tony.

“You must be Castiel,” Steve said, smiling amiably at Castiel. He extended his hand for the other to shake.

Castiel looked at it for a moment, brow furrowed. After a second, realization lit up his eyes and he clasped it. “I am.”

“I’m Steve,” Steve said. “It’s nice to meet you.” He was still holding hands with Castiel, who didn’t seem to quite realize what the proper protocol was. Following another awkward moment, Steve gave it a pointed look.

“My apologies,” Castiel said, quickly letting go.
“It’s all right,” Steve reassured him. “JARVIS only gave me a few details on what’s going on. You mind telling me anything else?”

Castiel shot Tony a look before returning his gaze to Steve. “I’m sure that whatever JARVIS told you is about the extent of what I know.”

“I’m sure we can figure something out,” Steve insisted, still not looking at Tony. He had, actually, managed not to look at Tony at all since entering the room. A remarkable feat considering Castiel was sitting right next to Tony.

And Tony wasn’t used to being ignored (hated it in fact). Unable to tolerate Steve’s blatant dismissal of his presence (and sick of feeling guilty), Tony opened his mouth, about to tell Steve something, only to stop dead in tracks at the glare Natasha shot him. Her eyes promised murder if he said something now.

Floundering and hurt, Tony was saved by the alert on his phone that signaled an urgent email from R&D. He quickly checked it, and then felt like throwing something because that was not how you build a water filtration system, damn it. “Fuck,” he muttered, scowling down at the phone.

He could fire back another email, but he could also use this as an excuse to leave the room and Natasha’s death glares and Steve ignoring him. Upon skimming over the blueprints of the filtration system again, Tony determined that the best course of action would be for him to leave the room. Pronto.

“I need to go down to R&D and fire them all for being inept idiots,” Tony told Castiel, carefully not looking at Steve. “You’ll be fine with them.”

Then, walking off as quickly as he could, Tony left the room and its stifling, awkward atmosphere before anyone could stop him.

He’d apologize to Steve once Natasha and her terrifying death glares weren’t around.

After last night’s disastrous outing, Steve was not at all ashamed to admit that he’d locked himself up on his floor and stayed there. It wasn’t like he needed to go to the penthouse. His floor had a fully stocked kitchen, even if the food was mostly canned or the type that never went bad because he so rarely ate there. There were also bathrooms, a bedroom, a living room, and virtually anything else he needed to live there full-time.

So he didn’t have to run into Tony, which was something he did not want to do. Not after what had happened.

Call him a coward, but Steve was going to hide and lick his wounds. He had no desire to put himself out there and feel everybody’s pitying looks because Tony knew of his feelings and had rejected them. Thoroughly. Completely. To the point where Steve just wanted to curl in a ball under his covers and never come out again.

It was perhaps not a manner befitting that of Captain America, but it was something fitting of Steve Rogers, who had only had crushes on a grand total of two people, one of whom was old and didn’t remember him half the time and the other who also didn’t remember most of their relationship and had decided that it wasn’t anything worthwhile anyway.

One could tell he just wanted to curl up in a ball and die of mortification.

“—I hope that you didn’t just fuck all of them up because you were jealous.”
“—because you were *jealous.*”

“—because you were *jealous.*”

Those words kept repeating in his mind.

And they would’ve done so for the rest of the day if Tony’s kids hadn’t somehow convinced him to let them onto the floor with Dustin and Suzie in tow. Steve hadn’t intended on seeing anyone, but Dummy had Tony’s inescapable charm and Butterfingers had the biggest puppy dog eyes that Steve had ever seen, so it was a lost cause the moment they stepped onto the elevator.

The fact that they didn’t care about what had happened between Steve and Tony was just what he needed. All they wanted was for him to play with them and maybe make some sketches of the kittens that they could hang up in their rooms. Then they wanted him to give them ice cream, which Steve refused to do.

He lasted five minutes.

Shortly after Steve had given into their demands and served them ice cream, only to regret it five minutes later when Butterfingers and Dummy started chasing each other on a complete sugar high, You looked up from his tablet and took his siblings and the kittens to the elevator, saying that they had a visitor. Steve didn’t follow them, as the visitor could have been virtually anyone. Instead he went and cleared up his kitchen and made himself something to eat since it was lunchtime.

Just after he finished cooking, he was joined by Natasha. He’d almost not let her in, but if she was really bound and determined to see him, a little thing such as denying her access wouldn’t stop her, and Steve had no desire to be on her bad side.

“Soop?” he asked once she entered the kitchen.

“Bit of an odd thing to eat,” Natasha said, sitting down at the table.

“It was this or the microwaveable mac and cheese, and I’ve heard bad things about that.”

Natasha inclined her head in acknowledgment. “We have a visitor,” she remarked.

“I know. You told me.”

“I know. You told me.”

Natasha raised her eyebrow questioningly before her lips parted in realization. Then a small smirk crept onto her face. “You let the kids in?”

“It’d be cruel to tell them no,” Steve muttered, switching the gas off and taking two bowls out.

It wasn’t until after Natasha had a bowl of steaming tomato soup and a slice of garlic bread in front of her that she said quietly, “You can’t avoid him forever.”

Steve didn’t meet her eyes. “I’m not avoiding anyone.”

Natasha made a skeptical sound. “What happened last night wasn’t your fault.”

“No, it was.” Steve rubbed the bridge of his nose, wincing as he remembered his behavior. “He’s right. I was…jealous.” He bit off a large chunk of bread to forestall any more questions.

This turned out to be a bad idea as he couldn’t respond when Natasha said, “That doesn’t excuse his behavior. It doesn’t matter if he doesn’t remember us; he shouldn’t have treated you like that.”
Unable to swallow the large chunk of bread he was currently chewing, Steve settled for pinning
Natasha with a glare.

Natasha’s eyes softened slightly, but her tone didn’t change. “I know how you feel about him, Steve,
but that doesn’t matter. Don’t let the people you love hurt you like that; it only leads to bad things.”

Something about the way she said it had Steve suspecting that someone she cared about had hurt her.
“Speaking from personal experience?”

Natasha’s answering smile was sad. “Perhaps.”

Steve soaked up some soup with his bread, watching as the crust turned red. “Doesn’t really matter
anyway.” His voice was quiet. “Nothing’s going to happen.”

“Maybe, maybe not.” Natasha offered a small shrug when Steve glanced up at her. “He’s not quite
himself, Steve.”

“Obviously,” Steve griped unthinkingly.

“That might’ve been a poor choice of words,” Natasha admitted, smirking amusedly. “Or maybe the
best. You’ll never know.”

Steve was unable to resist snorting. “You know exactly what you’re doing.”

Natasha didn’t respond immediately, simply stirring her spoon around in the soup. “Not always,” she
confessed quietly. She said nothing else, and Steve didn’t feel comfortable pressing the matter.

When they were done eating and Steve had finished off the soup and bread, Natasha helped him
clean up despite his protestations.

“The dishwasher is more ecologically friendly,” she told him firmly, putting the glasses away.
Looking up at the ceiling, she added, “I think I’ll introduce myself to our visitor. You should come,
Steve.”

Steve ducked his head, unwilling to meet her eyes. “I might.”

Natasha touched him gently on the elbow. “Good enough. I’ll see you shortly.”

With those parting words, she left Steve standing in the kitchen, scrubbing at the pot. That was one
thing that wouldn’t fit in the dishwasher.

Before he could think the better of it, Steve found himself asking, “JARVIS, what kind of visitor do
we have?”

The answer was prompt. “His name is Castiel. Mr. Stark received a phone call from him this
morning requesting for a pickup. He is a Fallen angel.”

Steve almost broke the handle of the pot. “He’s a what?”

“A Fallen angel,” JARVIS repeated patiently. “I do not know the exact details that led to his Falling,
outside of the fact that someone stole his Grace.”

Looking down at bubbles frothing in the pot, Steve found he didn’t quite know what to say. “Oh.”
He swallowed, rinsing the pot out and turning the water off. “Is he… Does he know about Tony?”

“Yes.”
“Can he help?”

“That would perhaps be a better question for you to ask him.”

Steve’s fingers tightened on the granite, and he had to take a calming breath before speaking again. “Where are they?”

“They are currently in the living room on the penthouse level.”

Even though Steve really didn’t want to see Tony at the moment, there was really only one choice for him. He had to see this visitor – Castiel. He needed to know if there was any way Tony could regain his memories. The angelic abilities didn’t matter; Steve wanted the memories. And with Castiel apparently Fallen and yet apparently still in full possession of his faculties, he was their best source.

Tactically it was the best decision, so Steve put the clean pot on a towel to dry out and headed to the elevator, mentally preparing himself for seeing Tony.

Not that anything really prepared him in the end, as Steve was unable to make himself look at Tony when he entered the living room. It was undeniably rude of him, but Steve didn’t really care. Most of his attention was anyway taken up by the dark-haired man sitting next to Tony on the couch.

Jealousy surged up in Steve, taking him aback once more by the vehemence of the emotion. He’d thought he’d gotten used to it from last night, but it was just as strong and just as uncontrollable.

Then Steve took in how the man – Castiel – seemed to be shrinking into Tony’s side as if seeking protection. It didn’t look like a conscious action, and certainly not one Tony was aware of, but it was definitely the look of a younger brother seeking the help and shelter of an older one.

“You must be Castiel,” he said, shaking himself out of his thoughts and approaching him, extending his hand in greeting.

Castiel stared at it in utter confusion, brow furrowed. It took a beat too long before he realized what was expected of him and took hold of it. “I am.” His voice was unexpectedly deep.

“I’m Steve. It’s nice to meet you.” Steve had already relaxed his grip, but Castiel was still holding his hand. It took another awkward moment and Steve looking down pointedly for Castiel to let go, apologizing as he did.

“It’s all right,” Steve told him, not wanting the other to be embarrassed. He moved gracelessly into the main topic. “JARVIS only gave me a few details on what’s going on. You mind telling me anything else?”

Castiel turned to Tony as if seeking reassurance before answering, “I’m sure that whatever JARVIS told you is about the extent of what I know.”

“I’m sure we can figure something out.” Steve could feel Tony staring at him.

Steve almost gave in to return the stare before Tony’s phone went off and he checked it, scowling upon reading whatever it was. “Fuck,” he muttered.

His eyes flicked between Steve and Castiel before he turned fully to Castiel. “I need to go down to R&D and fire them for all being inept idiots. You’ll be fine with them.”

Then, not looking at Steve at all, Tony left, leaving a rather bewildered looking Castiel alone with
them. He didn’t seem very pleased about it, shrinking in on himself and glancing furtively around as
if checking his exits. His eyes lingered on a spot behind Steve, who glanced over his shoulder
instinctively to see that Castiel had been looking at the mantel where Tony’s sword lay.

He had to restrain himself from bristling protectively. It was probably the only familiar weapon here
that Castiel knew how to use. Steve couldn’t blame him for wanting to know what his options were.

Not wanting to loom and make Castiel even more uncomfortable, Steve sat down on the couch,
making sure to keep several feet of space between them.

“No one’s going to hurt you,” Steve said finally, wanting to reassure Castiel.

Castiel’s piercing blue eyes met his own, and his head tilted to the side as he studied Steve. “They all
say that.” His lips quirked into a small smile that showed he hadn’t quite meant it the way it sounded.

“Maybe in the movies,” Steve agreed, smiling back.

“Then my life must be a movie.” The words were dry.

“To be honest with you,” Clint started thoughtfully from where he was sitting at the bar, “ours could
be a movie, too. Would probably sell a lot of tickets.”

“If you try to sell anyone the rights, no one will ever find your body,” Natasha told him.

“That assumes you can even finish the job,” Clint fired back, grinning lazily.

“I will,” she promised.

“No one’s selling anyone movie rights or killing anyone,” Steve interrupted, shooting both of them
stern looks.

“Aw nuts, there goes half of our job description,” Clint said with a mock groan.

Castiel had relaxed significantly as the friendly banter progressed, and Steve was grateful to Clint for
having broken the ice.

“So, Castiel,” Steve started, catching his attention again, “do you think you can tell us what
happened?”

Castiel’s shoulders stiffened minutely. “There’s nothing you can do. Gabriel already has the
necessary details.”

“But you know, don’t you?” Steve asked. “That he doesn’t remember.”

“It came up,” Castiel said, glancing back at Jarvis. “But he didn’t feel comfortable discussing it.” His
eyes returned to Steve. “What happened?”

“I hoped you would know,” Steve admitted. “It’s been a few weeks and nothing’s changed.”

“Jarvis said he smote the Leviathans,” Castiel said slowly. “What happened after?”

“We have satellite images and a video feed if you think that will help,” Natasha said abruptly,
holding a transparent tablet. “Because we don’t know what happened during or after the event.”

Castiel glanced between her and Steve. “I don’t know how I can help you. I have no Grace left.”
“Just look?” Steve pleaded. “It’s – he’s there, but he doesn’t remember. And we don’t understand enough of angels to even know where to begin.”

Castiel’s eyes dropped, his hands curling into fists on his thighs. “I understand.” His voice was even, and he looked back at Natasha. “Would you show me?”

It was JARVIS who pulled up the appropriate video and satellite feeds for Castiel to view.

When the feed from the warehouse began to play, Steve found himself unable to look away as Gabriel appeared again and prayed, his sword in his hand. Then, seconds later, the video feed fizzled out and JARVIS switched to the satellite feed that they had watched on the Helicarrier. This time there was a reaction from Castiel, who frowned and leaned forward over the tablet as if to better see what had happened.

It wasn’t until he reached the feed of Gabriel’s true form exploding in Nebraska that he made noise, inhaling sharply and muttering something in that guttural tongue Steve recognized as Enochian.

“What is it?” Steve asked.

Blinking, Castiel looked up from the tablet, the image frozen on that white light. “The Leviathan are my Father’s first born,” he started slowly, settling back against the couch. “We were Created after, the four archangels leading the way: Michael, Samael, Raphael, and Gabriel.”

“He told us that,” Steve said. “He also said something about the archangels being keys.”

“I heard the same,” Castiel said, “but didn’t know if it was true.” He tapped the tablet. “This speaks for itself. Only an archangel could have destroyed the Leviathans, and he used an immeasurable amount of power to do so.” Castiel’s lips thinned. “If there had been more, then maybe it would’ve been easier.”

“There aren’t any more,” Natasha said, her tone harsh.

Castiel didn’t flinch. “I know.”

“Is there a way for him to remember?” Steve asked.

“I don’t know that,” Castiel said, sounding regretful. “If he has his Grace…”

“He doesn’t.”

Castiel’s expression flickered into something similar to dismay. “I thought so.” He put the tablet aside. “If his memories are to return, then you’ll need to find his Grace. But since he somehow lost it while smiting the Leviathan…”

It was with a dawning sense of horror that Steve understood what he was insinuating. “You don’t know if it’s here.”

“No.” Castiel’s smile was rueful. “But you have him here with you. Only one being could have brought him back.”

“Why not with his memories?” Dummy demanded furiously, cheeks splotchy red. “He brought one part of him back, but why not the rest?”

Castiel shook his head. “I don’t know.” His eyes tightened. “If I could ask him…” He sighed, the exhalation long. “I would also ask him why he saw fit to do the same for me.”
“Or Lilith,” Natasha said tightly.

The name had Castiel’s head snapping up in alarm. “Lilith? She’s here?”

“Smote, actually,” Clint said, mouth curling in disgust at the memory of her. “Gabe wasn’t too happy with her in the end. And good riddance,” he muttered, Steve’s enhanced hearing only just catching it.

Castiel visibly relaxed. “Just her?”

“There was another called Azazel,” Jarvis said, “but he has been in a coma since encountering Gabriel.”

“And one more,” Steve said slowly, remembering Tony’s drawn face in Asgard as he’d realized what he was facing. It was a memory Steve could do without. “Raphael.”

The reaction Castiel had now was startling. He flinched back, eyes widening. “R-Raphael?”

Steve watched him carefully, unsure of why he’d had this reaction to another angel. “Yeah.”

Castiel swallowed. “Where is Raphael?”

“We don’t know.” It was something that peeved Steve now, since it would’ve been a good idea to see her earlier if he’d just remembered. “Tony never said, only that she was here.”

“She must be human,” Castiel murmured, relaxing slightly. “Otherwise she would have helped.”

“Bad blood between the two of you?” Natasha asked neutrally, eyes sharp.

Castiel looked at her. “Of a sort.” His eyes went to the window. “How strange,” he mused, “that so many of us would find our way here.”

“We don’t really appreciate being treated as a dumping ground,” Clint said bluntly.

Castiel inclined his head. “Understandably.” His gaze returned to Steve. “Is that all?”

Feeling rather hopeless with the knowledge that Castiel could do nothing to help them, Steve nodded once, shoulders slumping. “Yeah.” His voice was quiet.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of more help,” Castiel said, sounding genuinely regretful. “But as it stands…” His lips twisted into an unhappy smile. “I’m in need of help myself.”

“We’ll give it to you,” Steve promised him. “What we can.”

Castiel’s smile lightened, and his eyes skimmed over each of them. When he finally spoke, his words were soft. “Gabriel is lucky to have you as his friends.”

“His family,” Jarvis corrected, gently tousling Dummy’s hair.

Castiel said nothing else, but his gaze moved to Butterfingers and You sitting by the coffee table, and his eyes softened.

Engrossed as he was in studying Castiel, Steve completely missed Bruce coming in and was then startled when he heard his sleepy voice say, “I didn’t know we were having visitors. Why didn’t anyone wake me?”

Once introductions and explanations were made, Bruce was displeased enough with Steve at having
been kept out of the loop that he pointed out that he wouldn’t be the one to explain anything to Pepper and Rhodey.

The reminder that Tony’s friends would also be unhappy at having missed the conversation was enough to make Steve want to hide on his floor again.

R&D had seemed rather dismayed at Tony entering their domain and promptly tearing them all a new one. Then they’d started tripping over themselves to get the required materials as Tony walked them through creating the water filtration system that he’d assigned them to make.

In retrospect, he probably shouldn’t have given the assignment to them in the first place because they didn’t have much of an idea of how to make a filtration system that would practically clean itself.

In any case, once Tony was done with that, he headed into office, startling Pepper as she hadn’t expected him at all that day.

“Tony, what—?”

“Please, don’t.” Tony’s quiet words stopped her. “I’ll do it, but just not now.”

Pepper gave him a searching look before nodding and putting a pile of paperwork on his desk and going off on all the emails he’d forwarded her because they actually were important.

The normality of it had Tony easing back into his work, and he spent the next few hours signing off on projects, saying no to board members, and trying not to think about what was going on upstairs.

The last part turned out to be moot in the evening as Castiel joined him, let in by a rather stunned looking Pepper. She gave him and Castiel both a curious look before closing the door and leaving them alone.

Tony raised an eyebrow at him. “You need something?”

Castiel shook his head. “No, thank you.” He gave a small smile. “I think that your friend out there is reading Steve the riot act.”

Tony blinked. “You get metaphorical sayings but don’t know how to shake a hand?”

“I’m very pop culture savvy now,” Castiel said easily, walking past the desk to the window.

Tony followed him, eyes narrowing. “Is that so.”

Castiel’s face was amused. “It is. It’s one thing Dean sought to remedy after I didn’t know who Mr. Spock was.”

“Fascinating,” Tony drawled, finishing off the last of the paperwork and stacking it in the delegated bin.

Castiel’s response was bone dry. “Indeed.”

Swiveling the chair around, Tony leaned back as he faced Castiel. “So what are you doing here?”

Castiel’s gaze shuttered. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know why you’re in my boring office when you could be with the others?”
“Oh.” His face brightened. “I wished to speak with you.”

Tony turned his hands palm up. “You’ve got me.”

“Yes, I do,” Castiel agreed, seemingly not understanding what Tony had meant.

Tony briefly considered correcting Castiel’s mistake before deciding it wasn’t worth it. “Okay, if you’re fine just standing there, then I’m gonna go back to not emailing the board.”

Castiel’s eyes narrowed. “That seems like an unusual job.”

“It’s about the only fun I get to have in the office.” Tony waved dismissively at a chair. “Other than the inventing, which is where the fun part comes in. Have a seat if you want.”

Turning back to the computer, Tony opened up the emails Pepper had sent back to him with various shades of “Urgent” marked. There were a few members who raised legitimate concerns about their international branches, and Tony made a note to check on them soon. A few others just demanded that the company go back to making weapons, and Tony trashed those with absolutely no remorse.

There was still no email from Rumiko, and Tony didn’t even know why he kept anticipating one. A quick check on the state of her company showed that she had managed to get the leadership turned to her with some nifty legal work.

It was while he was searching for information on Tiberius’s and Aldrich’s joint venture that Castiel spoke, dragging his attention away from the screen. “You have friends here.”

Tony pushed away from the desk, half turning to Castiel. He didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing.

“I’d thought you dead, brother,” Castiel continued softly. “I’m glad to see that you aren’t.”

Tony’s chest clenched as he remembered the first dream – the one with Lucifer. “I – he did die.” He didn’t flinch as Castiel looked sharply at him. “Lucifer killed him; I remembered that.” He smiled darkly.

Castiel’s head tilted to the side. “So you do remember?”

“No. Just that, and something else from here.” Tony looked down at his fingers. “Nothing important.”

“Those who have Fallen usually don’t remember,” Castiel said quietly.

“Then what about you?” Tony pointed out sharply.

Castiel didn’t react other than a sad twist of his lips. “I didn’t Fall.”

The words were out before Tony could stop them. “Neither did I.” Stunned, he shook his head, pinching his nose. “Gabriel didn’t,” he said after a moment.

Castiel studied him curiously. “No,” he said eventually, the word soft. “I suppose you didn’t. But the circumstances are similar.”

“Yeah? How so?”

“The loss and retrieval of Grace, along with memories,” Castiel answered. “Although what happened here with you is out of the realm of my experience.” He smiled ruefully. “I was never
meant to deal with the Leviathan.”

“Gabriel wasn’t either, considering what happened.” Tony glanced out at the lights of the city.

“He was the only one who was,” Castiel disagreed, following Tony’s gaze. “Your friend Steve confirmed it. You are one of the keys to Purgatory, and one of the four best equipped to deal with the Leviathan. You smote the first Leviathan, a feat no other had matched.”

“I’m no key,” Tony bit out, head snapping to Castiel. “I’m not Gabriel, Castiel. I’m Tony Stark.”

Castiel hadn’t flinched at Tony’s sharp tone, although he leaned forward in Tony’s direction, eyes studying him. “I was once a man called Emmanuel,” he began slowly, eyes closing momentarily. “I’d lost my own memories after my ill-advised plan with Purgatory.” He smiled self-deprecatingly. “I’d died, yet my Father brought me back with my Grace but without my memories. When Dean found me, I didn’t believe him when he said I was an angel, that my name was Castiel. Yet the things I could do…” He craned his head back, falling into a short silence.

“That time as Emmanuel is still with me,” he continued eventually, dropping his chin to meet Tony’s eyes. “Yet I am Castiel, even as I was and still am Emmanuel. You have no memories as Gabriel, Tony, but that doesn’t mean you aren’t him.”

“Am I really?” Tony smirked bitterly. “Don’t memories make the man?”

“I see him in you,” Castiel said softly. “Of the four archangels, Gabriel was the one who spent the most time with the lower angels. I grew to know him well before he left Heaven, and for all he changed, there are a few fundamental ways that he didn’t.”

Tony’s mouth was dry as he asked, “What?”

The corners of Castiel’s lips pulled into a small, almost indiscernible smile. “His laughter, his sense of humor, and…love for his family.” He didn’t look away from Tony. “It’s the last that I see in you.”

Tony could so very clearly remember that love in both memories. And that love had gotten Gabriel killed twice. “That a good thing? Seeing as how it’s gotten him killed twice and all…”

Castiel’s eyes closed, face pained. “I’ve lost my own life for the same.”

Tony eyed him sharply. “You look pretty alive to me.”

“And so do you,” Castiel returned gently, eyes opening. “Love hurts, Tony; it doesn’t mean it’s a bad thing.” His smile was small, his eyes looking at some point beyond Tony.

Uncomfortable, Tony glanced back at his computer and the screensaver of race cars. His fingers tapped against the surface of the desk anxiously.

No answer came to his lips, but JARVIS saved him from finding anything else to say when a video feed popped up on his computer screen.

“JARVIS?” Alert, Tony leaned forward, eyes scanning the feed. It was focused on a person dressed in a hoodie, baseball cap, and jeans. The man’s face was turned away from the camera and his left hand in his pocket. There was no one in the lobby as it was now seven in the evening and most of his employees had gone home, so that man shouldn’t have been able to enter either unless he’d broken in. “Why haven’t you alerted the police?”

“I forestalled the alarm,” JARVIS said, two pictures showing up next to the video feed, “as I
captured a snapshot of the intruder’s face, and found that it bore a startling similarity to one Sergeant James Buchanan Barnes of the Howling Commandos.”

Tony’s eyes skimmed over the two photos, one in black and white and the other in color. The more recent photo showed a haggard-looking man who could clearly use a shave, but it was undeniably an older looking James Barnes.

“You haven’t told Steve yet?” Tony asked, looking back at the feed. Barnes was now trying to get the elevator to open.

“I thought it better to wait,” JARVIS said, faint traces of hesitation in his tone. “I am uncertain as to his motivations.”

“Only one way to find out,” Tony said, moving to stand and startling when he nearly conked Castiel in the head as the other had crept up behind him to also inspect the feed. “Christ!”

Castiel simply raised an eyebrow at him, completely unperturbed. “Shall I accompany you?” he asked evenly.

Taking a step away from Castiel and putting some much needed space between them, Tony studied him. “Why not,” he decided, shrugging. “Can’t make things any worse.” He headed for the door.

“Sir, I would advise against meeting him on your own—”

“I’ve got Castiel. Think an angel—”

“—former angel isn’t going to kick ass?”

“Judging from what I have just retrieved from S.H.I.E.L.D.’s databases, James Barnes has had a most illustrious career as the Winter Soldier.”

“Sounds chilly,” Tony quipped, stopping in front of the elevator. “Think you can tell him company’s coming and to hold on?”

“The Winter Soldier is a legendary assassin that the community thinks of as a ghost,” JARVIS said acerbically. “I have already informed him; he shot out the speaker.”

“Not much of a ghost if he’s standing in my lobby,” Tony said idly, stepping into the elevator and pressing the first floor button, Castiel at his side. “You’ve got more speakers down there; just tell him to stow the gun since I don’t fancy being shot.”

JARVIS was silent for a moment before he said in a resigned tone, “The suit is on standby should you need it, sir.”

“What good will a suit do?” Castiel asked, head tilting towards Tony inquisitively.

Tony quirked an eyebrow at him, smirking. “You haven’t seen this suit.”

Castiel made a considering noise. “I suppose.” His eyes flickered to the number display. “Do you have a plan?”

Tony shrugged. “No, not really.”

Castiel gave him a thoroughly unimpressed look. “You’re planning on encountering a ghost of an
“assassin without even a plan?”

“Yup.”

Castiel sighed. “Then let me out first; I doubtlessly have faster reflexes than you.”

Tony’s gaze swept up and down the unassuming form hidden under the unfamiliar clothes that had probably come from Steve’s closet judging from the fit of the jacket and the shirt. “I don’t doubt that.”

The elevator pinged then, announcing their arrival. The doors opened seconds later to the sight of one Winter Soldier standing there with a fierce expression on his face.

Tony reached out and pressed the emergency stop button before anything else could happen. Barnes wasn’t going to let them out of the elevator, and Tony wasn’t in the mood for the elevator to get pissy on him.

“Hey there,” Tony started in a carefully modulated tone, meeting Barnes’s wild eyes. “Considering you just broke into my tower and didn’t make a secret of it, I’m guessing you want something?”

Barnes’s lips pressed together in a thin line, his eyes scanning Tony’s form in a second before flicking to Castiel. Tony had no doubt that the man had formed several plans to kill both of them in five seconds flat.

“Who are you?” Barnes asked, voice low and raspy, sounding like he hadn’t spoken in weeks.

“Not something I get asked every day,” Tony responded easily, keeping his hands in plain view of Barnes. “I’m Tony. This here is my friend Castiel. And from the facial recognition scan I got from your entrance, you’re one James Buchanan Barnes, also known as the Winter Soldier.”

Barnes blinked, frowning. “I don’t know who you’re talking about.” He shifted, and Tony caught the glint of metal where the sleeve didn’t quite cover his left arm.

“So I’ve got someone else who just happens to be the Winter Soldier standing in front of me?”

“No, that’s me.” Barnes twitched, eyes flicking between Tony and Castiel. “But the other name – that isn’t.”

Tony studied him for a moment, eyes narrowing. “Agree to disagree,” he said eventually, an easy smile settling on his lips. “So, that still doesn’t answer my question: what are you doing here?”

Barnes hunched his shoulders, ducking his head so that the cap hid his features. “Black Widow,” he whispered. “Natasha. Is she here?”

Taken aback by Barnes’s urgency and worry, Tony took pity on him. “She’s fine,” he confirmed. “Alive. You tracked her here, I assume?”

Barnes eyed Tony warily, even as his bearing seemed to lose some tension. “Yes.” The answer was soft. “Can I…” He looked up at the ceiling. “Can I see her?”

“Hm…” Tony shared a glance with Castiel out of the corner of his eye, but the other didn’t really
seem to have anything to say other than a raised eyebrow that clearly told Tony that the ball was in his court. “Sure,” he said finally, stepping back further into the elevator to give Barnes room. “But she’s not going to be the only one up there.”

“I don’t care.” Barnes stepped inside and to the side, watching Tony as he canceled the emergency stop and pressed the button for the penthouse.

“Just don’t shoot anyone,” Tony warned him, leaning back against the railing, his arms folded across his chest.

“I won’t.”

After giving Barnes a scrutinizing stare and determining that he was indeed telling the truth (and also hiding any and all weapons on his person), Tony nodded and settled back, watching the numbers climb ever higher until they reached the top. He had no doubt that JARVIS had already prepared the others for their second visitor of the day.

When the doors slid open, there was no one standing right there to ambush them. Admirable considering how jumpy Barnes appeared. But they were standing in a group by the sofas, body language visibly nervous.

Tony and Castiel exited the elevator first and stepped off to the side to let Barnes off. He stepped out slowly, eyes fixed on Natasha.

Tony’s own eyes were on Steve, who looked like he’d seen a ghost.

“Natasha?” Barnes sounded lost.

Surprisingly, Natasha broke first, dropping her arms from their defensive posture across her chest and covering the short distance between them in a span of seconds, clutching Barnes in what looked like a tight hug. Barnes didn’t seem to mind from the way his own arms came up to clutch back, and now Tony could see the silver metal fingers of his left hand, glistening in the light before they buried themselves in Natasha’s shirt.

“James,” Natasha breathed, turning her face into Barnes’s neck.

Barnes hid his own face in Natasha’s short, red hair. “Natasha.” Muffled as it was, Tony could still make out the sheer emotion imbued in that one word.

And in the background, Tony saw Steve stagger backwards into Jarvis, face ashen. “Bucky?”

The name caught Barnes’s attention, and he pulled away from Natasha to look at the other people in the room. “Who the hell is Bucky?”

Chapter End Notes

So who remembers that Natasha name-dropped the Winter Soldier in the last story? And that the Leviathan were going to do nefarious things to his person? HE’S ALIVE, mainly because he was craftier than the Leviathan were and high-tailed it out after he saw what they did to Natasha and Steve. And once he went to ground, no one was able to find him.
As for that spam robot story... it's from florahart's fic [SPAM ROBOT CHALLENGE 2013](#) which you should all read. Because it is hilarious.

Yeah, anyway, I'm not sorry for leaving you all on this note (mainly because next update is Friday!). Please let me know what you thought!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Well, now that Bucky's here, things are going to get better, yes? Or maybe not...

All I can tell you is that this chapter contains a lot of feels and finally the next plot development that I have been withholding since I first started planning this story because it's a gigantic spoiler.

I have no regrets for how this chapter ends. None.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It was going to be messy. Of course it was. Why had he expected anything different from plopping Steve’s old friend from the forties here?

The worst part was that Barnes clearly didn’t remember Steve, though he knew Natasha and evidently shared history with her. Of an intimate sort.

For the first time, Tony had some inkling of what it was like to be on the receiving end of an amnesiac person. But only in an abstract sort of way, since Steve was a friend and Tony didn’t want to see him hurt (even if he’d hurt Steve).

“Steve?” Natasha asked, pulling away from Barnes to give Steve a concerned look.

“That’s—” Steve broke off, evidently unable to find the words.

“This is James,” Natasha said, her words loud in the absolute silence of the room.

“Also known as the Winter Soldier,” Jarvis added when Natasha didn’t. He shot Tony an angry scowl from behind Steve, clearly unhappy with Tony’s life choices. Tony returned the scowl with a face.

“The Winter Soldier?” Steve clearly recognized the name. “Natasha, wasn’t he—”

“In Russia when we were,” Natasha finished smoothly, facing Barnes again. “We didn’t see him.”

“I saw you.” Barnes’s words were tinged with horror. “I saw you and those…things.” He glanced at Steve.

“Leviathans.” Natasha closed her eyes, shaking her head. She leaned imperceptibly into Barnes’s frame, the movement so slight Tony almost missed it.

“I thought you were dead.” Barnes reached up a hand to trace the shell of Natasha’s ear, seemingly oblivious to everyone else.

“I’m not.” Natasha’s fingers curled into the cloth of Barnes’s hoodie even as she stepped away. “How did you escape? I heard them say that they’d take care of you.”

Barnes smirked darkly. “I do have some idea of how to hide my tracks. They couldn’t find me once I
went underground, and I didn’t return to HYDRA. I didn’t need to anymore.” He angled Natasha a look that Tony couldn’t read but Natasha understood judging from her soft smile.

Steve had sat down on the couch by now, face buried in his hands. Jarvis had a hand stroking up and down his back while watching Natasha and Barnes warily. Clint was wound as tight as a bowstring, and Bruce didn’t seem to know whether to look at Steve or Barnes.

“I thought you were dead,” Steve said into the silence, getting Barnes’s attention. “I saw you fall.” His voice was haunted, twisted by old grief.

Barnes blinked, face shuttering for a brief moment before he flinched, shaking his head. “What’s your name?”

Steve looked up at him, a fragile hope dawning on his face. “Steve. Steve Rogers.”

Barnes tilted his head to the side, giving Steve a dry smile. “Nice to meet you, Steve. I’m James.”

The hope died a slow, agonizing death, though Tony could visibly see Steve steel himself before smiling back weakly.

“Awesome reunion and all,” Clint said sharply, his tone like a knife, “but, Tony, what the fuck were you thinking meeting him by yourself?”

Tony gave Clint a cool look. “I wasn’t by myself.” The words were acerbic. He jabbed a thumb at Castiel, who hadn’t moved from his position by Tony. “I was with him.”

“And neither of you is trained to go up against an assassin,” Clint fired back, face set in hard lines. “I don’t care about Castiel’s past; he’s human now and he has no idea how to act like one.”

“I wasn’t expecting an assassin.” Tony kept his voice soft, a cold anger hiding under it. “I was expecting the man Steve knew. The Winter Soldier is a so-called ghost, and the man broke into my lobby like a common burglar with no sense. Those aren’t the actions of a legendary assassin.”

Natasha gave Barnes a curious look. “Really.”

Barnes just shrugged, one side of his mouth tugging up into a small smile. “I wasn’t trying to hide.”

“If you think I’d ever be that kind of idiot,” Tony continued in that same soft tone, “then you never knew me at all.”

Clint’s face twisted angrily. “Yeah.” His tone was final. “I guess we don’t.”

Tony let the stares of the others slide off him like ice water, turning to a silent Castiel and taking him by the elbow. “Come on; I’ll show you where you’re staying the night.”

They stepped back into the elevator, the frigid silence of the room an almost palpable weight. Tony didn’t look out as he reached for the button that was for the floor that wasn’t on any existing blueprint and no one could see from the outside. Pepper had sounded completely resigned when answering Tony’s confused questions about it (not that she’d known much about it beyond muttering “Fucking magic and lazy archangels” under her breath).

It wasn’t until the doors closed that Castiel spoke, voice tinged with concern. “Tony—”

Tony stopped him wearily, rubbing the bridge of his nose and feeling a familiar tension headache begin to build up. “Don’t, Castiel.”
It was a mess. He didn’t know why he’d expected otherwise.

Taking the back route to his floor (namely the stairs) was probably cowardly of Tony, but he had no desire to put himself in the middle of that awkward situation in his living room. He much preferred the privacy of his room, where he could sulk in peace.

That notion crushed him to the floor the moment he entered his bedroom to have an excited Dummy jump on him and topple him over with a loud thud.

“Oops.” Dummy cringed.

Tony groaned, unable to do much more from his prostrate position on the floor. He’d hit his head and his skull was throbbing in protest.

“And that’s why you don’t jump on people who aren’t expecting it,” Rhodey’s voice said.

“But he always catches us!” Butterfingers’ voice protested. “Even when we jumped from the vents!”

“You’re not supposed to be in the vents,” Pepper’s voice said mildly. That explained where she had disappeared to from her office.


“Come on, Dummy.” Pepper appeared in his field of vision, crouching down to peel Dummy off him. “Let him up.”

Even without Dummy’s weight it took Tony a bit to get his breath and then gradually sit up. He found that his bedroom had been commandeered by the kids and his two best friends. Not exactly what he’d been expecting.

“Why are you all in my bedroom?” he asked warily.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Pepper said sweetly, letting Dummy down. “Maybe it’s because of the assassin you decided to meet by yourself?”

“There are other rooms,” Tony pointed out, eyeing her carefully.

“But this is your room, Tony,” Pepper said, raising an eyebrow.

“If you wanted to talk to me, you could’ve just waited outside the office,” Tony said, slowly getting to his feet.

“Instead of giving you and Castiel some privacy and being called up to act as a relationship counselor for your team?” Pepper sounded irritated. “And then I’m shoved into a bedroom because there’s a master assassin in the building and my idiotic boss has decided to go and meet him with no backup except for a complete stranger!”

“I knew what I was doing,” Tony objected.

“You say that, but we know that most of the time you don’t,” Rhodey pointed out, sighing. He was sitting on the bed with Butterfingers on his lap.

“This time I did,” Tony insisted irritably. “What kind of master assassin breaks into the lobby like a common burglar? He wasn’t here to kill anyone.”
“You had no guarantee of that,” Pepper said fiercely. “Absolutely none. You’re human, Tony, and you had better act like it. I won’t have you throwing away your life because you’re a fool and can’t think of your family.” Blinking, Pepper wiped at her eyes with a hand, inhaling sharply.

Tony’s heart sank. “Pepper—”

Pepper’s hand flew up, forestalling what he might have said. “I can’t, Tony.” Her lips twisted unhappily. “Seeing as how you’re still alive, I’m assuming that there’s no danger to be had. Good night.” She brushed past Tony dismissively, her cold disregard hurting him more than anything one of his teammates could have done.

“Nice going, Tony,” Rhodey said, meeting his eyes calmly.

Tony shifted uncomfortably, folding his arms across his chest. “I’m not sorry.”

“I didn’t expect you to be,” Rhodey answered tiredly. “I understand taking risks in the name of the job, but this was just stupid, Tony.”

Tony squashed down the guilt that rose in him. “That’s me.” He kept his voice even.

“Not always.” Rhodey lifted Butterfingers off his lap and set her down on the bed. “Mind keeping your dumb dad company while I go see what I can do for Pepper?”

Butterfingers gave him a thumbs up, grinning toothily. “You got it, Uncle Rhodey!”

“That’s my girl.” Rhodey fondly ruffled her hair, earning himself a disgruntled face in the process.

“You’re leaving, too?” Tony was unable to resist asking.

Rhodey gave him a look as he stopped beside him. “Tony, man, I love you, but there are times that I just want to strangle you. This is one of those times, and it’ll be better for both of us if I leave now.”

Throat thick, Tony nodded, arms coming down to his side as he shuffled away from the door. “All right.”

Rhodey gave him another long look before sighing and clasping Tony’s shoulder reassuringly. “We’ll talk later,” he promised. “Spend time with your kids.” He left then, closing the door behind him.

Tony stood there, back to the door, staring at three wide-eyed kids. He had absolutely no fucking clue what to do.

Dummy decided the matter, coming closer and reaching for Tony’s hand to take hold of it. “I think you did good,” he informed him solemnly, dark eyes wide.

“Yes,” Butterfingers agreed, smiling widely. “You can do anything.”

You added something in that foreign language, then gave Tony a dark scowl.

“Yes, I can’t do that,” Tony said resignedly, smiling sadly at You. “Sorry.”

Giving a dismissive shrug and smiling softly now, You went for Tony’s other hand and tugged him to the bed. “It’s bedtime,” he said, giving Tony a look that dared him to argue.

Tony didn’t. “You guys staying?”
Dummy tugged eagerly at his hand, crawling onto the comforter next to Tony. “Sleepover?” he asked excitedly, bouncing happily.

Tony eyed them all critically, thinking of what little kids had to do before bed. “You guys brush your teeth and shower?”

“Yes,” the three chorused, grinning widely at him.

“I haven’t,” Tony told them, “so why don’t you tuck yourself in and I’ll be back in a bit.”

There was a short scuffle before all three of them were under the covers and peeking out to give Tony eager looks. Smiling rather nervously, Tony slid off the bed and made a beeline for the bathroom.

By the time he was done and back in his dark room, he stopped short upon seeing that they had fallen asleep. The sight stuck something in his throat, and Tony was momentarily at a loss for air.

There was something so…unreal about seeing them in his larger than necessary bed. Butterfingers and You had taken up one side and were tangled up, You lying half on top of Butterfingers. Dummy had the other side and was curled up in a ball facing the empty space between them. An empty space that was perhaps not coincidentally exactly large enough for Tony to slip into.

How often had Gabriel done this with them?

Often enough to form a routine, as they didn’t stir as Tony carefully slipped under the covers. It wasn’t until he’d settled comfortably into the space between them that Dummy murmured indistinctly and scooted in closer, head coming to rest on Tony’s shoulder and warm fingers curling into his nightshirt.

Tony couldn’t breathe, too caught up in a surge of protectiveness and love for these kids that he had never in his life expected. He didn’t deserve them, but he was going to do his damn best not to mess it up.

It wasn’t until twin meows came from beside the bed and two warm weights jumped up onto the mattress that Tony found himself breathing again. He felt the two kittens settle themselves around his feet before a soft rumbling filled the air.

Inhaling quietly, Tony closed his eyes, trying to relax.

He had a lot to deal with tomorrow, but he could take in the peace and unconditional love from his kids for now.

He didn’t even notice when the dark of his eyelids faded away to the breathtaking formation of stars and galaxies at the universe’s beginnings.

“If you think I’d ever be that kind of idiot, then you never knew me at all.” The quiet tone those words were delivered in made it all the worse.

Clint’s response sounded utterly disgusted. “Yeah.” His tone was final. “I guess we don’t.”

Steve watched in dismay as Tony turned his back to them and put a hand on Castiel’s elbow. “Come on; I’ll show you where you’re staying the night.”

A minute later, Tony and Castiel left the room.
The moment the elevator doors closed, Clint scoffed in disgust, shaking his head. “Ass.”

“Clint,” Steve chastised quietly.

“No, screw it, Steve,” Clint snapped. “There’s nothing that calls for that attitude. I don’t care how he’s feeling, he shouldn’t treat us like that.”

“He seemed pretty reasonable,” Bucky murmured, sounding rather confused.

“He can be,” Natasha told him, “but that depends.”

“Trust me,” Clint said to Bucky, “there is nothing reasonable about going off to meet you with absolutely no backup.”

A small smile flitted across Bucky’s face, one that Steve hadn’t seen before. “He was in no danger.”

“But did he know that?”

Bucky inclined his head, a thoughtful expression crossing his face. “He did.”

Once more, the sight of his best friend – alive – after thinking he was dead put a stopper in Steve’s throat. He was having trouble breathing, and it wasn’t just the pain in his chest from Tony’s harsh remarks. It was the fact that it was Bucky standing in front of him, notably more haggard and unkempt and twitchier than Steve had ever seen excepting the period after he’d been recovered from Zola’s base, but still undeniably Bucky. Steve could scarcely believe it; it was almost too good to be true.

But he knew Bucky like the back of his hand, and no amount of scruff or wariness would put Steve off from recognizing his childhood best friend, the man who had stuck through thick and thin with Steve. The man who Steve had never thought he’d see again.

The fact that Bucky was standing here now, alive, was more than Steve could have ever hoped for. So it didn’t matter that Bucky didn’t know who Steve was or didn’t remember his name. It didn’t matter that the only person Bucky knew was Natasha. It didn’t matter. The only thing that did was that Bucky was here, and Steve had a second chance with the friend he had failed.

Seeming to sense Steve’s breathlessness, Jarvis returned to stroking Steve’s back soothingly. The contact drew Steve out of his thoughts and back into reality, which was Natasha leading Bucky to an armchair that was situated a bit further away from the main sitting area. The armchair had been hauled in for Loki and hadn’t moved from its spot even though Loki was currently in Asgard.

Natasha didn’t move away from Bucky, instead perching on the armrest and keeping an arm slung over Bucky’s shoulders. Steve didn’t miss the way Bucky leaned into the touch, and jealousy rose up in him before he could stop it.

Biting down on his lip so hard he could taste blood, Steve told himself to stop it. He wasn’t Bucky’s only friend, and he wasn’t going to begrudge him a comforting touch when he needed it. From the way Bucky looked, Steve doubted he’d been in a safe place anytime recently.

“I’m glad that you’re all right,” Natasha said quietly, looking down at Bucky.

Bucky looked up at her, smiling softly. It was the same smile that he’d given Steve when they were younger, and it was jarring seeing it directed towards someone else. “Not as glad as I am that you are.”
“It was close,” Natasha admitted. “But thanks to Gabriel it worked out.”

“Gabriel?”

Natasha hesitated briefly, lips pinching. “He isn’t here anymore,” she said eventually. “Taking care of the monsters you saw ended up being more permanent than we anticipated.”

Bucky frowned, tilting his head back. “Seems like an odd job for just one man,” he said candidly.

Natasha’s smirk was darkly amused. “He wasn’t just a man.”

“No kidding,” Clint muttered, shuffling around behind the bar. Bruce was eyeing him disapprovingly.

“Considering what I’ve seen, I’m not surprised,” Bucky said. He reached up with his right hand to take hold of Natasha’s, gently stroking her knuckles. “I’ll have to thank him when I can.”

“Likelihood of that happening without a punch to the face or your heart getting scraped out of your chest with a toothpick is absolutely zero,” Clint said acerbically, tossing back a large glass of clear liquid that Steve dearly hoped wasn’t vodka.

“Please,” Pepper’s voice said, coming from the corner where the hallway to the rest of the floor was. “He’s more likely to use a fingernail.” Entering the living room, she came up to Bucky. “You must be the lovely assassin Tony decided to meet. It’s a pleasure to see that you really are as harmless as he assumed you were.”

Bucky blinked in surprise, evidently taken aback at the force that was an angry Pepper Potts. “Okay?”

“Hey, Pepper,” Rhodey said, rushing into the room, “remember what you just chewed out Tony for? You’re doing it.”

“He really is harmless,” Pepper said, her cheeks flushed in anger. She flapped a hand at Bucky and Natasha. “Big cuddly panda bear. Or raccoon. You look like you’d be a raccoon.” She squinted slightly, gesturing up to her face. “Some badly applied eyeliner and you’ll be just—”

Rhodey had a hand over her mouth, grinning sheepishly down at Bucky. “Sorry about that. She’s just a bit pissed off at the moment.”

Bucky’s eyes darted to the side, his eyebrows scrunching together. “I think I understand,” he said slowly, blinking. A moment later he looked past Rhodey and Pepper at Steve, uncertainty and fear warring on his face. “Back alley fights?” he asked.

Steve let out a breathless laugh, feeling the hot burn of tears prickling his eyes. “All the time,” he choked out. “You hated it.”

“cause you kept beating everyone up and I had to mop up the mess?”

“More like they kept beating me up.” Steve gave him a watery smile. “I wasn’t always this big.”

Bucky tilted his head, eyes scanning Steve’s form for a brief second before they closed and his forehead wrinkled in thought. “No… You were a hell of a lot smaller.”

“You remember, James?” Natasha asked gently, unmoving.

“I think…” Bucky pressed a hand to his face, leaning forward and dislodging Natasha’s arm. “Just
shadows – blurry images. It’s there, but I can’t get to it.”

“It’s okay,” Steve said quickly, perching on the edge of the couch cushion. “We’ve got time.”

Bucky’s lips curled into a small smile that Steve hadn’t seen before, probably because Bucky usually wasn’t one for shy, awkward smiles. “Yeah.” His voice was quiet, and he looked up at Natasha with an expression that Steve recognized as adoration. “We do.”

Pepper pried Rhodey’s hand off her mouth, giving him a glare that promised death. She turned to Clint. “How good are you at mixing drinks?”

Clint arched an eyebrow, swishing his unidentified drink around in his glass. “My best friend’s Russian. What do you think?”

“Mix me something strong,” Pepper said. “If I’m going to make ill-advised life choices, then I’m going out with style.”

“Pepper—” Rhodey started, alarm crossing his face.

“Shush.” Pepper slapped a hand over his mouth. “You should join me. God”—she rolled her eyes—“knows we’ll need it tomorrow.

“I can do without the epic hangover from hell, thanks, especially when dealing with Tony.”

“Suit yourself.” Pepper shrugged, clicking her way over to Clint and tossing her heels off to sit down on a barstool.

“He really good at mixing?” Bucky asked Natasha curiously.

“He has me for a bestie,” Natasha said entirely seriously. “What do you think?”

Following a few seconds’ deliberation, Bucky nodded and stood, also making his way to the bar. “Mind if I join in?”

Clint was already throwing drinks together. “Have at it, new best buddy.”

“This is such a bad idea,” Bruce muttered, pinching his nose.

Not deigning to response to Bruce’s probably very apt statement, Steve craned his head back to meet Jarvis’s eyes. “You going to join Tony?” He kept his tone carefully even.

Jarvis responded with a sad smile, shaking his head lightly. “They are already asleep,” he answered quietly. “I won’t disturb them.”

With a pang, Steve realized that Jarvis was probably just as lost – if not even more so – than the rest of them. He had been closest to Tony, and it must be extraordinarily difficult to go back to the relationship he had prior to Afghanistan.

“So,” Steve continued, forcing cheer into his voice, “want to get drunk with us?”

“Steve,” Bruce groaned in dismay, burying his face in his hands.

“What? It’s not like I can get drunk.”

And it was definitely a day for getting drunk.
Tony was woken up rather rudely by someone rolling on top of him. It took him a breathless moment before reorienting himself in a physical body. He was not dancing around the universe as his dream would have suggested, and the sudden shift to a purely physical state startled him.

And then he wondered why it should startle him since he’d always had a body.

“Are you awake now?” Dummy whispered, patting his cheek.

Tony cracked one eye open to give him a not very menacing glare. “Thanks to you.”

Dummy didn’t look very apologetic. “Sorry.”

“We’re hungry,” Butterfingers declared from next to Tony.

“Are you?” Tony craned his neck to smile at her. “What do you want me to do about that?”

Butterfingers made a face at him. “Make us breakfast!”

“Hmm...” Tony wriggled partly out from under Dummy to sit up against the headboard. “You want me to cook?”

“Pancakes?” Dummy asked hopefully.

“Only if you want me to burn them,” Tony said, smiling apologetically at his eldest. “What about an omelet?”

“You burn that, too,” You said sleepily.

“Do you or do you not want breakfast?” Tony demanded.

“We do!” Dummy assured him.

“Then I’m making omelets. Get off, Dummy. I need to change.”

Pouting, Dummy did. Then he rolled himself up in the blankets. “I’m staying here,” he declared.

Tony patted the lump that was Dummy. “You do that.”

Wiggling out from between them, Tony slid off the bed and headed to the bathroom, hearing twin thumps from behind him shortly before two little bodies beat him to the destination. Resigned to sharing his bathroom with the two fur balls, Tony locked the door.

He was done in fifteen minutes, opting against a shower since he had no plans for the day and had showered the previous night. He just shaped his goatee before cleaning up after himself and leaving the bathroom.

Chattering loudly, the kids followed him to the kitchen, scrambling for seats before they activated the holographic display on the table and began squabbling over coding.

Tony had no idea what it was about, except for the fact that he was feeling distinctly proud. Smiling to himself, Tony fished out the eggs and assorted condiments.

He’d just started whipping the eggs by the time Castiel shuffled in, obviously uncertain as to his welcome.

“Morning,” Tony said, nodding at him. “Fancy an omelet?”
Castiel nodded in response, a small smile playing at his lips as he watched the kids. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. You haven’t even tasted it.”

Sitting down at the table, Castiel was instantly pulled into the discussion, thought it didn’t look like he’d be very helpful judging from the lost look on his face. He was saved from further confusion by Jarvis’s arrival, who gave the sight of Tony cooking a skeptical eye before opting for helping the kids with their coding issues.

Tony would have felt insulted at the skepticism if he wasn’t currently having problems keeping the omelet an omelet and not turning it into scrambled eggs. Flipping the damn thing had always been problematic.

In another fifteen minutes Tony had successfully managed five decent omelets and one plate of scrambled eggs. Only one omelet was slightly burned; the others were a bright, cheery yellow.

Tony kept the scrambled eggs for himself and gave Castiel the best omelet, leaving the rest for the others.

After a small misunderstanding considering the distinct lack of salt on the omelets since Tony hadn’t felt with dealing with complaints about using too much, everyone dug in happily. Or most everyone. Castiel finished his plate but didn’t seem to have an opinion beyond the fact that he didn’t like the bell peppers.

That was good to know, but Tony suspected that Jarvis wasn’t going to be letting him at the stove anytime soon considering the stray pieces of food strewn about all over the countertops and metal.

In fact, Jarvis didn’t even let Tony clean up, ushering both he and Castiel out and retaining the kids so that they could help clean up and “instill proper manners for later in life, Dummy.”

“I don’t think it sets a good example to ask two of the adults to leave,” Castiel told Tony, sounding perplexed.

“Jarvis can make just about anything make sense,” Tony said, shrugging. “I’ve learned not to ask.”

“So he bullshits?” Castiel asked.

“Eighty percent of what anyone here does is bullshit,” Tony informed him seriously, bumping his shoulder.

“So it is human.”

“Probably. Can’t say anything about any aliens out there.”

“From what I have heard, aliens tend to bullshit, too.” Castiel smiled wanly. “But I’ve not met one beyond the stories my siblings have told me.”

Tony eyed him curiously, keeping pace with him until they stopped in front of the windows. “You must have a lot of stories.”

“I’ve lived a very long time,” Castiel said bluntly, looking out at the city, “but not as long as the archangels.”

“I can’t imagine that.” And he couldn’t. It wasn’t even millions or billions of years he was looking at; it was trillions. The human brain just wasn’t equipped to handle numbers of that size.
“Humans aren’t supposed to,” Castiel said softly, face soft in the morning light that was peeking over the buildings. He didn’t look entirely out of place in his freshly washed clothes, though that trench coat was just ridiculous, but there was still something rather inhuman about him. It might’ve been his eyes or even the way he carried himself, just a bit too stiff to be human.

“And now you’re one of us.” Tony’s voice was subdued.

Castiel gave him a small smile. “It’s not so bad – being human. Emotions are more visceral than I’m used to,” he admitted, “but overall…” He took a breath, eyes closing. “I have a better idea of what I’ve spent the last five years protecting.”

Unable to find a suitable response to that, Tony kept quiet, leaning his shoulder against the window and joining Castiel in watching the view.

“I need to go back,” Castiel said suddenly, startling Tony.

“Go back where?” Tony asked, eyes flicking to Castiel.

“Where I woke up.” Castiel met his eyes, desperation written all over his face. “I need to see if there’s something I missed – some sign of how I can go back. I can’t stay here, Tony.”

Tony kept his voice soothing. “That wasn’t the plan, Castiel. Are you sure you want to do it today?”

“Yes.” Castiel shook his head, agitated. “The time difference is incalculable; I can’t risk staying here any longer and leaving them alone.”

“Probably not really incalculable if I had more variables,” Tony commented offhandedly, pulling out his phone and checking his calendar. He’d done most of his work yesterday when he should’ve done it today, so at least he didn’t have to go in the office unless he wanted to. And he didn’t. “Where’d you wake up?”

“A park.”

“Right,” Tony murmured, remembering where he’d picked Castiel up. “You were just outside Central Park when I got your call, so that’s probably where you were. You didn’t go far before calling, did you?”

Castiel shook his head, eyes watching Tony inscrutably.

“Okay, good.” Tony put his phone back in his pocket. “Let me get my stuff together and we can go. Parking’s a nightmare around that place, so we’ll take a cab.”

Leaving Castiel in the living room, Tony went back to his room to get his wallet. Jarvis met him outside. “Are you certain about this, sir?”

“About this?” Tony shrugged, rifling through his wallet to be sure he had enough small change. “Yeah.”

“I can go with you—”

“Take care of the kids,” Tony interrupted him, shouldering past him and putting his wallet in his back pocket. “I’m not meeting an assassin or doing anything else that’s potentially dangerous. Castiel and I are just checking out the site of where he woke up; that’s it. I’m a grown adult, Jarvis. I do not need supervision for everything I do.”
Jarvis’s face smoothened out. “I understand,” he said tightly. “Then I shall let the others know where you have left to once they wake up.”

“Sounds good,” Tony said, squashing down his immediate regret for treating Jarvis so harshly. His point still stood; he didn’t need to be babysat.

Castiel was by the elevator when Tony joined him, and he gave Jarvis a nod.

Jarvis had his arms folded across his chest as he stood there. “Be safe,” he told Tony firmly.

“Anything happens, I’ll give you a ring,” Tony reassured him, giving him an apologetic smile.

“I assume you mean a phone ring and not an actual ring,” Castiel said blandly as the elevator doors opened.

“I could give him a ring, too,” Tony drawled, smirking and winking at Jarvis.

“I would much prefer the phone, sir,” Jarvis retorted, looking amused despite himself.

Tony waved his fingers in goodbye as the doors closed between them.

Castiel said nothing else, and Tony didn’t feel the need to speak either. They breezed through the lobby with only a few strange glances Castiel’s way, but the employees were used enough to Tony’s bizarre antics that they weren’t distracted for long. Being able to work through distractions was one of the hallmarks of a Stark Industries employee.

It was sunny out, and the air just a bit nippy, so Tony put on his sunglasses, waving down a cab as he did.

“I have never been in a cab,” Castiel said, watching Tony.

“Then you’re in for a treat,” Tony said dryly. “Don’t touch anything and you’re good. The only reason we’re taking a cab is because I don’t fancy parking several blocks away from the park.”

Castiel’s brow furrowed, but he didn’t say anything else as Tony opened the door to the cab and waved him in.

“Central Park,” Tony said to the driver once the door was closed. “Just drop us off outside.”

The cab driver set the meter. “You got it.”

The drive passed in silence, Tony leaning an elbow against the window and propping his head on his hand. Castiel was much less relaxed, sitting stiffly and staring straight ahead.

Dropping them off as close to the entrance of the park as was possible, the driver pulled to a stop by the curb. Tony gave him a significant tip and meaningfully nudged Castiel’s knee with his own so he would get out first as he was right next to the sidewalk.

“So,” Tony started once they were out of the rather smelly cab, “I figure we’ll head inside and start walking. D’you remember where you woke up exactly?”

Castiel shook his head, eyes scanning the greenery inside the park. “It was dark when I woke,” he said, “and it looks different in the day. But I think I might remember some of the turns.”

“Can’t do anything if we don’t try,” Tony said easily, leading the way.
Central Park was usually extraordinarily busy, being an absolute oasis in a city of brick, steel, and cement, and today was no different. Tony kept close to Castiel, thankful that given his incognito clothes and sunglasses, no one gave him a second look. Having a crowd of people around him begging for his autograph or demanding info on what Stark Industries was doing about what had happened two weeks ago would have been a nightmare.

“I didn’t wake up near a road,” Castiel said ten minutes later.

Tony hummed thoughtfully, pulling open a map of Central Park on his phone. “Do you remember how long of a walk it was until you reached one?”

“Five minutes? And then maybe fifteen or twenty minutes until I left the park.” Castiel’s shoulders drew up to his ears. “My sense of time is off,” he admitted softly.

There was nothing Tony could say to that, so he kept his head down as he magnified the map so he could get a closer look at what he was searching for. They could keep walking for another five minutes before heading into the grass and seeing what Castiel remembered.

“Trees, or were you in a clearing?” Tony asked after another minute.

“Trees.”

“Doesn’t narrow it down much,” Tony said dryly, thumbing the screen off and putting his phone back in his pocket.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. A walk’s good for the soul, or so I hear.”

Castiel gave him a skeptical look. “I’ve not heard that.”

“Trust the human here,” Tony quipped, nudging Castiel’s side playfully. “Come on. Let’s go off the well-traveled road and into the trees. We’re not going to find it here.”

Obediently following after Tony, Castiel said nothing as they left the busy street behind and entered the shade and relative quiet of the trees. It was still loud considering the chatter of people and the rumble of cars that drove by, but the foliage absorbed most of the din.

“Everything looks the same,” Castiel said, sounding dismayed. They’d been walking through the trees for several minutes.

Tony wasn’t all that surprised. “They’re trees.”

“I know, but…” Castiel glanced back at where they’d come from. “I should’ve paid more attention.”

“Hindsight’s twenty-twenty and all, but it’s pitch dark here in the night,” Tony said, turning back to Castiel. “There’s no way you could’ve seen anything noticeable enough to note as a landmark.”

“So I give up?” Castiel demanded angrily. “I can’t do that, Tony. I need to get back.”

“And you will.” Tony kept his voice calm. “But we might not be able to do this on foot. I can rig up something that’ll scan the place for odd energy signatures, or maybe send some drones through that can cover the area faster than we can.”

Castiel’s jaw tightened. “How long will that take?”
Tony shrugged. "Depends. I might be able to send the suit out with the excuse that it’s an Avengers thing, or I can send the drones out in a few days. For a sweep in energy signatures, that can be done today. I’ve got the equipment.”

“It needs to be done quickly,” Castiel insisted. “I can’t afford to wait long.”

“Actually,” Aldrich’s smarmy voice drawled from behind Tony, “I think you can take your time.”

Tony spun around on his heel, eyes narrowing behind his glasses as he took in the sight of Aldrich in casual clothes and a chilling smile on his face, his head tilted slightly to the side. “What are you doing here?” he asked flatly.

“It’s a park, Tony,” Aldrich said, smiling. “Completely free. I’m just walking. Like you.”

“Right.” Tony took a step closer to Castiel, keeping his front facing Aldrich. “I kinda think you’ve got something else going on.”

Aldrich’s eyes turned into slits, and his smile broadened. “You do, do you?”

“Tony?” Castiel breathed questioningly.

Tony shushed him with a hand to the stomach, stretching out behind himself. “What do you want, Aldrich?”

“I think it’s more of a question of what you can do for us,” Aldrich said, rolling his shoulders and his neck.

“I’m not into genetic engineering for making super soldiers,” Tony said bluntly, “so you’ll have to go get your funding elsewhere if Tiberius’s money isn’t cutting it.”

Aldrich’s smile stretched into a predatory grin, his eyes glinting orange. “What makes you think I’m after your money, Tony? No, I’m here for Castiel.”

The fact that Aldrich knew Castiel’s name despite Tony not having used it since entering Central Park set off all his alarm bells, and he could physically feel Castiel stiffening behind him.

“I’m not interested,” Castiel said evenly, his tone betraying no emotion.

“You know what, Castiel? It doesn’t really matter if you’re interested or not. You don’t have a choice.”

It was literally a blink of an eye before something whammed into Tony and threw him aside into the grass. Skidding painfully into a tree, Tony caught sight of Aldrich lifting Castiel up bodily with one hand on his throat. That strength wasn’t natural.

That didn’t matter. Nothing was happening to Castiel on his watch.

Scrambling to his feet, Tony lunged at Aldrich, only for the other to punch him in the chest. All oxygen was forced out of his lungs in one painful whoosh, and Tony slumped to the grass, gasping.

“You’re weak, Gabriel,” Aldrich said scornfully from above Tony, “but still useful. Bag him.”

Still gasping for air that wasn’t coming, Tony scrambled for his phone, barely managing to tap out the emergency code before something slammed into his head and he was out cold.
Tony woke with a splutter, coughing as cold water ran down his nose and mouth. His chest gave a bone-deep throb and his head was pounding, most of the pain located on the side.

Blinking, he cleared the water blurring his vision, trying to bring up his hands to wipe off his face, only to be brought up short when he realized his hands were tied behind his back through the bars of a chair.

“Wakey, wakey, Tony,” he heard Tiberius’s voice sing.

Groaning softly, Tony dropped his chin, scrunching his brow as he tried to deal with his headache from being knocked out. “Shut up.” Shaking his head and suffering through a wave of dizziness, Tony opened his eyes, his eyes taking a few seconds to focus on the sight of Castiel similarly tied to a chair directly across from him.

The room they were in was dark save for the yellowish lights illuminating the space. The walls were a grimy gray, and the floor was absolutely filthy with black dust everywhere. Something about that set off faint alarms in Tony, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on why.

“You sure you didn’t break his ribs?” he heard Tiberius ask someone.

“They’re just bruised,” Aldrich’s voice answered; Tony felt fingers play at the hairs of his nape, eliciting a shiver of disgust from him. “I do know how to moderate my strength.”

“Don’t touch me.” Tony jerked his head away from Aldrich’s fingers.

“Don’t worry.” Aldrich moved into his line of sight, mouth curled in disgust. “There’s nothing about you that attracts me.”

Tony found his own lips curling in response, and he purposefully looked away from Aldrich, focusing on where Tiberius was standing right by Castiel. “What are you doing, Ty?”

“Oh, this wasn’t planned,” Tiberius said cheerfully, grinning. “Imagine my surprise when I was out and about one morning and saw dear little Castiel being picked up one Tony Stark. I just had to find out what my dear brother was doing here.” His hand came to squeeze Castiel’s shoulder.

Castiel’s head jerked in surprise, his eyes narrowing.

“Oh, didn’t expect that, did you?” Tiberius’s grinned broadened, and he straightened, taking his hand off Castiel’s shoulder. “No, I suppose you wouldn’t,” he continued. “A bit human now, aren’t you?”

“Tiberius,” Tony said in a low, dangerous tone, “what the hell is going on?”

“Shh, Gabriel.” Tiberius put a finger to his lips.

Tony jerked back in surprise at the name. How did he know?

“You really should tell your friends to keep things private,” Tiberius continued in a conversational tone. “In the middle of a party? Anyone could overhear.”

Damn Reed. Tony had known that would come back to bite him in the ass. “I’ll be sure to let him know,” he bit out, fixing Tiberius with a cold glare.

“Just as human as the rest of us, aren’t you, Gabe?” Tiberius smirked, seemingly uncaring of Tony’s simmering fury.

“Who are you?” Castiel asked, glaring up at Tiberius.
“I’m hurt you don’t recognize me, Castiel.” Tiberius moved to stand in-between them. “After all, I was your superior for such a long time.”

It took only a breath, and then Castiel’s eyes widened in obvious recognition. “Zachariah?”

“Ring-ding-ding! We have a winner!” Tiberius shot Castiel finger guns, his grin sharpening.

“You’re dead,” Castiel said, eyes wide. “Dean killed you.”

Tiberius’s – Zachariah – face twisted in anger. “Oh, he did. Said yes to Michael and then turned around and stabbed me through the throat. Winchesters – absolutely no manners.”

“You’re one to talk,” Castiel said venomously. “What was it you did before? Took Sam’s lungs away and gave Dean cancer?”

Tiberius rolled his eyes. “All in the name of the job,” he dismissed. “How else was I going to get their cooperation? After all, you failed! But then,” he continued, his eyes hardening, “you never really tried.”

“You were wrong,” Castiel stated firmly, jaw set. “Dare I follow orders from a menagerie of liars?”

Tiberius’s mouth twisted. “You always were amusing,” he said flatly. “Always curious, always asking questions, always wondering. You never listened! Centuries of planning gone down the drain, because of you!” The last word was a shout. “Because you and those moronic apes decided that paradise was too good for you!”

“Because we have free will,” Castiel fired back, “because it wasn’t written in the cards. You manipulated them and claimed it was fate, but it was nothing more than the machinations of jealous children.”

Tiberius swelled angrily, cheeks flushed, when Aldrich cut in, “Zachariah, enough. This is how Castiel works. Instills doubt and lets it grow like a seed. Only to carve it right out when it doesn’t grow the way he wants.” Aldrich tilted his head, gazing at Castiel. “Isn’t that right, Castiel?”

Castiel stared up at him, confusion written all over his face. “No.”

Tiberius had recovered and was smirking at Tony now. “It doesn’t matter. Can’t do anything about it here.” He turned back to Castiel. “Which is where you come in.”

Castiel’s brow furrowed in obvious confusion, though he said nothing

“Our newest arrival!” Tiberius said cheerily. “Fresh off the press in his very own vessel, unlike the rest of us sorry saps.”

“I can’t take you back,” Castiel protested.

“But he can.” Tiberius pointed at Tony, who abruptly found his hair fisted by Aldrich, whose eyes were burning orange.

Tony swallowed, willing himself not to show any pain. “If I could, I would’ve sent Castiel back yesterday.”

“Our esteemed archangel,” Tiberius continued, heedless of Tony’s objection.

“I’m not anything!” Tony snarled furiously, rocking forward despite Aldrich’s hold on his hair. A second later he inhaled sharply as Aldrich wrenched upwards.
“Be careful how you speak,” Aldrich cautioned, his fingers just a tad bit too hot. His neck was swirling orange, and his irises similarly so.

“What did you do to yourself?” Tony demanded.

Aldrich smirked, head tilting to the side. “Extremis really is a marvel,” he remarked casually. “Not quite what I had before, but infinitely better than being one of the mud monkeys.” Out of the corner of Tony’s eye, he saw Castiel startle at the insult. “They’re so…messy.”

“Uriel?” Castiel breathed, eyes wide. “You, too?”

“Oh yes, Castiel,” Aldrich snapped, those orange eyes cutting to him. “Anael may have killed me, but I woke up here. Like Zachariah; like Gabriel here.” His fingers tightened.

“You family is messed up,” Tony hissed, regretting it immediately after as Aldrich suddenly slammed his fist into his already bruised ribs. Tony hadn’t even seen it coming.

“You family, too, Gabriel,” Aldrich hissed, “no matter that you left us in the dust millennia ago.”

“For good reason apparently,” Tony wheezed, hoping that nothing had been fractured. He just had to hold on long enough for the Avengers to come.

“You always were a coward,” Tiberius said softly, watching him without pity. “Following along like a soldier to the beat—”

“You were no different!” Castiel snapped, enraged. “Or were you acting on your own initiative instead of the orders of Raphael and Michael? Be careful what stones you toss, Zachariah, lest the glass house you break is your own.”

“As if you were any better, soldier,” Tiberius sneered. “Unquestioning, obedient—”

“You said I wasn’t,” Castiel said, eyes bright. “Can’t have it both ways. Was I an obedient soldier who followed orders? Or was I the one who rebelled and threw your plans down the drain?”

“Obedient to yourself and the mud monkeys,” Aldrich said. “You always were too soft, Castiel.”

“Perhaps.” Castiel kept his chin high. “Or maybe I was just following our Father’s last orders. Which you all carelessly disregarded because you think humans are lesser.”

“Like you were thinking of that,” Tiberius scoffed. “No, the only thing on your mind was the Righteous Man, whom you listened to over the calls of your family.”

Castiel’s eyes glittered. “Maybe.” His smile was cold. “You’ll never know regardless.”

“I’m sure I can find out,” Tiberius said, reaching out and fist his hand in Castiel’s dark hair, pulling his head back. “I seem to recall a certain someone singing like a bird in our reeducation program. And given how much less…resilient you are now, I think it would be most interesting to hear what you have to say.”

“I’ve been to Hell and back, faced down the likes of Lucifer and lived to tell the tale, and swallowed the denizens of Purgatory whole,” Castiel breathed, unflinchingly meeting Tiberius’s gaze. “But go on and try.” The corner of his mouth curled into a smirk. “You’ll not get anything from me.”

Tiberius reeled back, a mask of pure fury on his face. “Maybe not from you.” His voice was dangerously low. “But what if we do this?” He snapped his fingers, pointing back at Aldrich.
Tony barely had time to wonder what was going on before Aldrich struck him across the face, whipping his head to the side with the force of the blow. His head rang with the impact.

He had no time to recover when he was brutally punched in the stomach, just enough force used to avoid rupturing anything but enough so that Tony felt like throwing up.

“Are you his lap dog, Uriel?” he heard Castiel ask in a furious tone. “Going from killing our brethren in the name of Lucifer to following the orders of a lowly human?”

“What makes you think I’m human like Gabriel there?” Tiberius drawled.

Aldrich hadn’t hit him again, so Tony took the chance and straightened out, working his sore jaw as he turned his head to face Castiel. His face was one large throbbing bruise, and he had no doubt that it was going to look horrible tomorrow.

“You’re going to regret this,” Tony said, pinning Tiberius with a hard stare. “Painfully.”

Tiberius gave him an unimpressed glance. “You were once something to be feared, but now you are no better than the rest of those animals out there. Regardless of what you were before, it only matters what you are now.”

“Are you even hearing yourself, Ty?” Tony snapped his mouth at Aldrich’s hand when the other moved to silence him. “What the hell were you when we met? An angel? Or human?”

“I have ascended,” Tiberius sneered, standing proudly.

Tony caught sight of Aldrich rolling his eyes where Tiberius couldn’t see it, though the other quickly slapped Tony’s face away when he caught him watching.

Restraining a pained whimper, Tony squeezed his eyes shut, desperately trying to relax his face. He’d taken in a deep breath when the metal door slammed open and a man with tattoos covering every visible inch of his body save for his head almost fell in.

“The Avengers!” was all the man said breathlessly, skin and eyes simmering orange.

Tony’s mouth curled into a pained but triumphant grin when Tiberius shot him an accusingly furious look. “Looks like your time’s run out, Zachariah.”

Tiberius gestured for the other man to get back out, shooting Aldrich a look that Tony couldn’t decipher before Aldrich also left.

“I’m not done with you yet, Castiel,” Tiberius said, giving Castiel a venomous glare.

“Does it look like I care?” Castiel fired back, voice similarly venomous.

“You should.” Tiberius backed up to the open door, taking something that Aldrich handed him. “You said my time’s run out, Gabriel?” He smirked, pulling something out of the black device he was holding. “So’s yours.”

The door slammed shut seconds after the black cylindrical device Tiberius threw into the room landed between Tony and Castiel.

Tony lost his breath upon seeing what it was. “Oh shit.”

“What?” Castiel demanded, tugging ineffectively at his bonds. “What is it?”
Tony looked up at him, fear written all over his face. “I’m sorry, Castiel; I’m so sorry—”

The grenade that Tiberius had thrown into the room exploded.

Chapter End Notes

Keep in mind, the next chapter will be up on Monday, though whether there'll be any answers in it isn't very likely...

Several of you made extremely accurate guesses as to Tiberius's and Aldrich's identities, and I am extraordinarily pleased with myself that I managed to nail their characters to the point that you managed to guess that Zachariah was Tiberius and Uriel was Aldrich.

So...I have no regrets for how I ended this... *slips into bunker*
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

If you guys thought that cliffhanger was bad, it gets WORSE. I'm sure you remember the cliffies of the last story...

Now, if you thought this chapter might alleviate the cliffhanger of the last one, you might find yourself mistaken. HOWEVER, there is no major character death (besides, it's Supernatural. If there were, it'd be entirely temporary, I assure you. Besides, I'd also warn for major character death; that'd be just cruel of me to drop it on you like that without warning.

To the anon who was wondering about the Tesseract, it is indeed still in zero space. And no one can get to it at the moment, so it's quite safe where it is.

The morning after Bucky’s arrival, Steve woke up inordinately cheerful. Even what was going on with Tony wasn’t enough to destroy his spirits. Bucky was alive, and he was here. That was all that really mattered. It was Steve’s wildest hopes come true, and it didn’t even matter that Bucky couldn’t remember beyond vague impressions and general ideas.

Humming to himself, Steve showered and dressed, briefly considered grabbing another change of clothes for Castiel before deciding to ask the other if he needed it, and then went upstairs to see if Bucky was up. He had no doubt that Tony was already up and about, but he didn’t necessarily want to see him; he had no idea what he would even begin to say.

In the end, it turned out it didn’t even matter. Tony wasn’t even there when Steve entered the living room. Neither was Bucky. Only Jarvis and the kids were around, and Jarvis had a faint frown on his face. The kids were busy scribbling and doing something on their tablets.

“Jarvis?” Steve asked, concerned. “Everything all right?”

Jarvis gave him a faint half-smile in response, shaking his head lightly. “Yes, Captain.”

“Okay,” Steve answered dubiously, pursing his lips.

“He’s upset that Dad didn’t take him with them,” Dummy said candidly, sticking his tongue out at Jarvis, who gave him a reprimanding glare. “They went to the park,” he continued.

“Tony and Castiel?”

Jarvis sighed, ruffling Dummy’s hair in chastisement. “Yes. I have been tracking Mr. Stark’s phone to Central Park. They hope to find some indication of what sent Castiel here.”

Steve raised his eyebrows. “But you don’t think they will.”

“I find it doubtful,” Jarvis said honestly. “Ever since the close shave with the Tesseract and more recently with the Leviathans, Dr. Banner has continued to periodically sweep the city for strange energy signatures. I’ve checked the reports for the night Castiel reportedly woke up here, but there
were no strange energy signatures signaling that someone from another visitor traveled here. And from Dr. Richards’s research, inter-universal travel does give off a signature.”

“So they’ve gone out for nothing?”

“I suspect Mr. Stark knows this, but he wished to vacate the premises.” Jarvis raised his eyebrows meaningfully.

Steve flinched despite himself, ducking his head. “He shouldn’t have to.”

“There are a great many things Mr. Stark shouldn’t have to do, but he does them nonetheless,” Jarvis said wearily. “It is his nature.”

“Yeah.” Steve’s mind turned over to Tony’s hospitality, the way he’d given Steve a home even though he really didn’t have to. He could’ve ignored Steve and gone his own way; he hadn’t had to shelter Loki; he hadn’t had to give them all a home in his tower. But he had.

“No matter,” Jarvis continued in a cheery tone. “Have you eaten yet, Captain?”

“Ah, no…” Steve had hoped to eat it with Bucky, but now he wasn’t so sure that Bucky wasn’t eating breakfast with Natasha on her floor.

“I think there are still eggs leftover from Mr. Stark’s cooking.”

“Tony cooked?”

“He forgot the salt,” Butterfingers said solemnly, taking the pencil from Dummy’s hand and sticking a pad in his face.

“Then I guess that means there’s still some there for me to use,” Steve said, smiling at her. “I’ll leave you guys to whatever you’re doing.”

“We’re making a game!” Dummy said brightly, tongue sticking out slightly as he squinted at the screen in concentration.

“It’s not done yet,” You added, fingers tapping on his tablet.

“You’ll show me when it’s done then?” Steve grinned at their exuberant nods before he turned and headed to the kitchen to make something quick.

In the end he grabbed two protein bars just in case they’d have a team breakfast. It probably wasn’t very likely considering current affairs, but it had become a habit since moving in, so Steve was still holding out hope.

In the few minutes he’d left Tony’s AIs alone, Butterfingers and You had broken into a furious whispering match and were jabbing at the one tablet between them while Dummy had a look of intense concentration on his face and seemed to be painstakingly writing something down.

“Keeping out of it?” Steve asked Jarvis, who was sitting on the couch with a fond expression.

“If I interfere, the game will be complete in five minutes if I physically put it together,” Jarvis said fondly. “Five seconds if I do it otherwise.” He flickered his fingers up to the ceiling to emphasize what he meant.

Steve nodded, halfway through his bar and grimacing at the taste. He’d had to grab pineapple, didn’t he.
Butterfingers and You had stopped squabbling and were both now furiously tapping away at the tablet by the time Steve managed to choke down the last of his pineapple-flavored protein bar that Tony had probably stashed in the cupboard as a joke; he decided against eating the second one after seeing that it was apparently pizza flavored.

He knew they didn’t make pizza-flavored protein bars.

Two minutes later, all thought of nastily flavored protein bars went flying out Steve’s head when Jarvis’s head snapped up, his eyes taking on that familiar faraway glint.

He blinked, standing in one swift motion and turning to Steve even as machinery clinked together on the podium outside, assembling the Iron Man armor. “Mr. Stark has entered his emergency code.” His tone was carefully blank, indicating that Jarvis was really panicking but preferred not to show it.

Steve’s heart went cold. “Is he still in Central Park?” he demanded, mind snapping to where his uniform was.

“Yes, but I don’t know for how much longer.” Jarvis was already striding towards the glass doors to outside, craning his head back to look at Steve. “I will transmit the feed to you, Captain.” The window darkened as the camera feed from the Iron Man armor blinked to life. Seconds later, the same suit careened off into the distance, repulsors bright.

The camera feed was dizzying to look at, buildings flying past almost faster than Steve could focus. Even when the green foliage of Central Park entered the frame Jarvis didn’t slow down, and Steve wondered at what the people were thinking about Iron Man tearing through the sky.

Second later, the view of the camera zoomed in dangerously close to the trees before dropping through the branches. Then all movement halted as Jarvis landed on the ground. Readings popped up on the screen that Steve didn’t understand, but they quickly disappeared into the ether as Jarvis stalked around agitatedly.

Then, abruptly, he halted, the feed narrowing in on the sight of a familiar cell phone and sunglasses lying on the grass. There was no sign of Castiel or Tony or what had happened to them.

“Shit,” Steve breathed, mind already whirring about possible plans to chase after the kidnappers.

“Captain,” JARVIS’s dangerously quiet tone said, “please be prepared to leave the moment I return.”

“Steve?” Dummy asked, voice wavering.

Barely having the presence of mind to give him a comforting smile, Steve rushed into the already open elevator. “JARVIS, wake the others.”

“I have already done so.”

Steve couldn’t begrudge JARVIS the terse answer given that panic and worry was surging through him as well. Luckily it didn’t matter if his fingers were shaky or if he used too much strength to pull on his uniform; the material had been reinforced several times over by Tony after he’d seen the first uniform that S.H.I.E.L.D. had given him and broken down into helpless laughter because of how skintight it was.

Whoever had taken Tony and Castiel would be finding themselves in great trouble the moment the Avengers found them.

The rest of the team had assembled in the living room by the time Steve joined them, and Jarvis was
already there, the faceplate drawn back to reveal his tense face.

Bucky was there, too, frowning softly as he studied the cell phone and sunglasses Jarvis had retrieved and lain on the coffee table.

When Natasha saw Steve, she turned to Jarvis and asked, “Do you have a way to track him without his phone?”

“He’s still wearing his watch,” Jarvis said. “There is a tracking chip in it.”

Clint rubbed his eyes, looking rather terribly hungover but still alert despite that. Thank God for S.H.I.E.L.D. training. “Do you know who did it?”

“Central Park has no cameras,” Jarvis answered crisply, “and there were no witnesses given where it occurred. They had already left the premises by the time I arrived, and since Mr. Stark gave the alert three minutes before, they evidently have the means to move quickly.”

“So they could be anywhere,” Bruce said, brow pinched in worry.

“They are still in New York,” Jarvis said. “The tracking chip in Mr. Stark’s watch is on highway two-seventy-eight. I would suggest we move out quickly.”

“Quinjet’s flashy, but it’s the best we’ve got for now,” Steve said, catching everyone’s attention. “Jarvis, go on ahead and detain them if you can. No casualties if you can help it. We’ll be right behind you.”

“You will be approximately five minutes behind me,” Jarvis said, “but I understand your point.” He gave the silent kids a look. “Ms. Potts and Colonel Rhodes will be up shortly to supervise you.”

As Jarvis headed out, Steve turned to Clint. “Are you good to go?”

“I may be slightly hungover, Cap, but that doesn’t mean I still can’t kick ass.”

“I’m coming with,” Bucky said, his expression unyielding.

Rather than answer instinctively with an affirmative, Steve forced himself to think strategically and looked inquiringly at Natasha, who knew Bucky best right now. She gave him a firm nod, glancing back at Bucky with a smile.

“Then buckle up,” Steve said. “We’ve got a teammate to rescue.”

This assumption turned out to be rather problematic the moment they arrived as a rather furious Jarvis was threatening the driver of the truck he had pulled off the highway and dumped on top of a building. The back of the truck was open, showing nothing more than boxes and crates of art supplies.

There was once again no sign of Tony or Castiel.

“Iron Man, report,” Steve ordered, jumping out of the Quinjet.

Jarvis just threw something at Steve, who caught it with no small amount of trepidation. A second later showed just why Jarvis was so furious; it was Tony’s watch.

“So he’s not here,” Steve said, feeling Natasha come up to his side to look down at the watch.
“No,” Jarvis said, disgust in his tone. He throttled the driver again, who seemed less inclined to pee his pants and more likely to faint now that he had the Avengers glaring him down. “Where is he?” he demanded.

“They just gave me the watch,” the driver said, eyes flickering between Jarvis and the Avengers. “Gave me some cash and told me to drive.”

“Who?” The voice synthesizer of the suit made Jarvis’s voice even more sinister. “Who was it?”

“Some guy!” the driver yelped, flinching back. “Blond hair, blue eyes, seemed rather sleazy.”

Natasha pinned him with a chilly glare. “And you listened to him?”

The driver paled at receiving the attention of Black Widow. “It was money,” he squeaked.

There were countless men who were blond-haired and blue-eyed in the city, Steve included. They’d never find Tony at this rate.

“Does Castiel have a phone?” Natasha asked Jarvis sharply.

Jarvis made an impatient sound. “Yes, but it’s in a manmade dead zone; there’s nothing to track.” He rattled the driver against the side of the truck again. “Where did the transaction take place?” he demanded.

The driver told him, and Steve had no idea why this information was even useful to Jarvis as the other let the driver go and stepped back, putting some space between them much to the driver’s obvious relief.

“Aldrich Killian,” Jarvis said suddenly, shifting to look at Steve. “He did not take the cameras into account.”

“Wasn’t he the one who Tony was talking to?” Natasha asked, brow furrowed.

“Along with Tiberius Stone,” Steve said, gritting his teeth. He’d known that those two were nothing but bad news. “What have you got on him, Iron Man?”

After a few more breathless minutes, during which the driver slid down the side of his truck to sit down heavily on the ground, face pale and sweaty, Steve itched to do something. But he couldn’t. He could only wait for Jarvis to come back with anything he could find on Stone and Killian so they could go after them.

“Tiberius Stone recently acquired a warehouse at Gowanus Bay,” Jarvis said finally. “Witnesses have been reporting rather strange happenings around the area for months, but given restrictions imposed by Stone, there have been no investigations into the matter.”

“That’s where we’re going next,” Steve decided, nodding. He gestured for the others to head back into the Quinjet. “Are you coming with us?”

“I shall go ahead,” Jarvis said, already lifting off several feet. “I will see you there, Captain.”

“Wait,” the driver called after Steve, sounding rather faint. “How do I get down?”

It was a valid question seeing as how the roof of this building had no way into the building itself, but Steve wasn’t feeling rather charitable to the man who had taken a watch and money without asking any questions. “Call the police.”
Bucky was smirking when the hatch closed behind Steve. “‘Call the police’?”

Steve rolled his eyes. “It’s what they do nowadays.”

“The police is useless,” Bucky asserted, still smirking.

“Play nice, James,” Natasha said from the front, copiloting next to Clint.

“I’m nice,” Bucky said, leaning against the side as the Quinjet took off in the direction Jarvis had gone. “I’m always nice.”

“That’s like me saying I’m always calm,” Bruce said, buckled in nice and safe.

Bucky gave Bruce a curious look. “You’re not?”

Bruce snorted. “I turn into a giant green rage monster.”

Bucky tilted his head to the side, absentmindedly gripping onto a handle when the Quinjet veered sharply to the side. “I think I’ve seen pictures.”

“Probably,” Bruce said, not looking at all ashamed of this. “I hope they got my good side.”

“Settle down, boys,” Natasha said, glancing back at them. “We’ve arrived.”

Jarvis was waiting outside the large warehouse, several unconscious people lying on top of a large crate next to him. They didn’t seem to be injured aside from their lack of consciousness.

“There are no cameras inside,” Jarvis said without preamble as Steve went up to him.

“Given that the men here are in possession of unusual abilities that are too similar to be natural, I would think that we have justifiable cause to enter,” Jarvis answered, gesturing to the unconscious men. “I was forced to sedate them.”

“Time for some smashing?” Bruce asked, fingers going to the hem of his shirt. His eyes were on the warehouse.

“Time to smash,” Steve agreed.

Five seconds and one tossed shirt later, Hulk stood there in all his glory, glaring at the warehouse furiously. With an earth-shattering roar, Hulk took to the air, coming down with a devastating crash on top of the warehouse, punching straight through the roof like it was paper.

“I wasn’t expecting that,” Bucky said, blinking rapidly.

“It takes some getting used to,” Natasha said mildly, her bracelets flaring blue as she tested them one last time.

“Orders, Cap?” Clint asked Steve.

Steve opened his mouth, only to be cut off by a devastating roar and implosion of sound as the warehouse literally exploded in a rain of debris and fire. Instinctively bringing up his shield and shielding the next person to him, who turned out to be Clint, Steve huddled under the small protection afforded him by the vibranium-steel mixture.
“What the hell,” Clint gasped as the rain of debris stopped. “There was a fucking bomb?”

There was a displeased roar from Hulk, and a veritable tornado of flying metal and steel as he dug himself out of the mess.

With a whine of repulsors, Jarvis took off, angling low to the ground and veering round the corner where the warehouse used to stand.

“This isn’t good,” Natasha said a moment later, pushing Bucky away from where he’d crouched over her.

Jarvis’s voice crackled into life over the intercom. “There are survivors attempting to escape, Captain.”

Steve didn’t even have to say anything before they all broke into a dead sprint, jumping over stray debris that was still smoking or glowing orange. It was immediately apparent why Jarvis had canvassed the surrounding area as the warehouse stood in the middle of a strip of land between two small bodies of water, and the people they were looking for had escaped the warehouse at the opposite side, out of sight of the Avengers.

Jarvis had his hands full with several of them, who were literally breathing fire and punching out the armor with absolutely no problem. That left two others free to run off with the distraction their lackeys were giving them.

Steve usually moderated his speed and strength when fighting others, too used to not wanting to hurt regular humans with his superhuman strength. It had become ingrained habit now to keep pace with his regular teammates, so he was completely taken off guard by the sudden burst of speed Bucky put on as he dashed off after the two escapees.

“Back up Iron Man,” Steve ordered quickly, not bothering to check if Clint and Natasha had heard, because he knew they had. He put on his own burst of speed, chasing after Bucky and the two men who were responsible for what had happened.

There was no way the men they were chasing after were anything but superhuman as they were still outpacing them without any effort. Steve grit his teeth, pushing himself harder. Bucky had the lead on him and was inching closer to the target.

What happened next happened so quickly Steve had to go over it afterward to confirm that it really had taken place. Bucky seemed to put on a final burst of absolutely inhuman speed before jumping and throwing himself at the men. He knocked down one and then slammed into the other, bowling both of them over and giving Steve enough time to catch up and help.

Now that the men had stopped running, Steve could see that Bucky had pinned Killian and Stone down. Killian was looking rather orange, and Steve was faintly alarmed to see that his skin was glowing with the unusual color. Stone was rather more normally colored, but his nails had lengthened into claws and he struck out at Bucky.

Steve slammed into him, sending them both rolling. Bracing himself on his knees, he brought back his shield and slammed it into Stone’s head, knocking him unconscious. Then, panting, he looked up in time to see Bucky punch out Killian with his left arm. Killian’s head bounced off the asphalt with the force of the blow, and Steve swore he could hear his skull crack.

Putting his hand to his earpiece, Steve said breathlessly, “We have Stone and Killian.”

“*Iron Man and I sedated these guys,*” Clint reported. “*Took all of my tranqs – the bastards just*
Heaving Stone up onto his back, Steve stood, only to see Bucky start dragging Killian by the legs across the ground.

“Bucky?” he asked, unsure.

“I have no shits to give,” Bucky said bluntly, only to look slightly startled at the words that had come out of his mouth. He gave Steve a perplexed look that turned into a faint grin before he continued dragging Killian across the rough asphalt and over smoking debris to where the others were waiting.

Steve kept Stone slung over his shoulder, though he was less than careful with how he cushioned the man’s body. Given what he had just seen Stone do, he had no doubt Stone could handle it.

“You guys should go for the Olympics,” Clint informed Steve once he came back into earshot, leaning against Jarvis. “I swear you guys were a blur.”

“I’m pretty sure I’d fail their drug tests,” Bucky answered, dropping Killian’s leg.

Unable to joke, Steve let Stone slide off his back and to the ground next to Killian, looking back at the wreckage of the warehouse, a stone lodged in his throat. “Iron Man,” he managed, “is there…” He couldn’t say the rest.

Jarvis understood nonetheless. “Aside from us, there are no life signs in the area. I have already scanned the remnants, but I have seen no bodies with the correct body temperature.” He nudged one of the nameless lackey’s bodies. “These men run considerably higher body temperatures than any human I have ever seen.”

“Considering one was literally breathing fire, I’m not surprised,” Clint muttered.

“They didn’t seem to like electricity one way or another,” Natasha said, shrugging.

Hulk was still in the wreckage, digging through rather messily and throwing large chunks of debris through the air that landed with loud splashes in the water. It was quite impressive.

“Is he trying to find them?” Bucky asked tonelessly, standing next to Natasha.

“I have tried to ask,” Jarvis said, “but he seems disinclined to answer beyond ‘stupid question, metal man.’” His impression of Hulk’s vocal intonations was spot on and would’ve served to make Steve laugh at any other time.

“Is S.H.I.E.L.D. on their way?” Steve asked. He didn’t doubt that they would be considering Iron Man had doubtlessly been sighted flying to and from Central Park before the Quinjet had torn through the skies. It wasn’t exactly subtle.

“They have dispatched Agent Coulson and several other agents, yes,” Jarvis confirmed. “They shall be here momentarily.”

“Momentarily” turned out to be ten minutes, during which Hulk had systematically dismantled what seemed to be half of the smoking and smoldering ruins of the warehouse, refusing any and all help from the rest of the team. Phil seemed rather nonplussed upon finding Hulk doing so, but he said nothing in favor of having his agents take Stone and Killian into the Quinjet. They came out again to take hold of the other men that the Avengers had taken care of.

“There’s been no sign of Stark or his guest?” Phil asked Steve.
Steve didn’t question how Phil knew of Castiel. “No.”

“It’s possible they weren’t in there,” Phil remarked, tie fluttering in the breeze that smelled of dirty water.

“They were taken by Killian and Stone, and they blew up the warehouse to hide evidence,” Steve disagreed.

“Then we’ll wait until Hulk finds the bodies.” Phil didn’t seem to think that there was any chance that Tony and Castiel were alive.

Steve bit back his instinctive protest. There was little chance that they were actually all right. The warehouse had blown up pretty spectacularly, and the only reason Killian and Stone were still alive was because they’d gotten out before.

Ten minutes later, Hulk had thrown most of the rest of the warehouse into the bay. Steve could already see Phil mentally tallying up the paperwork that this fiasco would require.

“Do you think he’ll let us in close enough to determine where the blast originated from?” Phil asked.

The question ended up being moot as Hulk let out a devastated roar before sitting down heavily, prodding at the mass of metal and debris that he had yet to move.

Uncertain, Steve pressed forward, picking his way through the remnants of what Hulk hadn’t thrown out to come to a stop by the other’s enormous legs. “Hulk?”

“Not here,” Hulk grunted, eyes devastated.

“Can you smell them?”


Steve patted his leg in the best attempt at comfort he could give. “Thanks, Hulk. We can take it from here.”

Letting out another sad grunt, Hulk closed his eyes. Seconds later, he started turning pinker and shrinking down rapidly to Bruce, who found himself rather taken aback to find himself sitting in what looked like a mini-warzone.

“Steve?” Bruce asked, sounding dazed.


“We didn’t find them?” Bruce murmured, rubbing at his face even as he staggered against Steve.

Steve swallowed thickly, looking back to where the others were waiting. “No. No, we didn’t.”

Several hours later found them all on the Helicarrier awaiting S.H.I.E.L.D.’s report as to what had happened at the warehouse. Fury hadn’t seem very impressed with Steve’s rather vague report as to who Castiel was and what his relation was to Tony, but he’d let it lie for rather obvious reasons, namely the fact that they had two volatile super humans in detainment. They were currently sedated since they weren’t quite sure if their detainment facilities would be enough.

Fury had eyeballed Bucky skeptically but had subsided upon Natasha and Steve vouching for him.
Phil had promptly fallen over himself at having another legendary figure in his presence and then gotten some cards that Steve hadn’t even known existed. Bucky had signed them with a perturbed expression.

They’d all had lunch given that no one had had time for a proper breakfast. Bucky and Natasha had literally jumped out of bed, while Clint claimed he had fallen out gracefully upon hearing JARVIS’s alarm. Bruce had already been up but hadn’t eaten anything as he’d been too absorbed in some lab results.

S.H.I.E.L.D.’s food wasn’t bad, but it also wasn’t something Steve would like to eat every day. Judging from Bucky’s disgusted face as he ate the suspicious looking meatloaf, he thought the same. Natasha had just seemed amused and teased Bucky about becoming picky since leaving HYDRA.

Nonetheless, by the time Fury had the analysis and report in hand, Steve was feeling pretty impatient and more inclined to head down to Killian and Stone and start punching. Judging from the rather alarmed look on Phil’s face, he suspected that his more violent tendencies might have shown on his face.

Given this, Fury wasted no time in dispensing copies to all of them before opening his own and saying, “Our analysts have speculated that given where the explosion originated, Stark and Castiel were both in the immediate blast zone. Seeing as how there were no bodies despite the meticulous excavation efforts by the Hulk, they believe that their bodies were vaporized.”

“But it was a grenade,” Clint objected, frowning down at the report. “A grenade exacerbated by the gunpowder all over the place and a remote bomb that was detonated about the same time by the immediate explosion. That doesn’t have enough power to vaporize human bodies.”

“Be that as it may,” Fury said pleasantly, “there were still no bodies aside from the remnants that our crew fished out from the bay. And since I’m sure DNA evidence will show that none of the limbs belong to our two missing persons, the bodies we are looking for were vaporized.”

“Oh,” Phil added, “they were never in the warehouse to begin with.”

“We can’t make that assumption without asking Stone and Killian,” Natasha said, staring at the closed folder in front of her.

“And until we find out how to safely detain them, we’re not waking them up,” Fury said firmly.

“If that’s the case,” Bruce said mildly, “then I’m sure you won’t mind if I join in.” He raised an eyebrow, giving Fury a bland smile. “Best if we solve this quickly.”

“Why were they even after your friend?” Bucky asked, getting everyone’s attention. “This isn’t a businessman’s style, and Stone’s definitely a businessman. They don’t do things personally.”

“I suspect we won’t know the answer until we ask them,” Jarvis said flatly, having not touched his own report. “I will gladly add my own expertise on the matter, Dr. Banner.” He looked up at Fury. “You still have the prison that had been intended for Hulk. Would you consider putting them inside that?”

Fury didn’t look at all remorseful for having such a thing on the Helicarrier. “Without any other options, yes.”

“They’re businessmen – the two of them,” Bucky said thoughtfully, flipping through the pages in the report that also included brief backgrounds on Killian and Stone. “I don’t think it’s very likely that they’ll break out the hard way until they’ve exhausted all other options.”
“I don’t care if you’re the Winter Soldier, I’m not taking that chance with these men,” Fury said. “Jarvis, Dr. Banner, go get started. I’d like to get this mess somewhat cleaned up sometime today.”

“Highly unlikely, sir,” Phil noted dryly.

“I know,” Fury said, rolling his one eye. “But I can dream.”

It was another several hours before Jarvis and Bruce finished running all the tests they could think of on Killian and Stone. Since Jarvis was an AI, this was a lot of tests, and the sheer volume of data that it would result in was staggering. Steve had no idea where to even begin with what they were looking for, but thankfully that wasn’t his job.

That also meant he was completely bored because there was nothing for him to do on the Helicarrier aside from maybe cause some agents to faint because he surprised them. Clint had disappeared into the vents sometime around the second hour and Steve could occasionally hear startled shrieks from hapless agents.

Bucky had already fallen flat on his back a total of two times as no one had warned him about the slippery floors. He’d taken to glaring at the floors as if they’d personally offended him. By the third hour he’d started skating and had grabbed Natasha by her waist and dragged her into it; the last Steve had seen the two had collided with a startled Maria Hill, who hadn’t seemed at all pleased to be laid out flat on the floor.

Not wanting to be at odds with an organization of spies, Steve had confiscated a tablet from a star-struck agent and started playing Flappy Bird, only to realize that there was a reason that JARVIS had refused to let him download it. Phil found him furiously tapping away at the screen and promptly left the room after hearing his peeved curses. Steve wasn’t disturbed after that.

When Jarvis and Bruce reappeared from their testing, the two of them seemed rather surprised to find a visibly vexed Steve still tapping away at the tablet, a madly grinning and completely filthy Clint, and Bucky and Natasha giggling like loons, having escaped Hill’s wrath. Both Fury and Phil had placed themselves as far from the team as possible.

“Report?” Fury demanded the moment the two entered and paused, shocked at the sight.

“Er…” Bruce eyed his team warily, visibly perplexed when he stopped at Steve halfheartedly tapping at his tablet.

“No report yet, Director,” Jarvis picked up for him, giving Steve a pitying look that the other stuck his tongue out to in response. “We will have the results in the morning.”

“Do you expect us to put you up for the night?” Fury raised an eyebrow, looking unimpressed.

“That would cut down on travel time,” Jarvis said agreeably.

“I’ve already had no less than a dozen complaints about your team,” Fury said, rounding on Steve. Steve scowled down at his failed game before closing the app down and shutting the tablet off. The battery was in the red anyway. “I know nothing,” he answered, finally meeting Fury’s eyes.

“Of course you don’t,” Fury said long-sufferingly, eyeballing the tablet.

Further questions as to the mischief the Avengers had gotten up to while on the Helicarrier were stalled by Hill’s face popping up on the screen behind Fury, saying, “There’s an incoming call from
Pepper Potts, sir. She’s requesting to speak with you.”

Fury gestured for Hill to put her through, and a second later the image of Hill’s face was replaced with Pepper, who looked rather frazzled from having to deal with the kids all day with only Rhodey’s help.

“Is everyone there?” Pepper asked, eyes skimming from face to face to check. “Okay, good.” She patted back a stray strand of hair that had fallen in her face. “We have a visitor,” she continued calmly.

“Another one?” Steve asked, straightening.

“Yes.” Pepper’s eyes shifted to look at something out of frame. Her tone was pinched as she said, “She says her name is Raphael.”

Steve cracked the side of the table. “You have Raphael there with you?” he asked, his voice sounding tinny and far-off to his ears.

Pepper’s grin was slightly disbelieving. “She landed on the tower ten minutes ago in a private jet and demanded to speak to Tony.”

Fury snorted. “Sounds about right.”

“She knows Tony’s not here, right?” Steve asked hollowly.

“That doesn’t matter,” an accented voice said impatiently, pushing her face into the frame. “I want to speak with you,” she continued without preamble, eyes unerringly fixing on Steve. “And I will fly up there one way or another.”

“We’ll shoot you down,” Fury warned, eye scrutinizing Raphael carefully.

Raphael smirked, the sight eerily similar to Tony even though there was no physical resemblance between them. “I would like to see you try, Director,” she purred. “I’ll expect a ride soon.” The call blinked out.

“I’ll send a Quinjet,” Phil said, sounding resigned. “Best not to tempt fate.”

Fury waved him off, staring down Steve. “You knew of her?” he demanded.

“Tony mentioned her once on Asgard,” Steve admitted, “but I’d never seen her before.”

“She looks familiar,” Natasha commented, eyes narrowed. “I’m pretty sure I’ve seen her somewhere before.”

“Rumiko Fujikawa,” Clint said offhandedly. He shrugged in response to the surprised looks he received. “What? I read, and she’s been pretty big news in the business world as the daughter of the guy in charge of Fujikawa Industries. I think she’s become CEO since the Leviathans.”

“That’d be where I’ve seen her,” Natasha said, nodding. “She was on a magazine cover as one of the most promising CEOs since Tony Stark.”

“And apparently she’s an angel,” Fury said, sighing, sitting down heavily. “How long until she’s here, Coulson?”

“Half an hour considering where we’re at over the Atlantic,” Phil answered, a finger to his ear.
“How angry do you think she’ll be when she realizes what happened to Tony?” Bruce smiled weakly, his eyes weary.

Considering everything he knew of how angry angels could be, Steve flinched at the thought. “But she seemed to know,” he protested.

“She probably doesn’t know that he’s dead,” Phil said candidly, “but we’ll cross that bridge when she gets here. Is anyone up for coffee?”

As it was late, everyone except for Bucky, Steve, and Jarvis asked for it. Caffeine had no effect on Steve, and he suspected the same went for Bucky. In any case, Steve could stay awake for two days or more if he absolutely needed to. He crashed hard afterwards, but hopefully he wouldn’t be up that long. Jarvis tended not to imbibe any substances that could be addictive, and he didn’t sleep much anyway.

Steve didn’t begrudge the others their caffeine fix; they were all looking rather run down after the day they’d had.

In fact, after everyone had downed at least two cups of the coffee that arrived, they were all looking notably perkier. Even if Clint had placed his report over his face and rested his feet on the table to lean back in his chair. Steve was pretty sure Clint wasn’t asleep because he could do so with his eyes open, which was a truly perturbing sight the first time you saw it. And Natasha had also informed Steve that Clint had a tendency to snore if he was safe and not on a mission.

When Raphael arrived, Hill escorted her in. Then she planted herself by the door and Fury a stare that clearly told everyone that she wasn’t leaving. She did make sure the door was locked.

Raphael wasn’t quite what Steve was expecting, although he’d already gotten a small glimpse of half her face during that video call. She wasn’t very tall, but she carried herself with a presence and weight that signaled she wasn’t one to be messed with. Her black hair was cut short to her neck, and her clothes were formally casual, a soft, light blue cashmere sweater and dark blue jeans.

She gave the room a critical glance, her eyes lingering momentarily over Jarvis before she turned to Fury. “The lovely Ms. Potts has informed me that you believe Gabriel to be dead. I find this rather impossible to believe considering he’s always had more lives than a cat.”

“There was no body,” Fury said bluntly. “For him or Castiel.”

Raphael’s gaze sharpened. “Castiel?” The name was terse. “He was here as well?”

“He woke up in Central Park yesterday morning,” Jarvis explained, eyes carefully studying Raphael.

Raphael’s eyes narrowed. “Did he? Memories intact? Tell me, was he wearing a getup eerily reminiscent of a tax accountant with an atrocious brown trench coat?”

“Yes.”

“Still no fashion sense,” Raphael muttered, rolling her eyes. “So his vessel was the same,” she continued more clearly. “He didn’t die then; someone put him here.”

“What does that matter?” Fury demanded.

“It matters because every single one of us here died in our universe,” Raphael said. “We died and were reborn. I assure you that Gabriel’s previous vessel was not quite as tall as he is here, nor did he have a predilection for facial hair. Castiel’s vessel remained the same, and he arrived here only a day
ago, perfectly intact. There was an outside hand involved in his arrival, evidently meaning to unite him with Gabriel. And now you claim they are dead. I call bullshit.”

“So you think they’re alive?” Steve asked hopefully.

Raphael folded her arms across her chest. “I want to talk to whoever had them before the explosion.”

“They’re sedated,” Fury said.

“Then wake them up.”

“They breathe fire and are insanely strong,” Clint said, peeking out from behind the report.

Raphael’s lips thinned. “Who are they?”

“Tiberius Stone and Aldrich Killian,” Steve answered before Fury could lie.

Sighing, Raphael pinched her nose. “Extremis. Of course.”

“You know what they used?” Bruce asked eagerly.

“I’ve been following Killian’s papers on the subject for a matter of years,” Raphael said, “particularly after he approached my father about funding it. My father declined, but I found it interesting and kept an eye on his progress, up to when he joined with Stone. Extremis is quite volatile apparently, but considering Killian’s earlier disabilities, I’m not surprised he took it for himself. I’m more surprised that Stone decided it was worth the risk.”

She pinned Fury with a hard stare. “I want to talk with them,” she insisted.

“What use is talking to them going to do?” Fury demanded.

“They took Gabriel and Castiel for a reason,” Raphael said. “If it was just Gabriel, it would be understandable because of his standing as Tony Stark, but Castiel? No, something else is going on here. Considering who Azazel was, I’m not taking any chances. Now, are you going to let me talk to them, or will I have to do that myself?”

“Let her,” Steve said, getting Fury’s attention. “We need answers, and if Tony’s not dead…” He shrugged, a frail hope rising painfully in his chest.

“Like I said, I highly doubt he is,” Raphael said quietly. “He hid himself from the forces of Heaven for several millennia, dropping so far off the radar that we thought him dead.” She looked pained at the memory.

Fury gazed at her for a long moment, eye hard. Finally, he stood up with a clatter of the chair, sweeping his black trench coat back. “Fine,” he grumbled, turning to the door. “Let’s go.”

They took Killian and Stone off the drugs they’d been feeding them intravenously, but the two didn’t wake up until they were put in the interrogation room that Raphael insisted on. Steve found it looked an awful lot like the cheesy interrogation rooms on those cop procedural shows that Clint was so fond of, but that was probably to be expected considering who had designed the Helicarrier in the first place.

“This seems out of place on a high-tech aircraft,” Bucky muttered.

“You’ll understand once you get to know Tony,” Natasha told him. “He’s also why the floors are so slippery.”
Bucky’s eyes narrowed, and Steve just knew that once Tony was back – because they would get him back – they would probably have to deal with retaliation of some sort from Bucky.

Raphael, Stone, Killian, Steve, Bucky, and Jarvis in the armor were the ones allowed in the interrogation room given that Steve, Bucky, and Jarvis were the only two even remotely capable of subduing the two men if they went on a rampage. The rest of the team, Fury, Hill, and Phil went behind the mirror, and Steve felt vaguely uncomfortable that he couldn’t see them even though they could see him.

Bucky guarded the door with Steve, while Jarvis went to stand menacingly behind Stone and Killian. Raphael took a seat at the table, hands folded together on top of the metal surface as she waited for the two to wake up.

When they did, it was so sudden that it was like they’d never been sedated at all. One moment they were slumped over, the next they were upright and alert, eyes flickering around the room warily before fixing in on Raphael, who had an inscrutable expression on her face.

“Evening, gentlemen,” she started evenly, a thin smile flashing across her lips.

Killian narrowed his eyes briefly before grinning. “Little Rumiko, isn’t it?”

“Not so little anymore,” Raphael said simply, not rising to the bait. “Let’s get to the point before I feel like punching your faces regardless of any fancy healing factors you have. Tony Stark and Castiel. Why did you take them?”

“Above your pay grade, darling,” Stone drawled, grinning smarmily. It was that same grin that had made Steve want to punch him during the charity gala of the Fantastic Four.

Raphael ignored the slight. “Tony Stark I understand, but Castiel? You’d have no reason to take him if you were after Stark; you’d have just killed him. But you decided to take him with you, and Stark along with him. Which makes me believe that Stark wasn’t your goal; Castiel was. And since Castiel isn’t even in the system, it makes me wonder what the two of you would want with him. Fodder for your little experiment?”

Killian’s lips curled. “That useless little cretin isn’t good for anything.”

Raphael’s eyes sharpened. “And you would know.”

Stone tilted his head at her, eyes piercing. “What would you know about him?” he asked softly.

“I’m sure as much as you,” Raphael said coolly. “Which is to say not very much at all since he and Stark are both missing. Where are they?”

Stone grinned briefly. “Missing, you say? No way they could’ve survived that grenade I threw in with them, human as they both were.”

Her eyes narrowing, Raphael unlaced her fingers and sat back, resting just one hand on the table. “Curious that you say that. Like they were once not human…or like you consider yourself better?”

Killian’s eyes flared orange, his lips stretching to bare teeth. “Are we not?” he asked sleekly. “Regardless of how we were born, we’ve ascended to better. We are no longer like the mud monkeys – like the drivel Castiel associated himself with and threw everything away for,” he spat.

“Aldrich,” Stone warned, eyes flicking to him.
But it was too late, as a triumphant look flashed across Raphael’s eyes. “I never expected to see you here, Zachariah.” Her gaze flickered to Killian as she said flatly, “Uriel.”

The two looked thunderstruck, mouths falling open.


Raphael’s smile was cold. “Someone you don’t want to cross, Zachariah. Now I have your measure, I understand why Castiel. Couldn’t let it go, could you?” She tapped her fingers against the table. “But Gabriel?”

“He was a coward!” Uriel blurted, face venomous. “Hiding for millennia, refusing to help! He left us!”

Sadness flickered across Raphael’s face for only an instant before it hardened. “Be careful how you speak of him,” she said lowly. “Of all of you, he made a stand for the right decision, no matter how late it may have been.”

“You don’t think him wrong for leaving?” Uriel sneered. “The fourth archangel, and he left us high and dry!”

“Would you have wanted to stay with us squabbling like petty children?” Raphael snapped, eyes flaring. “Squabbling because we were no longer Father’s favorite? Jealous of the new child in the playground? All of us against each other because one chose to Fall, taking those who believed in his ideology with him because they chose to follow, and we were never the same again. And you blame Gabriel for leaving?”

“The oldest four led us,” Zachariah said quietly, face tight. “He had a duty, and he fled it.”

“Because we failed him,” Raphael said heavily, eyes dark. “We failed him, and he left. I don’t blame him for it, not anymore. Not with the weight of humanity on me, and I’d hoped that it would have made the two of you wiser, but apparently not.”

“All it has done,” Uriel said, chin high, “is show us what kind of mud monkeys they really are.”

“You are one of them,” Raphael said coldly, “regardless of the Extremis virus. Regardless of what you may have been before, you are human now. Respect that.”

“As if we should!” Uriel roared, throwing his chair back against the wall next to Jarvis and standing upright, skin flaring orange. “We were above all of them! Father’s favored and the most beautiful of His Creation! And He would have us bow to them! Have us worship them when they should be the ones worshipping us! And now I have the power,” he continued breathlessly, hands curling and uncurling into fists, the air around his mouth wavering with the heat he was giving off. “I have power unlike humans, and while not the same as before, it’s still enough to do this!”

Steve saw Jarvis move to restrain Uriel, but Raphael acted first. In a flash, something sizzled blue and embedded itself in Uriel’s stomach. He stiffened, eyes widening and a pained choke escaping his mouth. The orange in his skin subsided as his muscles twitched violently, electrical shocks coursing through his body; he hit the floor by the table, twitching.

Raphael stepped around the table, kneeling to yank the sword-like weapon she had used out of his stomach, uncaring of the blood she spilled.

Zachariah moved, but he was laid out flat on his back before he could touch her, Raphael having thrown him over her with a hefty twist of her torso.
“Do you think that because I am human I am weak?” Raphael snarled. “Do you think that because I am in a frail, female body that I can’t kill you where you lie? Respect your elders, younglings; I am still your superior and always will be.”

“Raphael,” Zachariah whimpered, eyes wide.

Raphael’s smile was chilling, and she stood in one smooth motion, digging her shoe into Uriel’s hand, bones snapping under the weight. “You see me now,” she said softly, “as I have seen you. You are lacking, Zachariah, and a disappointment to our Father. Both of you.” She looked down in disgust at a whimpering Uriel.

“As if you were any better,” Zachariah gasped. “Who agreed to starting the apocalypse?”

“It was I,” Raphael agreed somberly, “as it was Michael, and you, and every other high-ranking angel who decided it was time because fate decreed it. And yet it was never fate simply because the angels made it so. We were wrong, Zachariah, and I thank Father that our plans never succeeded.”

“Being human has made you weak,” Uriel managed in a weak tone, one hand clutching his stomach. It seemed to have stopped bleeding.

“Careful, Uriel.” Raphael dug her electrical sword in Uriel’s shoulder, causing him to cry out in pain as the sharp blade pierced through his skin and electricity coursed through him once more. “This human has taken both of you down, and it’s only by the grace of Gabriel’s last message that I’ll let you live.” Her eyes darkened. “And you attempted to kill him.”

“He’s dead,” Zachariah insisted.

Raphael turned slowly to him, smile cold. “If you truly think that,” she said softly, “then you are a very foolish man.”

Wrenching her sword out of Uriel’s shoulder with a sickening squelch and a strangled moan, Raphael pulled herself upright and turned to Steve and Bucky, an implacable expression on her face. “I’m done here. Do what you will with them, but don’t kill them.”

Hearing the lock click open on the door, Steve stepped aside to let her by. He shared a stunned look with Bucky, who was similarly wide-eyed at everything that had just taken place.

Regardless of what had happened today, Steve had never expected this.

What was more, what made Raphael so certain that Tony was still alive?
Chapter End Notes

Also, again not sorry for not alleviating the cliffy from the last chapter. I’d intended on making this part only one chapter, but it grew like a fungus on me so now we have two. See you Friday!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Okay, several of you were wondering about the Avengers, thinking that it was unusually callous of them to act so carefree when Tony was most likely dead. They needed to distract themselves. There was nothing they could do, and they’re all professionals. They know better than anyone that sitting around and stressing and worrying when they’re not sure of anything is going to get them nothing. So they goofed off, just to stay relaxed enough that they would be prepared for anything.

Okay, now on to the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After Raphael left the room, Zachariah and Uriel were both sedated by Jarvis and carried out by two blank-faced agents who didn’t look closely at who they were helping out. Steve and Bucky waited outside for Jarvis with the others before heading back to the conference room where Raphael had gone.

Fury looked pinched the entire way, evidently not having anticipated two more angels-turned-humans on his turf. Phil and Hill seemed impassive, though Steve had seen Phil stare after Raphael in faint fascination.

Once they were back in the room and the windows had been blacked out, Fury turned on Raphael, snapping out harshly, “You were the ones who kick-started the apocalypse in Gabriel’s world?”

Raphael didn’t flinch. “Yes.”

“Had a change of heart did you?” Fury’s voice was uncompromising.

She held her head high, lips pressed tightly together. “I won’t apologize.”

“You won’t apologize for nearly destroying the world?”

“I will not apologize to you,” Raphael snapped. “It was not your world, Nicholas Fury. I will apologize to those I have wronged, and you are not among that number.”

“What changed your mind?” Phil asked. “Why aren’t you like them?”

Raphael looked torn, eyes pained. “I am a warrior of God,” she started, “one who heals and one who destroys. The third oldest of my Father’s children, and I agreed to lead the war that would destroy my Father’s most precious creation simply because I was tired. I was tired of having no cause or reason, tired of loving an absent Father who had left us alone with no leadership save that of us – the archangels. And we were just as lost as our younger siblings, only we refused to show it.”

Her gaze dropped shamefully. “They stopped the apocalypse in its tracks,” she continued roughly, “two humans and one Fallen angel, locking the two oldest in the Cage. And I… I continued, striking a division directly through Heaven’s forces because I refused to admit that we had been wrong, that Castiel had been right in siding with the humans.” She smiled sadly. “One of the youngest of us, and perhaps the wisest all along. I pushed him too far, and he opened Purgatory, swallowing it whole.”
Shrugging, Raphael hugged herself, an all-too-human gesture. “He killed me then, and I woke up here, my memories restored when Gabriel reclaimed his Grace.”

She looked at the blacked out windows. “There are some of us who despise humanity, blaming it for our Father leaving. Uriel was responsible for the deaths of numerous angels in his garrison before Anael killed him. Zachariah took great pleasure in causing pain in order to achieve his goal. I think our Father placed us here to give us a second chance, an opportunity to see what we couldn’t before, removed from humanity as we were.”

“Doesn’t seem to have worked,” Fury said acerbically.

“Zachariah was the quintessential businessman,” Raphael said, “and Tiberius Stone even more so. Social conditioning and how one is raised goes a long way, and Stone saw only the worst of humanity as a businessman. Killian was disabled, and I’m sure that did nothing to alleviate Uriel’s hatred for how weak humanity is compared to angels.”

She tilted her head to the side, eyes dark. “Repentance only goes so far, and redemption isn’t possible for everyone. I’m sure you’d say the same for certain humans in your history.”

Fury narrowed his eye. “And you’ve repented.”

“A thousand times over,” Raphael said softly, smiling sadly.

Steve fidgeted anxiously, hope and nervousness warring in his chest. “What makes you so sure Tony’s alive?” he blurted out, getting her attention.

Raphael scoffed, leaning her hip against the table. “An explosion can’t kill an angel. I would’ve thought you knew this considering you know who he is.”

The sudden realization left Steve cold in fear. “But he’s not an angel anymore,” he croaked.

Raphael frowned. “What are you talking about, Captain? He was fully himself the last I saw him.”

Steve opened his mouth, was unable to get the words out around the blockage in his throat, and looked down, shoulders hunched.

Hovering comfortingly at his side, Natasha spoke for him. “I don’t know when you last saw him, but things have changed.”

“Was it the Leviathans?” Raphael demanded. “I saw what he did in Nebraska and thought the worst, but he was still very clearly alive.”

“He was dead,” Jarvis said in a too-even tone. “And then he wasn’t, but he had no memories of the last several years.”

“And he was human,” Raphael concluded, the corner of her mouth twitching up. “Still not dead,” she said firmly. “At least I’m ninety-five percent sure he isn’t.”

“What if we’re in the last five percent?” Clint asked, mouth twisted unhappily.

“We aren’t,” Raphael insisted.

“All I’m hearing is a lot of hot air, Raphael,” Fury snapped. “Are you going to explain just why you’re so confident that Gabriel’s alive?”

Raphael’s eyes narrowed. “Fine,” she said in a clipped tone. “Gabriel destroyed himself to smite the
Leviathans, doing so in a much more efficient way than I would have expected. I’d thought him dead after seeing the results, but he wasn’t. I thought him normal, but you say he’s human with no memories. Someone brought him back, the same someone who placed Castiel here. And my Father would not let either of them die after the work and effort He put into resurrecting them, which requires more effort than simply keeping one alive.”

“So you’re saying your Father – what – teleported them out?” Phil asked incredulously. “Where are they now then?”

“Let me do a locating spell, and I’ll be able to answer that.” Raphael looked around the room, eyebrow raising. “But not up here. I have no more business here, and I don’t trust S.H.I.E.L.D. as far as I can throw it.”

“We’re hurt,” Fury drawled, crossing his arms over his chest.

“It’s wise,” Hill commented.

Raphael gave her a small, satisfied smile. “I quite think so.”

“Then we’ll go,” Steve said in a tone that forbade argument. “Director, will Zachariah and Uriel be any trouble?”

“Only their business connections,” Phil answered, a half-smile on his face, “but we’ll take care of it, Captain.”

Jarvis clanked over to the windows, clearing them. “Let’s go.”

They were met at the tower by Pepper and Rhodey, who were both vibrating with barely contained excitement.

“Well?” Pepper demanded once they disembarked the Quinjet.

“Patience, Pepper.” Raphael brushed past her into the penthouse.

Pepper shot Steve a furiously helpless look. “Tell me she’s behaved like an ass to you.”

“She’s a general and warrior of God,” Rhodey said in a soothing tone. It sounded he was quoting someone. “That’s how generals act. They expect things to happen when they want and want their orders followed.”

“She’s completely awesome,” Clint said, demonstrating with an arrow shaft. “Really showed those two asses what for.”

“She is pulling apart the kitchen.” Jarvis sounded horrified, walking quickly inside.

“It’s a good thing we put the kids to bed,” Pepper said resignedly. “They’re in Tony’s room.”

“They didn’t want to?” Steve understood why.

Pepper shook her head, smiling sadly. “Is there a chance he’s alive?” The question was soft.

Steve reached out to hug her, both to comfort her and himself. “Raphael thinks so. And I think I’m going to put my faith in the angel.”

“Never been particularly religious,” Pepper said, giving a watery, amused smile, “but why the hell
The others had already gone inside, and Steve made sure the Quinjet was locked down before following. He found them in the kitchen, surrounding the table that Raphael had commandeered. She’d had JARVIS pull up a 2-D map of the world across the entire span of the table. There were various herbs and incenses that Steve hadn’t even known they had, along with a cross on a flimsy looking chain that Raphael wound around her hand.

Raphael was currently lighting a cereal bowl filled with herbs and what looked like a picture of Tony with a match. Once the smoke started rising, she held the cross out over the map and spoke several words in that guttural language Steve had heard Tony occasionally use.

Nothing happened. The cross swayed in the air under Raphael’s hand, but otherwise didn’t do anything.

Frowning slightly, Raphael spoke a few more words.

The cross vibrated furiously for several seconds, rattling the chain it was on before it flew off and pinned itself to the table directly in the center of North America. Raphael magnified it, zooming in.

The map changed rapidly, almost dizzying with how quickly it grew in size and narrowed in on North America, the United States, Nebraska, and then stopping on a point in the middle of nowhere.

Natasha leaned forward, brow furrowed. “Isn’t that…?”

“Yes.” Raphael’s face was blank as she withdrew her hand, collapsing and discarding the map with the other. The blue light of the holograph gone, the natural lights of the kitchen turned up.

“He isn’t on this Earth,” Raphael said finally, picking up and shoving the cross in her pocket.

“So what was that?” Rhodey asked.

“I expanded the search to anything related to him,” Raphael explained. “That it landed on Nebraska means that there’s something of his there.” Her lips curled into a smile. “And I think I know what it is.”

Steve blinked, eyes darting down to the blank table. “Is it really?” he breathed, hardly daring to hope.

Raphael nodded, beginning to clear up what she had used. “Yes, it should be his Grace.” She paused, frowning thoughtfully. “It could also be the remnants of what he did there, but that’s unlikely as it wouldn’t carry enough of a trace for a low level tracking spell to pick up.”

“But you don’t know where Tony is,” Pepper said, voice hitching.

“I have my suspicions,” Raphael answered slowly, “but it seems unlikely considering what Gabriel told me…” Her lips quirked into a small smile as she let Jarvis take the cereal bowl. “Then again, my Father would have little cares of such restrictions. It does make things more difficult for us.”

“Could you be anymore cryptic?” Bucky sounded displeased.

“I could,” Raphael said pleasantly. She wiped the table down, throwing the towel in the sink without looking. When she seemed to be satisfied, Raphael looked up at them again. “Gabriel told me that there is no way to return to our home universe, that the trip is one-way only. As Death corroborated this, I’m more inclined to believe him. But, “ she continued, smiling widely, the sight rather disconcerting, “there is nothing limiting my Father from interfering.”
“You’re saying that Tony and Castiel are back in your universe?” Natasha asked.

“It’s most likely, yes.” Raphael folded her arms across her chest, frowning slightly. “You said Castiel was human?”

“Yes,” Steve confirmed. “He couldn’t have gotten them out either.”

“That’s not why I’m asking,” Raphael said. “Did he say how it happened? It wasn’t because he was here; he doesn’t need access to the Host to retain his Grace.”

“He told Mr. Stark,” Jarvis said slowly, “that the gates of Heaven have been closed, that everyone has Fallen.”

Raphael’s eyes widened, her breath hitching in shock. “He said that?”

“If there was anything else, he didn’t say it in my presence.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Raphael muttered, shaking her head. “If the gates closed, then the angels should be locked in as well, not Fallen. Something went wrong.”

“Does it change anything?” Steve asked, exchanging worried looks with his team.

“Only if you think it’s a bad thing that the two are both angels who have Fallen and every demon worth its salt will be out gunning for their blood,” Raphael said. “But otherwise, no.”

Rhodey’s head snapped up in the shocked silence that followed. “You’re kidding me!”

Raphael’s smile was rueful. “Sadly, no. Demons will pay a high price to get their hands on them.”

She looked down at her watch, a silvery metal piece on her slender wrist. “Unfortunately, there’s nothing we can do about it now.”

“We haven’t got time to waste!” Steve protested.

“Time differences between universes being what they are – subjective and prone to change – I think we do.” Raphael folded her arms across her chest. “In any case, I’ve learned through secondhand experience not to do anything dangerous at night. Not when the supernatural is involved.” She looked at them with an arched eyebrow. “Will you show me to my room, or will I have to sleep on the couch?”

Not for the first time, Steve could see that Raphael had been a warrior used to having her orders followed. But it was the first time that it grated on his nerves, no matter how right she may have been.

Steve didn’t manage to sleep that night aside from brief snatches of unconsciousness. And those were more restless than restful with terrifying images of Tony’s corpse. Eventually he just gave up on sleeping and lay there, staring up at the ceiling as he waited for a reasonable time to be up.

Six o’clock was reasonable enough, so he threw back his covers and staggered to the bathroom, taking a perfunctory five second shower before throwing on whatever clothes he could find and heading upstairs. He was surprised to find Raphael already sitting there, drinking a cup of tea while writing in a notebook.

Steve just nodded at her when she looked up, not wanting to break the pre-dawn silence. Her answering smile was surprising, not at all like what Steve had seen before.
Going to the fridge, he pulled out eggs and orange juice. He was going to need something to eat now since he hadn’t met his caloric needs yesterday.

“Couldn’t sleep?” Raphael’s voice was quiet.

Steve turned the heat on, oiling the pan. “Not really.”

There was a soft clink behind him, probably Raphael setting her coffee down. “I couldn’t either,” she confessed.

Steve turned slightly, rather disconcerted at this different Raphael from the one he’d met yesterday. Looking at her profile, he could just barely tell that the way she held herself was different, almost softer. Even her face had changed.

“Bad dreams?” he asked eventually, carefully cracking the eggs so that the yolk remained intact. He turned the heat low and reached for the bread bin, throwing in several slices into the toaster as he waited for Raphael’s response.

“Questions,” Raphael said slowly, her voice soft. “And memories.” Her smile was wistful. “Human brains aren’t equipped to deal with trillions of years of memories, so most of it comes out through dreams. I haven’t had a restful night’s sleep since remembering.” She shrugged with one shoulder, looking back down at the notebook she had been writing in.

She still didn’t sound like the Raphael Steve had gotten to know yesterday, the one who refused to take nonsense from anyone and spoke like a battle-hardened general expecting her orders to be followed. She sounded rather human, rather like Rumiko might have if she wasn’t an angel.

Perhaps Tony wasn’t the only one with dual identities as Tony and Gabriel.

Thoughtful, Steve finished up his eggs and toast and sat down across from Raphael, not at all guilty about eating without asking her if she wanted anything. But he was curious, so before he started eating, he asked one question. “What do you remember?”


She tapped a finger against the side of her cup, evidently mulling something over. “Angels aren’t meant to feel,” she continued slowly, “not the way humans do. But we can. And we don’t know how to handle it when it happens. Most of my later actions…were colored by anger. It’s those actions I remember most clearly, and it’s those actions I regret most of all.”

“Everyone has something they regret.”

Raphael’s face was blank. “But have those regrets caused untold pain to innumerable souls? I was a fool, Captain. A fool who ignored the proof right before me, and I was indirectly responsible for the deaths of many of my siblings. There is no accounting for my actions.”

Steve took a slow sip of his juice. “But there is forgiveness. Isn’t that one of the hallmarks of your Father? That He forgives you despite your sins?”

“Only now,” Raphael said quietly, eyes down. “He cast out Lucifer and our brethren for disobeying His wishes and set the course of the apocalypse in stone. What many of us have done in search for paradise is not worth forgiveness, but it seems that we have it nonetheless in a chance for a second life.”
“Then I guess you better make it worth it.” Steve gave her a soft smile when she met his eyes.

Raphael’s smile was sly. “I intend to.”

Cleaning up the yolk with some bread, Steve considered what he was going to say next. It would break the comfortable atmosphere they had established, but he needed to know. Finally, as was his habit, he just did it. “Do you have a plan for what to do?”

Raphael blinked, something seeming to shift in her features. Her shoulders straightened, and all at once she was the same person Steve remembered yesterday; it was such a gradually smooth transition that he wouldn’t have noticed at all if he wasn’t paying attention. “I have twelve percent of a plan.”

Steve frowned, pausing in his motions. “That seems oddly specific.”

“It’s one of those bits and pieces that comes through the universe in some shape or form,” Raphael said dismissively. “In any case, to execute this plan requires a magic user. I am capable of casting low level spells using Enochian as any human is, but I can’t wield magic to the point of transporting people across universes. Nor do I have the capabilities of harnessing Gabriel’s Grace and transporting it safely for him to use. We need someone capable of using magic and who is familiar enough with Enochian to cast the necessary safeguards.”

“Tony’s taught us all a little Enochian,” Steve said. “Not much, but enough of the basic sigils to protect us. But since most of it requires blood to work, Tony didn’t teach us the more complicated sigils.”

“Basic sigils drawn with blood anyone can use,” Raphael said. “All it requires is the knowledge. More complex sigils require magic and blood used in tandem for maximum effectiveness.”

“There’s Loki,” Steve mused, as the god had also been in attendance during Tony’s lessons.

Raphael looked mildly perplexed. “You have pagan gods here?”

“Not on Earth, but up on Asgard.”

“Of course.” Raphael shook her head. “Pagan gods but no angels, naturally. You think this Loki will help?”

“He should.” Steve had no doubt that Loki would once he knew what had happened to Tony. “But he’s not here at the moment.”

“We can get him,” Raphael said simply, eyes keen. “Once we have a magic user, everything else should be simple. And that is if we’re able to breach the walls of the universe, but I think I have a plan that should work.”

“Whatever it is, we’ll try it.” Steve gave her a grim smile. “There’s nothing we won’t do for one of our own.”

Raphael studied him for a long moment, her dark eyes inscrutable. “Good, Captain,” she said eventually, a small smile crossing her face. “We’ll need that attitude.”

Around seven the others began trickling in varying shades of alertness. Clint seemed to be the least alert with his shirt inside out and not having pulled on any pants over his boxers. It wouldn’t surprise Steve if he’d slept in that and then literally rolled out of bed to trek upstairs. Bruce was a close
second with his eyes half closed and his hair a veritable bird’s nest.

Bucky wasn’t there, and when Steve asked, Natasha told him he was with the children as they had expressed a great deal of interest in his metal arm. Bucky had apparently been charmed enough to agree to it, and he had always been fond of kids.

Seeming to be the most alert, Natasha turned from Steve and looked meaningfully at Raphael. “I suppose you have a plan?”

“Depending on if we get Loki here, I do.” Raphael nodded to Steve. “Your Captain says Loki knows some Enochian and is a proficient magic user; I’ll need both for what we need to do.”

“Loki’s on Asgard,” Pepper said, frowning.

“Either you get a message to him or I try summoning him,” Raphael said. “The rules of magic are different here, but I think a decent summoning will still work.”

Steve exchanged worried glances with Natasha. “They didn’t leave a way of getting in touch.”

“Maybe because they thought you’d talk to Jane about it?” Pepper said testily. “Call and ask her. I’m sure Thor told her.”

“What did Tony say before?” Bruce murmured, rubbing the bridge of his nose and squinting. “The Bifrost is watched over by an all-seeing Æsir?”

“Sounds right,” Clint muttered, scratching his chest, “but I’m still half-asleep so just about anything sounds good.”

“He did say that,” Jarvis agreed, his clear and alert tone supporting his statement.

“So address the guardian and we have an in,” Raphael noted. “But we still need a name.”

Pepper already had her phone out, shooting Steve a clear look that told him just how unimpressed she was with him.

But before she could call, rainbow light filled the room, the colors unusually bright given the sun still hadn’t risen. Within seconds, the light faded and two figures stood outside.

For half a second Steve thought it was Loki and Thor, but then he realized that the second person’s figure didn’t fit Thor’s strong and sturdy frame. One was undeniably Loki, but the other was just as tall and slender, only Steve didn’t know who it was other than male.

Once Loki opened the door and stepped inside, letting the other man follow him, Steve could better see his features. He was tall with graying hair, though it was still thick, and his skin was dark. He sported a goatee that looked rougher than what Tony usually had, and his eyes were shrewd. What was most eye-catching about him was his outfit, given the bright colors and the tall collar framing his face.

Steve had never seen him before in his life, and he thought the obvious question was rather clear on his face when he stared at Loki.

“Good morning,” Loki said affably, eyes meeting everyone’s at least once and lingering over Raphael. “I hope we haven’t interrupted anything important.”

Pepper had put the phone away. “Actually, we were just discussing how to call you.”
“How fortuitous then,” Loki said, lips pulling into a small grin.

“Who’s the guy with you?” Clint asked bluntly, more awake now than he had been before.

“Oh, excuse me. Where are my manners?” Loki flourished dramatically as he gestured at the other man. “Allow me to introduce one Doctor Stephen Vincent Strange, also known as the Sorcerer Supreme.”

The man now identified as Dr. Strange looked distinctly unimpressed with Loki’s posturing.

“Is he Asgardian?” Natasha asked, eyes sharp as she analyzed him.

“Human,” Dr. Strange answered, his voice deeper than Steve expected.

“But you were in Asgard?” Natasha pointed out questioningly.

“Following up on the largest breach between universes I sensed,” Strange agreed. “I’ve been cleaning up the mess of whatever creatures invaded, though I haven’t seen any of their ilk for the last two weeks.”

“You mean the Leviathans?” Steve asked just to be certain.

Strange raised an eyebrow. “They didn’t look anything like Leviathans.”

“You humans have strange ideas of Biblical creatures,” Raphael said amusedly. “Something doesn’t have to be large to be frightening. The most insidious beings are the ones you don’t see until it’s too late.”

Strange gave her a piercing look. “You’re not human?”

“I’m human now,” Raphael said dismissively. “I’m more interested in you. Are you a magic user?”

“I would have thought it obvious given my title,” Strange said dryly.

“Sorcerer Supreme, hm.” Raphael hummed thoughtfully. “How do you feel about traversing through the different universes?”

“I think it would be best if you tell us who you are,” Loki said, giving Strange a warning look that clearly told him not to answer. “I have not seen you here before.”

“No, you wouldn’t have.” Raphael looked amused. “My name is Raphael.”

Loki’s eyes narrowed. “You are whom Gabriel sought before.”

“I am,” Raphael agreed.

“What are you doing here?”

Steve stepped forward, getting Loki’s attention. “About that…” He took a breath, swallowing. “There’s something you should know.”

“Something has happened with Gabriel,” Loki said simply.

“He’s not here anymore,” Steve explained. “Raphael thinks he’s back in his original universe.”

“I don’t really think,” Raphael said idly, looking down at her fingernails, “I know.”
“You’re not completely certain,” Steve reminded her, not all impressed.

“I wouldn’t write up a spell for humans to use if I wasn’t certain,” Raphael said huffily. “That kind of magic is dangerous.”

“Was that why you were discussing contacting me?” Loki asked. “Seeking a way to travel there?”

“I need someone who is both a proficient magic user and has knowledge of Enochian,” Raphael said. “The good Captain tells me that’s you.”

“I would fill both of those qualifications, yes,” Loki agreed, not a hint of arrogance in his tone, just simple fact. “But traversing through different universes is not something I have done before.”

“It shouldn’t be done on a whim,” Strange said sharply. “There are forces you shouldn’t mess with, and the powers required to traverse universes are one of them.”

Raphael scoffed, distinctly unimpressed. “Don’t speak to me of dangerous powers, child.” She looked at Loki, clearly ignoring Strange. “Are you willing to help?”

“Of course I will,” Loki said, shooting Strange a sharp glare when he tried to protest. “Quiet, Doctor. There are things here even you would not understand.”

Strange looked disbelieving. “I doubt that.”

“Don’t,” Rhodey told him, “seriously, don’t. Just get out while you can.”

Strange raised an eyebrow, folding his arms across his chest and giving off a distinct air of aloofness. “Given my prolific experiences with magic”—Raphael snorted—“I’m already in.”

“You still aren’t what I need,” Raphael dismissed him. “Teaching you the basics of Enochian would require too much time, and Loki is already familiar with Gabriel and his Grace. Or are you not?”

“You are correct.” Loki looked at all of them, face somber. “What do you need?”

“Gabriel’s Grace,” Raphael answered. “If you can retrieve it and contain it so that we can transport it with us, that would be helpful.”

“His Grace?” Loki sounded blank, which was his way of concealing utter shock. “It’s here?”

“Considering I did a tracking spell and found it, I’d say so.”

“Give me the necessary supplies,” Loki said, eyes bright. “Then we will see about the rest of the spell.”

Resigned to being left out, Strange was looking interestedly at Bruce. “Aren’t you Dr. Banner?”

Bruce blinked, still rather bleary-eyed. “Yes?”

“I always found your work extremely interesting,” Strange informed him.

Bruce scratched his head, mussing up his hair even more. “I thought science and magic didn’t mix.”

“That depends greatly on what you’re referring to,” Strange said. “As I seem to have been pushed aside in favor of the possibly insane Norse god, how do you feel about comparing notes?”

Bruce gave Steve a perplexed look, who just shrugged. “I guess?”
“Excellent.” Strange whipped out a sheaf of notes from somewhere in his cape. “I was wondering about this paper of yours…”

Loki and Raphael had already left the room at this point, and Steve was wondering if he should follow them or make sure that Bruce wasn’t left alone with a complete stranger.

When Jarvis joined the discussion between Strange and Bruce, Steve decided to go with Loki and Raphael just in case. He had no idea what those two would come up with and wanted to potentially ameliorate anything dangerous.

Raphael ended up advising Loki on how to contain Grace in a specially made vial.

“I distinctly remember Gabriel saying his true form was the size of Jupiter,” Loki had said, peering rather dubiously at the notes Raphael had given him. “This vial is not.”

“The language of beings that transcend time and space also circumvents the rules of time and space,” Raphael had explained. “Simple enough to seal Grace into a contained vial that looks small but really isn’t.”

“Like a TARDIS?” Rhodey had asked, peering over Loki’s shoulder at the notes, which were rather unfortunately scribbled in Enochian that only Loki and Raphael understood.

“Like a TARDIS,” Raphael had agreed, looking amused. “Do you think you can forge this?”

Loki came back several hours later with the vial Raphael had asked for, but since he was Loki, he had forged the glass into an angel, the head being the cork. Raphael did not look amused.

“You did not say it had to be forged in any specific way,” Loki said, smirking. “I do believe Gabriel will like it.”

“I know he will.” Raphael sounded pained. “Do you know what you need to do?”

Loki sobered, long fingers curling around the angel vial. “Yes. It should not take me long.”

“This is a terrible idea,” Strange said, having now been informed as to what was going on; he’d taken it remarkably well.

“This is a terrible idea,” Strange said, having now been informed as to what was going on; he’d taken it remarkably well.

“Which is why it’ll work,” Raphael said.

Loki gave her a curious look. “You speak from experience.”

“Very painful experience. Don’t you have a job to do?”

“Impatient,” Loki murmured, raising an unimpressed eyebrow and glancing at Steve as he put in his earpiece for communication purposes. He had declined a camera as they were too unwieldy for him to use and do magic. A second later he twisted his hand and was gone.

Except for Raphael and Strange, they all automatically looked at Jarvis, who just raised an eyebrow in eerie imitation of Loki. “He has arrived safely, if that was what you were wondering,” he said dryly.

“Do have some trust in me,” Loki said, huffing loudly from the connection JARVIS had set up. “I know what I am doing.”

“God of lies,” Clint said propping his head up on a hand as he sat at the kitchen table. “I think we
need to take anything you say with a grain of salt.”

Loki snorted. Then, a second later: “Captain, I have it.”

“That was fast,” Steve said, surprised. He’d expected it to take longer.

“There is no life here except for this,” Loki said, “which makes it a rather obvious choice even if it were not for the power I can feel.”

“Be careful,” Raphael cautioned. “Gabriel’s last act was one of pure destruction; there may be backlash from that energy.”

“Rather much to ask from a flower,” Loki said, shuffling sounds coming from his end. “Let me concentrate now.”

This was the tricky bit according to what Steve had heard Raphael explain. Grace was for angels, and only angels could handle Grace safely. Fallen angels could handle their own Grace and that of others given their previous life, but humans couldn’t. Loki wasn’t human, but he also wasn’t an angel, so Raphael had advised him to be careful and given him several protection sigils to draw before he went about harvesting Gabriel’s Grace.

The main reason Raphael herself wasn’t doing it was because she was entirely human and didn’t want to risk a potential backlash that could wipe the state of Nebraska off the map. It wasn’t something that Steve wanted to imagine, and Loki had agreed that the risk wasn’t worth it.

Which led to now, and Steve hoped that everything was working. The earpiece Loki was wearing sounded like it had shorted out as there was only static at the moment.

“How long should it take?” Pepper asked, shooting Raphael an anxious glance.

“It depends on how much Grace there is to gather,” Raphael answered, eyes closed as she leaned back in her chair. “When an angel Falls and their Grace is torn out, it lands and creates a miracle. It can be anything, but it usually takes the form of a tree that springs up overnight or maybe a spring of water that has miraculous healing properties. Usually not a flower.”

“What does that mean?” Bruce was chewing on his glasses, which was not something Steve had ever seen him do.

“It could be an epic joke,” Raphael said wryly. “It would be very Gabriel, but I doubt he had any input as to its form. I think it’s more likely that it’s the remnants of his Grace having compiled itself together to give life once more; Grace seeks Grace, and an archangel’s Grace is particularly potent.”

“So it’s not a lot,” Rhodey summed up.

“How much of it is there doesn’t matter,” Raphael said. “What matters is that it is. It will replenish itself given time.”

“I find I quite agree,” Loki said, suddenly appearing in their midst with rather windswept hair and red hands that looked to be painfully burned. But he was clutching a silver chain from which hung the angel vial he had forged, and inside it swirled a painfully bright white light. “That said, this did give me quite some trouble no matter how little of it in actuality was contained in the flower.”

“That is really quite remarkable,” Strange remarked, coming to Loki to bend down and more closely inspect the swirling Grace.
“Shouldn’t our eyes be burning out?” Clint asked, half covering his face with his hands.

“There are protections inscribed on the vial,” Loki said, pulling the vial into his burned hands and tucking it into his armor. “I would not be so foolish, Clinton.”

“This coming from the guy who shuffled through my head,” Clint groused, though there was no real heat to his words.

“What’s the next step?” Pepper asked sharply, setting them back on course. “How are you going to get there?”

“I will need something of Gabriel’s to focus on,” Loki said. “Something that I can use to hone in on his position and use as a focal point.”

“You have his Grace,” Natasha pointed out.

“I meant Anthony,” Loki corrected himself. “There is a distinction between the two now even if there was not one before, and I will need to find Anthony, not Gabriel.”

“What sort of item will you need?” Jarvis asked. “Something personal of his?”

“Preferably something that he has a great emotional attachment to,” Loki said. “And not something that he was attached to as Gabriel.”

Jarvis frowned, evidently thinking over the matter. “There was not a great deal that Mr. Stark was attached to before,” he said slowly, sharing looks with Pepper and Rhodey.

“The impermanence of material things,” Rhodey murmured, looking rather pained.

“Surely there must be something,” Loki said impatiently. “Humans form attachments.”

“Yeah, not Tony,” Rhodey said, shaking his head. “Or if he did, he never told me.”

“He was attached to his cars,” Pepper said uncertainly.

“Cars are too big to use,” Raphael said. “And using magic to shrink them just hinders the process.”

Jarvis still seemed to be lost in thought, and something in Steve just ached because it shouldn’t be this difficult to find a small item that Tony was attached to. It shouldn’t be.

If it were Steve they had to find, the item used would undoubtedly be his shield or maybe even his sketchpad. The fact that Tony’s best friends from before he’d become Gabriel had no idea what Loki could use was horrifying.

“What type of emotional attachment?” Jarvis asked slowly, leaning forward in his chair to rest his elbows against his knees. “Does it need to be something he’s fond of? Or could it be something he labored over intensively with great emotion?”

“Something that is exclusively Anthony,” Loki answered evenly.

A slow smile spread across Jarvis’s face. “Given the time frame of when he regained his Grace in Afghanistan, I think I have just the thing.”

“What, Jarvis?” Pepper demanded before Steve could, his mouth already opening.

“He built the Mark I in that cave in Afghanistan,” Jarvis said, eyes bright. “Three months of intensive
labor over one of the greatest creations in his life, and it served as the vehicle for his escape. I don’t have any of the armor pieces here, but they are in his house in Malibu.”

Loki went over and rested a hand on Jarvis’s shoulder. “Show me where,” he commanded, only to teleport the two of them before anyone else could say anything.

“I hate it when he does that,” Steve groaned, thumping his head against the table.

“It’s very annoying,” Natasha agreed, sounding rather amused.

“I admit,” Raphael commented, “that now I realize what it’s like to be on the other side of someone with the ability to teleport. It’s rather annoying if they disappear on you without any word.”

“Especially if they just tell you ‘forty-two’ and you don’t see them again for several days,” Steve heard Pepper grumble.

“You mean you’ve never watched the Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy?” Rhodey asked, sounding all too amused.

“Forty-two: the answer to life, death, and the universe,” Raphael mused. “If only that were so simple.”

“You mean it’s not?” Clint sounded dismayed. Steve didn’t feel like lifting his head to see if he was just being sarcastic.

“If life were that simple, I’m sure humans would have ascended a long time ago.”

“Thanks for the backhanded compliment,” Bruce said.

“You’re welcome,” Raphael said, and that was pure sarcasm. Steve lifted his head to see her smirking, seeming rather pleased with herself.

Two seconds later, Jarvis and Loki reappeared, Jarvis holding what looked like a dented metal mask.

“I do believe we are ready,” Loki said, looking keenly at Raphael.

Raphael didn’t respond immediately, instead pulling out her notebook and flipping it open. “Yes,” she said finally. “We can’t bring much with us, only that which is most valuable to us so it can make the trip. Anything we don’t need might throw the entire spell off.”

“You’re going with him?” Pepper asked.

“Of course.” Raphael closed the notebook. “I know the universe and how it works. Loki will undoubtedly run into a demon five seconds after arriving and get himself killed.”

Loki looked like he wanted to roll his eyes but clearly found the motion beneath him. “I do know how to protect myself.”

“I’m sure,” Raphael said dryly, standing.

“I’m coming with,” Steve found himself saying without any thought, standing as well.

“I will as well,” Jarvis said, staring at Loki.

“Steve—” Pepper began to protest.
“Let him, Pepper,” Natasha interrupted her, resting a placating hand on her arm. “This is something he needs to do.” Her eyes were understanding.

“You’re gonna leave your team without a leader, Cap?” Rhodey asked, face understanding but his voice hard.

Steve understood why. “I’m not.” He looked pointedly at Natasha. “Black Widow’s in charge while I’m gone.”

Natasha inclined her head in acknowledgement.

“Will you stay and help?” Steve asked Strange, who had remained stoically silent throughout it all.

Strange’s face was impassive. “I shouldn’t,” he said, “but I think I will.” The words were resigned. “I would like to see how this resolves itself.”

“Hang around,” Clint said, actually reaching out and clapping Strange on the shoulder as they were sitting next to each other. “I’m sure you’ll have a grand old time.”

Strange looked dubious as to this claim, though he didn’t dispute it.

“Jarvis?” Pepper looked pleading.

“I can’t leave him, Ms. Potts.” Jarvis’s voice was quiet. “It is my responsibility to protect him. I failed him once; I won’t do so again, not if it is in my power to help.”

“Fine, then.” Raphael’s tone put an end to the discussion, and she looked hard at Steve and Jarvis. “Gather your things. We’ll leave tomorrow.” Her voice was softer when she added, “This will be a difficult trip. Take this time to prepare yourselves.”

One day was more than enough time. Steve could deal with anything if it meant he got Tony back in one piece.

They reconvened in the living room the next day, Raphael, Loki, Steve, and Jarvis standing in the middle of a carefully drawn circle of Enochian sigils and Asgardian magic that Loki had carefully wound together last night with Raphael’s aid. Strange had supervised, although Steve doubted he’d done much of anything other than observe; the man had looked faintly awed upon seeing the finished work.

Steve had his Captain America uniform on under his casual clothes, not knowing what to expect on the other side but needing to be prepared. He had his shield in a canvas bag slung over his shoulder. Jarvis had adorned the Iron Man armor, the faceplate retracted for now. Loki and Raphael possessed nothing but their clothes and any choice weapons they were attached to.

Fury would doubtlessly be rather upset upon getting the message Steve had left him this morning, but by the time he managed to do anything about it, it would be too late. Steve was confident that Natasha would be able to handle anything that came up with the additional help of Strange and Bucky. Jarvis had also assured him that his more technological counterpart was perfectly capable of piloting an Iron Man suit if necessary.

So everything was settled, and the only thing that even remotely worried Steve was the nervous butterflies in his stomach. It comforted him that Loki and Raphael didn’t seem to have any concerns, and he had faith in their abilities.
Dummy, Butterfingers, and You had wished him good luck and made him swear to come back with Tony. It was a promise Steve didn’t regret making because it was one he’d already made to himself.

Bucky had hit him upside the head gently with his left hand and told him not to take any stupid risks because it would make Natasha sad. The worried set of his mouth and eyes told Steve everything, though, and that more than reassured him.

In the end, all that didn’t really matter. It boiled down to Loki and Raphael and finding Tony. It boiled down to getting him back because Steve wasn’t going to consider anything else as a possibility.

“This may not work,” Raphael warned them as they took their places. “It all hinges on several guesses that I’ve made, and I hope that I’m right.”

“I’m sure you are,” Steve told her, hands clenching tight on Jarvis’s gauntlet and Raphael’s hand. He didn’t need to look behind him to the mantel where Tony’s sword no longer lay. It had been an unpleasant surprise when they had gone to get it to give to Tony, but Steve hoped that it had somehow already made the trip with Tony.

“Good luck,” Steve heard Natasha murmur.

“Audentes Fortuna Juvat,” Jarvis whispered, bringing the faceplate down.

Steve had no idea what it meant, but Raphael and Loki both nodded.

“Let it do so,” Loki said shortly before closing his eyes.

Steve copied the action, focusing on the comforting weight of his shield and the feel of Jarvis’s gauntlet and Raphael’s hand in his own. Then he turned his thoughts to Tony, since that was what would be needed if this was going to work.

He didn’t know when Loki started the spell, but he felt it happen when the world seemed to fade out and everything became dark and formless. He kept his eyes squeezed shut, all his thoughts focused on Tony’s face, Tony’s smile, Tony’s voice...

It felt like being squeezed through a tube; it felt like being sucked into a vacuum; it felt like everything wrong and unnatural that should never be done; it felt like something was pulling and pulling and stopping them from going any further.

Then it was like a spring had been cut, and suddenly they were flying.
Chapter End Notes

Benedict Cumberbatch bendorkle smuggerpuddle. My actor for Dr. Strange will remain Oded Fehr, and that’s who you should picture here.

In any case, I hope you enjoyed this chapter; please let me know what you thought. Monday will bring a return to our main protagonist, and we will see how he is faring. ;D
As a note, if you don't like what I'm doing with these relationships, you don't have to read this. This story is finished for the most part; I'm thinking of adding about another 4,000 words or so at the end to tie up some loose ends that I didn't before, but everything else is done. I appreciate and love all your feedback, but there isn't anything I can do about plot or characters because this is how the story wanted to be written, and this is how the characters wished to tell their stories.

If you want to change things or do them the way you think they should be done, go ahead. But just let me know so I can read them as well.

Perhaps you don't like one-sided relationships? That's okay. It's a fact of life. Regardless of what happens in the end, Steve just wants to be friends with Tony/Gabriel.

In any case, we're back with Tony and Castiel. And where are they?

(Perhaps obvious, but anyway...) Hope you enjoy!

Awareness came to him in fits and spurts. At first came the pain, focused in his ribs, gut, head, and face. Then the cold, sinking through his clothes and seeming to settle in his bones. And last, the hard, rough ground beneath his body and the smell of dirt and grass tickling his nose.

Inhaling sharply, Tony coughed as the movement jostled his bruised ribs, which protested sharply at the abuse. Coughing only made it worse, so Tony gasped in another breath, struggling to stop. When it did, he found himself relaxing with a soft exhale, and then he opened his eyes, blinking rapidly when he saw dirt, grass, and rocks.

Carefully twisting around to his back, Tony slowly sat up, trying not to jostle his ribs. He found Castiel lying only several feet away from him, face scrunched up in discomfort.

“Castiel.” His voice was a croak, and he had to clear it to try again. “Castiel.”


Tony’s mouth twisted at the name, though he said nothing because given the circumstances it could be excused. “Yeah.”

Castiel pushed himself upright, giving Tony a confused look. “Where are we?”
Tony shrugged, sitting back on his heels as he slowly gestured around at the trees. “You tell me. I’m not complaining about not getting blown to bits, though.”

“That was a bomb, wasn’t it?”

“Grenade, more specifically.” Tony slowly stood up, wobbling as his vision grayed out. “Ah, shit.” A sudden hand at his elbow supported him, and he leaned heavily against Castiel’s broader shoulder. “Thanks,” he breathed, closing his eyes against the resurgence of the pounding in his head.

Castiel’s hand brushed lightly over his hair, and Tony winced as it touched the spot that Aldrich had pounded. “You’re hurt.”

“No shit, Sherlock.” Tony pressed a hand to his forehead, pulling away from Castiel to stand upright, though he didn’t pull away from Castiel’s supporting hand. “So where are we?” he asked.

Castiel gave their surroundings a glance. “It would seem to be a forest.”

“Yeah, obviously.” Tony stepped back from Castiel, relieved when his legs or vision didn’t give out. He winced, putting a hand on his sore ribs. “But how are we not dead?”

“I don’t know.” Castiel looked rather troubled. “Something got us out.”

“Something not human,” Tony added when it didn’t seem like Castiel was going to. “Because I don’t know about you, but I felt the heat of that grenade. I’ve had a bomb blow up in my face once before, and this was a hell of a lot worse.”

Castiel’s lips pulled into a small smile. “At least we’re alive.”

“Yeah, there’s that.” Tony took a breath, winced at his bruised ribs, and then patted at Castiel’s front. “Where’s that phone of yours? You had it, right?” If Tiberius and Aldrich hadn’t taken it away, that was.

“I did.” Castiel reached inside his coat, coming out with a familiar phone seconds later.

“Great, that’s awesome.” Tony took it without asking, flicking it on. He frowned upon seeing the carrier network that flickered into existence for a second before popping out to a solid NO SIGNAL. “AT&T? You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

“Is that bad?”

“This is a StarkPhone,” Tony said, pulling open the map app. “That means it’s on my company’s carrier network, and unless the satellites are down, it shouldn’t be connecting to freaking AT&T.”

Castiel’s voice was indiscernible as he asked, “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know.” Tony’s mouth twisted as the phone insisted on giving him a NO SIGNAL alert. “I do know that even my tech isn’t going to get us a freaking connection out here with only AT&T to work off of. Let’s see if we can find a road, and then we can see about finding a signal.”

“So we can’t call anyone.”

“Not without a signal.” Tony opened the compass app, since that would at least work, giving Castiel a blank smile. “C’mon then. Let’s find out where we are.”

Castiel looked down at his feet. “Where do you think we are?”
“I would’ve hoped Central Park, or somewhere else in New York State, but you can get connection practically everywhere in the state. Since whatever got us out obviously didn’t feel the courtesy to put us somewhere we could call someone for help, I’ve got bupkis.” Tony made a face, checking to see which way north was. “So, pick your poison and let’s get walking.”

Castiel tilted his head at him, eyebrows scrunched together. “I don’t understand.”

Tony hid a grin under his hand. “Doesn’t matter. Which way do you want to go?”

Castiel’s shoulders shifted back in determination, and he narrowed his eyes, seeming to give the question his full attention. He faced each cardinal direction for a full minute before freezing at south and striding forwards.

Eyebrows raised, Tony watched him bend down to pick something up. “Castiel?”

“This is yours,” Castiel said, turning with a very familiar sword in his hand.

Tony stared at it, gobsmacked. “What is that doing here?”

Castiel held it out to him. “I don’t know, but it’s here.”

“How do you know it’s not yours?”

“I would know my sword,” Castiel said quietly, eyes dropping. “What’s more, without my Grace I’m incapable of getting it. This is your sword, Gabriel.”

“It’s Tony,” Tony snapped unthinkingly, shoving his hands behind him.

“Tony.” Castiel’s gaze was even.

Tony pursed his lips, eyes flicking between the sword and Castiel. He had no idea how to handle the sword, as familiar as it felt when he held it. Familiarity wasn’t enough, though.

“You hold onto it,” Tony said finally, bringing his hands back around to fold his arms over his chest. “I’ve no idea how to use it.”

“Fair enough.” Castiel flipped it around, tucking it inside his coat. “I think we should go that way.” He pointed in the direction he had found the sword.

Shrugging, Tony set off that way, only briefly regretting his quick motion when his head protested. “Hey, why not.”

An hour later, he and Castiel had stumbled, tripped, and staggered their way to the road. Tony was rather breathless with pain at this point, and he ended up sitting down heavily on a boulder, one arm wrapped around his bruised ribs as he struggled to catch his breath. His other hand was pressed against the throbbing point on his head; his face felt like one entire bruise.

“You’d think,” he managed, “that whatever put us here could at least had the decency to fix me up.”

Castiel’s presence was a reassuring weight at his side. “I’m sorry.”

“Agh, don’t be.” Tony took one more breath and then checked the phone to see if there was any signal. Still nothing, not even that blip that had happened since the first time he’d checked. “Let’s keep going; we’ll run into someone driving by at some point or another.”

Castiel looked up both directions and then gave Tony a doubtful expression.
Tony rolled his eyes, smacking Castiel’s thigh before using the other’s wrist to haul himself up to his feet. His vision swam slightly, but not as badly as it had an hour ago. He licked his lips, wishing for some water.

“I have this peculiar sensation in my mouth,” Castiel admitted several minutes later.

“You’re probably thirsty.” Tony kicked aside a small stone, keeping to the side of the white line on the road. “I know I am.”

“It’s unpleasant.”

“Not much about humans is,” Tony said bluntly.

Castiel was silent for a minute. Then, “But so much more is.”

“You a romantic at heart, Castiel?” Tony shot him a grin over his shoulder.

Castiel tilted his head. “I don’t think so, no.”

“Eh, I think jury’s still out on that.” Tony held the phone up high, blocking the sun from hitting his eyes. His sunglasses were probably back in Central Park, and so was his own phone.

“Hm.” Castiel sounded unimpressed with him, which was just about par for the course for Tony.

Huffing out a pained breath, Tony dropped his hand and hunched his shoulders, biting the inside of his mouth as he breathed through the pain. If he ever met the thing that had taken them out of the frigging warehouse and put them here, then he was going to kick its ass for not bothering to heal him or drop them off at a hospital.

Fifteen minutes later, Tony heard Castiel stumble behind him, and he turned worriedly to find Castiel’s hands pressed to his head and him staggering into the middle of the road. His eyes were scrunched up tightly, and Tony didn’t know why, only that his head was ringing strangely.

“Castiel!”

Castiel didn’t seem to hear him, and there was a truck veering into view (now of all time?) and heading straight towards him.

“Castiel!”

This time it seemed to do the trick, and Castiel threw himself out of the way of the truck, rolling to a stop on the gravel. Tony rushed to him, crouching down by his side and placing a hand on his shoulder.

The man who had been driving the truck had pulled to an abrupt stop and was heading over to them, demanding, “What were you doing in the middle of the road?”

“Sorry,” Tony said when Castiel didn’t immediately respond, his attention caught by the blood on his palm.

“It hurts,” Castiel murmured, and the lost tone in his voice had Tony squeezing his shoulder comfortingly.

“I know it does,” Tony said softly. “Come on; stand up.”

“Is he okay?” the driver asked, sounding concerned. He was a rather portly man with a graying
beard, and he didn’t seem like a crazy lunatic Tony would have to knock out (he’d watched the movies, okay).

“I heard the angels,” Castiel said, glancing at Tony.

Tony managed a pained smile, the movement pulling at his swollen cheek and split lip. It also seemed to alert the driver to the fact that Tony probably looked like hell.

“Hell, are you okay?” the driver demanded Tony.

“I’ll be fine,” Tony said. “Just got a little roughed up. Any chance we can catch a lift to the nearest phone?”

“Had an accident, didn’t you?” the driver asked sympathetically, looking between the two of them. “Yeah, why not.”

“D’you also have some water?” Tony managed another weak smile, this one not pulling so painfully at his lip. “We’ve been walking for about an hour and a half.”

“Sure.” The driver gestured back to the truck.

Tony pushed Castiel ahead, using his larger frame to cover the pained wince he couldn’t stop as he started moving again. “Thank you,” he told the driver as they passed him.

“Least I can do after almost hitting your friend here,” the driver responded dryly, very obviously omitting the fact that it had been Castiel out in the middle of the street in the first place.

Tony didn’t bring it up either, only smiling politely and getting into the backseat, sighing with relief as he was able to sit down and relax. He rested his head against the window, gratefully accepting the water the driver offered him. Castiel sat in the front, shooting Tony a worried look that he waved off with a dismissive hand.

Soon enough they’d have a working phone, and then he could call JARVIS.

Tony thought it strange that the driver hadn’t recognized him, but maybe the guy was just being polite and not calling out that Tony was super famous. Some people were kind enough to do so. Or maybe Tony’s face was so purple that he looked unrecognizable.

Wincing, Tony pressed the cold water bottle the driver had handed him against his face, waving him off as the man left them at a gas station. There was a payphone right outside, though it was in use by a burly guy with a bandanna.

Castiel headed over to him, a set expression on his face.

“Whoa there.” Tony held him back. “Let the guy finish his phone call.”

Castiel gave him a desperate look. “This is an emergency.”

“A few minutes won’t hurt,” Tony assured him quietly. “Just give him five minutes; there’s only so long you can talk on those. Besides,” he sighed, checking the time, “it’s not like a few more minutes won’t make them worry any less.”

Sighing, Castiel shifted anxiously, his trench coat brushing against Tony’s legs. “I suppose you have a point.”
“Damn right I have a point.” Tony put his useless phone away, half an eye on the girl that seemed to be eyeing Castiel too interestingly.

Intending on pulling Castiel away and going into the store to get some supplies like water and food for the wait they would have, Tony started guiding him away, only for the girl he’d seen to say, “I know you.”

Castiel glanced over his shoulder, brow furrowed. “I don’t think so.”

“Castiel.” The sound of the other’s name had both of them halting, freezing in place. “We met in Heaven. My name is Hael.”

Another angel? How many of them were around?

“You’re an angel,” Castiel said seemingly inanely, facing Hael now.

“Am I?” Hael’s blue eyes were wide. “What’s an angel without its wings?”

Facing Hael fully now as well, Tony’s swept her form, blinking rapidly as he fought to clear his vision. He could see her face and physical body, but now that he was focusing on her, there seemed to be something overlaying her body that he was having trouble making out. It was primarily light — such bright light that he didn’t have a word for.

And there was something else that he intuitively recognized as wings, but they looked nothing like any wings he had seen on Earth. But even though they didn’t look anything like the wings he saw on birds, he just knew that they were tattered, diminished, ruined. They weren’t wings she could use anymore.

Blinking, Tony looked away, focusing on a tree for several seconds before looking back at Hael. That image was still there, but it wasn’t quite as disorienting. He could put aside the fact that it was an angel he was seeing and focus on the human body.

“Still an angel,” Castiel was telling Hael. “Do you…”—he hesitated, glancing back at the payphone and the burly man—“…want to talk about it?”

They ended up sitting by the gas pumps, though Tony just stood by them, knowing that if he sat down now he probably wouldn’t be able to stand again. He leaned against the column and trying his best to pretend that he wasn’t paying that much attention to what they were saying. Hael hadn’t paid any attention to him, and while Tony would usually take insult to that, he couldn’t be bothered to right now. He was too busy mentally panicking about what it meant that there was an angel who knew Castiel here and no one seemed to recognize Tony.

It added up to something he didn’t really want to face.

“It was a normal day,” Hael started, those ephemeral wings Tony was having trouble focusing on fluttering slightly in distress, “and then just…dark. And then I was just…falling.” She looked at Castiel. “How could that happen?”

Castiel didn’t look at her as he answered, “I don’t know.” There was guilt etched into every inch of him, though Tony didn’t know if Hael recognized it for what it was.

“Your Grace,” Hael said, looking more closely at Castiel, “it’s gone?”

Castiel gave her a sad face, his eyes flickering up to Tony. “I do still hear angel radio, though.”
“Then you’ve heard them – our brothers and sisters, many still circling for vessels, most just…so afraid.”

“There’s nothing to be afraid of, I assure you.” Castiel’s tone was comforting.

“But Heaven – there was order. There was purpose.”

And Earth would be the worst place for beings used to order and purpose. There was nothing tidy about being human.

“Well, believe it or not, there may be something even better down here.” Castiel’s face was fond, and he glanced up at Tony, giving him a small smile.

Hael didn’t look away from Castiel. “I don’t understand.”

“There’s opportunity for you, the others who have fallen, to do finally do what you would like to do – not just what you’ve been told.”

“And what would I like to do?”

Castiel’s smile broadened. “You tell me. If you could do anything, what would it be?”

Hael was silent, looking straight ahead. Looking at her angelic self, Tony had the sense that she was quivering in thought and barely restrained excitement. “There’s a place. I built it when I was last here – many years ago. A grand canyon.”


An angel had built the Grand Canyon? Oh, if geologists could hear this, they’d all have coronaries.

“I – I would like to see that.” Although Hael’s human body was still, Tony could see how excited she really was.

“Then go.” Castiel gestured out. “See the Grand Canyon. Go and see anything else you want to. Earth isn’t as orderly as Heaven, but it’s beautiful.”

Hael held onto Castiel’s sleeve as he moved to stand. “You mean you’re not coming?”

“No.” Castiel glanced at Tony. “I can’t. I have somewhere to be.”

Hael stood, gripping onto Castiel’s arm. “Come with me,” she pled.

Castiel gave her a sad look. “I can’t,” he repeated. He gently shook Hael’s hand off. “I have a phone call to make.”

Reaching back for the wallet that Tiberius hadn’t taken off him (the complete idiot he was), Tony followed after Castiel to the now available payphone. He had enough change for a phone call, and it would have to be Castiel to do it.

“You know where we are, don’t you?” Tony asked Castiel quietly, handing him the necessary change.

“Yes.” Castiel slotted the coins in. “I believe we’re in my universe.”

Snorting, Tony leaned his shoulder against the wall by the payphone. “Have that much power to dump the two of us in a different universe and can’t even be bothered to heal me.”
“I’m sorry.” Castiel gave him a concerned look, dialing the number.

Huffing, Tony shook his head, reaching up to rub the heated skin on his face. The throbbing in his head was milder now, but his ribs still protested when he moved too quickly or breathed too deeply. It would be a while until that went away, but hopefully he could get them wrapped soon.

Hael was pacing back and forth about twelve yards away, giving Castiel what she probably thought were surreptitious glances. Tony could practically see her thinking.

Whoever Castiel was calling had picked up judging from the relieved and utterly heartfelt “Dean” the other whispered.

“Yes, I’m all right.” Castiel’s eyes had closed, and he was leaning his head against the back of his hand on the top of the phone. His face pinched at whatever question Dean asked him. “Metatron… he tricked me.” Castiel’s voice was pained. “It was a spell, not the angel trials.”

Castiel shook his head, rubbing against the back of his hand. “I’m fine; I’ll be fine.” He sounded like he was more trying to reassure himself than being truthful.

Whatever the response was had a small smile flitting across Castiel’s face. “I’m not.” He took a breath, drawing back slightly and turning his face up to the sky. “What about you, Dean?”

He turned away from Tony. “Shh, Dean. Tell me.” There was a pause before he said softly, voice choked, “I’m sorry. Metatron – he took my Grace. No, don’t worry about me. I’ll be there as fast as I can; focus on Sam.”

He nodded in response to something, face turning back into view. “Yes, Ezekiel… He’s a good soldier; he’ll able to help until I can come—” Castiel stopped, eyes tightening at whatever Dean was telling him. “Not all of them, Dean. Some are just looking for direction. Some are just lost. But that doesn’t matter; I’m not leaving you.”

This time Dean’s response was loud enough that even Tony could hear it: “It wouldn’t be leaving, you dick! You have to stay safe!”

“I can take care of myself.” Castiel sounded distinctly huffy, and Tony had to turn his face to hide a smile. “Besides, I have Gabriel here.”

Dean’s voice was again loud enough for Tony to hear. “Gabriel?”

“Yes.” Castiel shot Tony a look, shooting him an apologetic smile at Tony’s displeased face. “It’s fine, Dean. I’ll be fine.”

Whatever Dean had to say to that had a mixture of exasperation and fondness and something else Tony had trouble deciphering across Castiel’s face. “Dean—” Fear flashed across his face. “Dean, what’s wrong? No, Dean, damn it, don’t hang up!” Shooting the phone an angry glare, Castiel slammed it into its receiver, closing his eyes and sighing.

“I think I like this Dean,” Tony said after a moment, grinning at Castiel.

Castiel gave Tony a fond but weary smile. “You would.”

“So, where we heading?” Tony very resolutely didn’t think about the fact that he was completely alone in this world and had no way of contacting anyone who could help. He was completely dependent on Castiel, and he didn’t like that.
“Lebanon, Kansas.” Castiel looked back at the road. “Any plans on how to get there?”

“Hm.” Tony gave the place a look, gaze skimming over any possible cars he could hotwire. “Definitely. Give me five while I go get some stuff; we’ll need water and food at the very least. And I’ll also need a map; gotta figure out where we are.”

“Why didn’t we ask the driver?”

“Not knowing where we are even though we had an accident on the road?” Tony snorted. “Really suspicious there, buddy. Best thing to do is get a map and say our GPS isn’t working and we’re lost.”

Castiel conceded the point with a slow nod. “I’ll wait out here then.”

“Sure thing, chief.” Tony brushed by him to the doors, stepping inside the air conditioned interior of the story. None of his credit cards were going to work until he managed to get his hands on a computer and fix that, but he had enough cash to cover them for the basic necessities of food and water even with the exorbitant prices here.

There was a TV playing above the register, and Tony caught sight of what was playing as he passed by it. The captioning said GLOBAL METEOR SHOWER and backed it up by showing images of what looked like meteors falling in broad daylight along with the usual night shots.

“…they’ve all Fallen.”

Shaking his head, Tony focused on what he needed to get. He didn’t bother with coffee, opting instead for a Red Bull because that would at least ice his face until it warmed up. Several large bottles of water, packages of chips, cereal boxes, and some packaged bread also joined the lot as he dumped them on the counter, smiling genially at the man who would ring them up.

“Mind doing this one first?” Tony asked, handing him the Red Bull.

“Accident?” the guy asked, ringing the drink up.

“Tow truck’s been called,” Tony lied, placing the chilled metal back on his heated skin. “Just gotta wait now.” He added a map on top of the cereal box. “Think you can tell me where we are? Got lost somewhere on the way.”

“Longport, Colorado,” the guy told him, unfolding the map to show Tony more specifically. “Right here. Nearest highway’s this one, and here’s the nearest town.” He took a pen and marked both. “Drive safely.”

Tony gave him another smile, paid in cash, and then took the bags, biting the inside of his mouth as his ribs protested against the heavy lifting.

Castiel could help—

Where was he?

Forcefully keeping himself calm, Tony gave the surrounding area one quick glance before catching a glimpse of a car driving out of sight. There was no sign of Hael either.

_Damn it._

Moving quickly around to the side of the building, Tony headed to one of the cars he had made note
of earlier. It was one that he knew didn’t have a good alarm system, so that made it absolutely perfect for what he needed to do.

Five minutes later, he was peeling out of the gas station and tearing after Hael’s car. He felt only moderately guilty for stealing the car, but cars could be replaced. Castiel couldn’t, and Tony had absolutely no idea how this universe worked given there were freaking angels around.

The sharp curves inhibited him from going any faster, but he didn’t think that Hael counted him as a threat. It would be the last mistake she made.

Smiling grimly to himself as he caught sight of the car, Tony floored it, the engine whining in protest as he asked more of it than it could give. Still, it managed, and Tony rammed the back of the other car, sending it skidding off to the side and into a bush.

Bringing his car to a stop, Tony threw himself out in time to catch Hael doing the same, brandishing a familiar looking sword in her hand.

Ah, damn.

“Who are you?” Hael demanded, gazing at him furiously.

“Castiel’s friend.” Tony gave her a tight smile, looking over her shoulder and into the car to see if he could find Castiel.

“You’re not a Winchester.”

“No, sorry.” Tony shrugged, eyeing the sword she was pointing at him. “And you’re not very angelic.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I mean, kidnapping? Not exactly something an angel should do.” Tony took a step closer; Hael stiffened. “What’s up with that anyway? Castiel already told you he can’t go with you. Couldn’t take no for an answer?”

“It’s none of your business,” Hael snapped.

“Seeing as how I’m Castiel’s impromptu traveling buddy, it definitely is. So you’re going to tell me why, and I’m going to get Castiel, and then we’re going to go our separate ways. Got it?”

“You don’t understand!” Hael cried, fingers clenching white around the hilt of her sword. “It’s Castiel’s fault that we’ve been shut out of Heaven! He’s the reason we’re all down here like this.”

Tony’s mouth twisted. “So it’s his fault that a douchebag tricked him and took his Grace? Last I checked, we blame the douchebags, not the victims.”

“It’s not the first time Castiel’s made a mistake like this,” Hael continued, glaring at Tony. “But it will be the last.”

“So you’re going to kill him?” Tony took another step closer, heart pounding as that sword wove in response to his movement.

Hael’s smile was chilling. “Not kill him. We’re going to become one.”

There was something about the way she said it that drove chills down Tony’s spine. And it popped out of his mouth before he could stop it: “Possession? You’re going to possess him?”
Hael frowned. “Your eyes…”

“That’s not happening.” Tony snapped, taking one more step closer, fury surging through his veins. “I’m giving you one last chance, Hael. Walk away, and I’ll let you live.” He wasn’t even sure where the fury was coming from; he had no attachment to Castiel outside of the fact that he’d helped the guy. But for some reason, the thought of Hael possessing Castiel had him see red.

Hael notably hesitated, eyes scanning Tony’s body. For a second Tony thought she would run, but then she shook her head, eyes fixed on Tony’s, and said, “No. I’m taking Castiel, and we’re going to do this together.” Without warning, she lunged at Tony, sword held high.

He had done this before.

Almost as if he was in a dream, Tony stepped aside, grabbed hold of her wrist, and used her own momentum to twist her around to the ground, following through by bringing her hand down andstabbing her sword directly through her heart.

Hael gasped, and a voice Tony almost didn’t recognize as his own said, “You have been judged, Hael,” as a searing white flash of light erupted from her eyes and mouth, and her angelic form burst apart.

When it was over, Tony found himself kneeling there, one hand on Hael’s that he had pushed into her heart, and the burnt image of two wings scorched into the grass. Exhaling sharply, Tony pushed away from Hael, sitting down heavily as he struggled to comprehend what had just happened.

That hadn’t been him…and yet it had been.

What was happening?

Half an hour later, Castiel started stirring, wincing as he did. Tony hadn’t moved him from the passenger seat, having instead left his own car sitting there and taken Hael’s. It was far easier to explain a dented back bumper than it was to explain the crumpled hood of his own, and the front of this car was mostly intact save for a few scratches in the paint and some dents.

Gasping sharply, Castiel touched the back of his head, his hand coming away red. He looked over at Tony, confusion written over his face. “What happened?”

“Hael knocked you out.” Tony opened the center console and pulled out a package of napkins that he’d found before driving off. “Use these. Head wounds always bleed a lot.”

Castiel took the package. “Hael?”

Tony nodded, keeping his eyes fixed on the road. “It’ll be about six hours until we hit Lebanon, and then you’ll have to tell me where exactly I’m going because I have no clue.”

Castiel looked around the car. “Where is she?” He froze. “Is that—”

“Her sword?” Tony kept his voice even through sheer force of will. “Yes.”

“You killed her?” Castiel’s tone was unreadable.

“She tried to kill me first.” Tony’s fingers tightened on the steering wheel. “I got to her instead.”

Castiel ripped open the package, bringing up a wad of tissue and holding it to the back of his head. “Why would she do that?”
“She wanted to possess you, said something about ‘becoming one.’” The words still sent a revolted shiver and a surge of fury through Tony, though the speaker was already dead. “I gave her a chance,” he added, glancing at Castiel out of the corner of his eye. “She didn’t take it.”

Castiel seemed stunned, eyes closing as his head bowed. “I’m sorry you had to do that.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not.” Tony said nothing about what else had happened, not knowing how to bring it up. “She tried to kill me first; I’m not the kind of guy to take that lying down.”

“No, I suppose you aren’t.” Castiel’s eyes were an almost physical weight on Tony’s face. “Your face is better.” He sounded surprised.

“Guess the ice helped.” Tony kept his tone noncommittal; he’d already seen the fading bruise in the mirror and had had his little freak out over the matter. Whatever he’d done while killing Hael had obviously done a little something else; even his ribs didn’t hurt quite so much anymore. “How you feeling?”

Castiel made a pained sound, looking down at his bloody tissue. “My head hurts.”

“Getting knocked out will do that to you.” Tony shot him a grin.

Castiel’s eyes flicked to Tony’s head. “Are you sure you should be driving?”

“Probably not, but seeing as how I’m the only one here with a license, you’re stuck with me.”

Castiel made a small huffing sound that could have been laughter. “Fair enough. You said about six hours?”

“Without bathroom breaks, and we’re going to need those.” Tony turned the radio on, switching it to a good music station. “Sit back and relax, Castiel. We’ll be there in no time.”

Castiel snorted, though his face was blank when Tony looked at him. “If ‘no time’ is your idea of six hours in car.”

Not taking his eyes off the road, Tony reached over and shoved at Castiel’s shoulder. “No dissing the driver.”

A faint smile flickering across Castiel’s face, he settled back into his seat, holding a clean tissue to the back of his head.

Yeah, Tony didn’t regret killing Hael. It was hard to when the reason for doing so was sitting comfortably next to him, very clearly alive.

About seven hours and several wrong turns later, Tony pulled up to what looked like an abandoned factory. Castiel pointed to a door in the hill, and Tony had an eerie thought that it seemed way too Lord-of-the-Rings-style to him.

“Please don’t tell me your friends are hobbits,” Tony said, peering out the window. It was a rather dreary evening in Kansas, barely enough light to see where they had to go in.

“Dean and Sam aren’t hobbits,” Castiel said, opening the door and stepping out.

Tony looked after him, eyebrows raised as the door closed. “Okay, good to know.” Reaching back for the bloody angel sword that had belonged to Hael, he turned off the car and got out, circling around to stand next to Castiel. “Are they here?”
“Dean’s car isn’t, so I would assume they haven’t made it back yet.” Castiel sounded resigned. “But we can go inside if the door’s unlocked.”

“Well, I’ve got nothing against going through a door in a hill in the middle of bumfuck, Kansas. It sounds like a brilliant idea.”

Castiel gave Tony a look. “That was sarcasm.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “Yes, it was.” It was getting cold just standing out here, and Tony hadn’t dressed for staying out all night. “So, we going in or not?”

“We are.” Castiel headed for the stairs, Tony following more warily. He trusted Castiel, but he didn’t trust Castiel that much.

Following a few minutes of jiggling the door, checking the lock, and knocking, Castiel stepped back unhappily. “We’ve been locked out.”

“What does that mean? Dean didn’t give you a key?”

“There is only one key to the bunker.” Castiel rocked back on his heels, looking up forlornly at Tony. “We’ll have to wait for Dean and Sam.”

“Okay.” Leaning over the railing, Tony clapped his hands together before wrapping them around the cool metal, pulling back. “Let’s go see where we can stay the night. I’m not sleeping in the car.” He clapped a hand on Castiel’s shoulder when the other was back up on his level. “We’ll be back in the morning, okay?” he said softly.

Castiel’s eyes were downcast as he nodded.

Sighing, Tony gave the bunker one last look before heading back to the car. He had just about enough cash for one cheap motel room before he would have to hack into an ATM machine and get more, which wasn’t something he wanted to do now.

When they pulled up to the bunker again the next morning, there was an absolutely gorgeous 1967 Chevy Impala standing outside, gleaming blackly in the morning light. Tony knew his cars, and this car had been lovingly taken care of.

“I like the guy who has that car,” Tony said, pointing to it.

“That would be Dean.” Castiel looked excited, his eyes bright. “Let’s go.”

The door was still locked when Castiel tried it, but this time someone opened the door when he knocked. From his place next to Castiel, Tony was almost knocked over by the man who choked out a soft “Cas” before throwing himself at Castiel and knocking them both into the cement on the other side of the door.

“Dean – Dean,” Castiel was saying, his arms around the other man’s waist.

“God, Cas.” Dean sounded choked, and that was all Tony heard before Dean planted a big one on Castiel.

Feeling uncomfortably like a voyeur, Tony looked back at the door, only to see two other guys standing there, one an absolute giant and the second looking like a shrimp next to him. The smaller one had the beginnings of a beard at the underside of his jaw and bruises under his eyes from lack of
sleep, his black hair tousled in the manner that spoke of his lack of care. The giant had long, brown hair, and he looked gaunt but healthier than the kid.

“Hi,” Tony said when he saw them looking at him.

“You’re Gabriel?” the giant asked, a faint note of incredulity in his tone.

Tony barely restrained a flinch. “Tony.”

“Tony,” the giant repeated, raising an eyebrow skeptically.

“That’s my name.” Tony nodded, looked back at Dean and Castiel, both of whom had stopped making out and pulled apart to look between Tony and the other two men.

“Let the guy in, Sam,” Dean said, one arm slung around Castiel. He was an inch taller than Castiel with startling green eyes and tousled light brown hair; he was also wearing just as much flannel as the giant now that Tony noticed.

“Believe me, I’m harmless,” Tony added, trying for a charming grin.

“Uh-huh.” The giant gave Tony a scrutinizing look that just stank of suspicion.

“He helped me,” Castiel said, giving Tony a smile.

“I’d appreciate a little bit of that help, too,” Tony said, scratching the back of his neck and letting his hand drop. “Cause I don’t want to stay here just as much as you don’t want me here, sasquatch.”

“We’ll help you, Tony,” Castiel promised.

“Whoa, Cas.” Dean’s eyes flickered between them. “Is there something you want to tell us?”

“Yes. Inside.”

Once inside and the doors closed, the giant looked at Tony. “You look awfully uncomfortable for someone who helped those two get together in the first place.”

Tony’s mouth twisted. “Yeah, yeah. Here’s the big thing, big guy, I don’t remember. I’m just the guy who Castiel called several days ago ’cause he woke up in my universe all in a tizzy. And now I’m here because some jackass hauled us out of the fire and couldn’t be bothered to leave a note explaining why.” Brushing by the stunned giant, he followed Castiel down.

Giving the inside of the bunker a speculative glance, Tony had to admit that it was a lot prettier than anything he’d expected. Dean and Castiel had made themselves comfortable in what looked like a small library, several long wooden tables lined up in a row along the length of the room.

“Nice place,” Tony said to Dean, sitting down across from him.

“Yeah.” Dean seemed pleased.

“Who is this guy?” the shrimp demanded, standing nervously at the other end of the table.

“Kevin, this is Tony Stark,” Castiel said.

Dean’s head snapped to Castiel. “Tony Stark? As in Iron Man?”

The giant – who was probably Sam through process of elimination – gave Dean what could only be
called a bitch face. “Dean.”

“He’s right,” Tony said, getting everyone’s attention. “But how’d you know? It’s not like it’s public.”

“Dude”—Dean leaned forward, face gleeful—“you’re a famous—”

“Not that famous,” Sam said.

“—famous,” Dean continued, shooting Sam a glare, “comic book hero!”

Tony’s eyebrows flew up. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Comic books?”

“No, but this is awesome.” Dean was grinning. “First case you had us out on, there was a Hulk!”

“Huh.” Sam looked thoughtful. “I remember that.”

Tony scowled. “I wasn’t on any case with you.”

“He doesn’t remember, Dean,” Castiel interrupted whatever Dean was going to say next. “This is Tony.”

“Not Gabriel,” Tony said pointedly, folding his arms across his chest. “No matter what everyone keeps saying.”

“Well, uh…” Dean’s eyes skimmed over Tony’s figure. “You do look awfully like the guy who popped in about a year ago and ganked Dick.”

“He has no Grace,” Castiel said.

Tony nodded sharply, pursing his lips. “Harsh but accurately put.”

Dean didn’t seem to comprehend, his eyes narrowing. “You sure had a lot of Grace the last time we saw you.”

“Yeah, I don’t know what you saw, but that wasn’t me.”

Dean opened his mouth, but he closed it when Castiel rested a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head slightly.

“So you can’t help then,” Sam said, sounding disappointed.

“With what happened with the angels?” Tony tilted his head, shrugging one shoulder. “No clue.”

Dean looked up at Kevin, who sighed, shoulders slumping. “Yeah, I’m doing the angel tablet,” he said tiredly.

“Hopefully there’ll be something on there about the spell Metatron used,” Dean said, slinging his arm around Castiel’s shoulders. He looked at Castiel. “How you feeling, Cas?” His voice was soft.

Castiel’s smile was gentle. “Better now, Dean.”

Sam’s smile was a mixture of disbelief and happiness. “Well, I’m glad you’re good, Cas. Tony, we’ll help you out. What we can anyway.”

Tony graced him with half a smile. “Thanks, sasquatch.”
Sam winced at that. “Yeah, uh… Let’s keep it to Sam?”

Tony’s smile widened into a shit-eating grin. “Sure thing, sasquatch.”

Sam’s hand clenched into a fist, and he nodded once, lips pursed. “I knew it.”

Giving him a curious look that went ignored, Tony watched as Sam stood and left the room, leaving Tony with Dean, Castiel, and Kevin. His eyes lingered on Sam’s tall form, brow furrowing as he caught a glimpse of something not quite…human. It was so brief he almost wasn’t sure if he’d seen it, but he had – the undeniable image of tattered, torn wings. Then it was gone, and all he saw was Sam’s back disappearing from sight.

“I’m gonna make some grub,” Dean said, grinning warmly at Castiel. “You want something?”

“We didn’t get breakfast,” Castiel said, smiling back at him.

“Let’s fix that.” Standing, Dean brushed his lips against Castiel’s temple, fingers interlocking with Castiel’s briefly and squeezing before he left.

Tony did his best not to stare, ending up pulling out his phone for lack of anything better to do. He felt more than saw Castiel leave after Dean.

“Oh man, what is that?” he heard Kevin ask curiously.

“My phone,” Tony answered absentmindedly, holding it up so he could see.

“That’s a phone? They have that on the market?”

“My company’s not here, so obviously not.” Tony waggled it briefly before bringing it back down. “It’s one-of-a-kind anyway, given to Death and then somehow ending up with Castiel.”

“I’m sorry.” Kevin rested his hand on the table. “Did you say Death?”

“Yes. Nearly gave me a heart attack, popping up in my kitchen like he did.” Tony smiled wryly, remembering that morning.

“Wouldn’t Death do that?”

“I suppose.” Tony shrugged, biting the inside of his mouth and putting the phone away. “Didn’t, anyway. You related to them?” he changed the subject, gesturing in the direction Dean and Castiel had gone.

Kevin snorted. “You’re kidding me, right? Do I look like I could be related to them?”

“Adoption’s always a possibility.”

“Yeah, no.” Kevin shook his head. “I’m just the prophet.” His tone was bitter as he said this.

Tony wasn’t quite sure how to respond, so he stayed silent for a minute. Then, “No idea what that is, but it sounds like an absolutely fantastic job.” He stood, bracing himself on the table as his still bruised ribs protested the abrupt shift. “I’m gonna go get myself some coffee.”

Kevin’s bitter voice drifted after him as Tony attempted to find the kitchen: “Oh yeah, fantastic job if you’re looking to get killed.”

Tony had no idea what was going on there, but he suspected it wouldn’t end well if nothing
changed. The kid seemed way too exhausted for his own good, and then there was how young he was in comparison to Dean and Sam.

Still…not his business. All he needed was to get back home.

But first coffee.

Chapter End Notes

We are getting so close to a tipping point that I'm practically vibrating with excitement here. I really hope you enjoyed this chapter. Please let me know what you thought!

I actually wrote out Dean's part of the phone call:
What – Cas?
What the hell happened, Cas?
Cas... Are you…?
Don’t try that bullshit on me, Cas.
It’s…not good. Sam, Cas, he’s… They say he’s dying. I stopped him, but it didn’t work —

I don’t know. I mean, first he was okay, and then he wasn’t. And I – have you heard my prayers? I’ve been praying to you all night.
There’s actually another angel working on him now. Says his name’s Ezekiel. Seems cool to me.
You better be, Cas. But please, stay safe. Don’t come here; head to the bunker. I’ll be there as fast as I can with Sam.
No, Cas, stay safe. I mean it. Don’t trust anybody; you’ve got a hell of a bunch of angels on your ass, and – oh, shit. We’ve got company. Head to the bunker; we’ll meet you there.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Consider this a Christmas present from Santa. ;D Which is why I didn't tell anyone it would be up so soon.

It's not as long as chapters have been lately, but I think the content more than makes up for the length. Happy reading! I hope you enjoy. :)

Also, I hope you all have a wonderful Christmas/Hanukkah/whatever you celebrate! ^^

Instead of the kitchen, Dean pulled Castiel into his bedroom, pushing him up against the door and kissing him, hands pressing between the small of his back and the door. “Cas,” he breathed against Castiel’s lips.

“I’m fine, Dean.” Castiel’s hand came up to the back of Dean’s head to pull him into a softer kiss. “I’m fine.” He brushed his nose against Dean’s.

“I thought you weren’t.” Dean leaned his forehead against Castiel’s, pressing his chest against Castiel’s, the other’s steady breathing reassuring. “You didn’t call, and I thought – I thought—” The words stuck in his throat, and Dean closed his eyes, dipping in to press a close-mouthed kiss against Castiel’s mouth.

“I’m not that easy to kill.” The words were wry, but they sent a shudder of fear down Dean’s spine. “In any case, that was never Metatron’s objective.”

“What was it, then?” Dean asked quietly, gently stroking Castiel’s back through the thick material of his trench coat and his suit.

“My Grace.” Castiel’s breath hitched, and Dean instinctively drew him into a tighter embrace. “He took my Grace, Dean. He took it and used it to complete the spell, locking down Heaven and shutting the angels out.”

“Shh…” Dean stroked a hand soothingly up and down Castiel’s shuddering back. “We’ll fix it, Cas. We always do.”

“I don’t know if this can be fixed.” Castiel’s voice was small.

“Hey.” Dean pulled back, his hands coming up to frame Castiel’s face. “We don’t talk like that. This can be fixed; we are going to fix this. A spell’s a spell, and spells can be broken.”

“I’m sorry.” Castiel’s voice broke halfway through the “sorry.” “I’m sorry, Dean. All I wanted was to keep you safe.”

“Damn it, Cas, I know.” Dean crushed him into another embrace, and this time Castiel returned it furiously, his grip one of desperation. “We talked about it, remember? Don’t get me wrong: it sucks that this happened, but we’re going to deal with it, you hear me? You and me and Sam, just like we always do.” He pulled back far enough to meet Castiel’s eyes. “You got it?”
“Yes, Dean.” Castiel drew him closer, dropping his head to Dean’s shoulder. “Thank you,” he whispered.

“We’re family,” Dean murmured into Castiel’s hair. “S’what family does.”

“Clean up messes?”

“It’s part of it.” Dean pulled away, smirking at Castiel’s displeased look at the distance put between them. “C’mon, Cas.”

Once he saw that all Dean wanted was to take it to the bed, Castiel went willingly enough, shedding his trench coat and suit jacket to curl up next to Dean, resting his head on Dean’s shoulder.

They lay there for several long minutes, simply breathing.

Castiel broke the silence. “Sam looks…healthy.”

Dean heard the unspoken question. “He…he wasn’t good, Cas. The last trial took it out of him, and then he didn’t even finish it.” He couldn’t stop the bitterness. “Wanted to stop him from dying, only to have him end up dying anyway.”

“But he isn’t dead.”

“Thanks to Ezekiel.” Dean could remember the desperate hope and relief that had suffused him at Ezekiel’s appearance and offer to help. The crushing disappointment, panic, and grief that struck him when Ezekiel had shown him Sam asking Death to make it permanent this time. The heartrending pain and knowledge that this was wrong when he told Ezekiel to do it and trick Sam because he couldn’t do it any other way – couldn’t deal with Sam’s death.

“Dean?” Castiel was looking up at him worriedly. He pushed himself up on an elbow. “What did you do?”

“I had to, Cas.” Dean’s fingers tightened instinctively on Castiel’s waist, silently begging him not to leave. “I – he gave up. I couldn’t let him go.”

“You can tell me.” Castiel’s voice was gently reassuring, his hand a warm weight on Dean’s chest, resting directly over Dean’s heart.

Worrying his lower lip in his teeth, Dean took several deep breaths through his nose. But Castiel’s steady gaze never wavered, that unquestioning love and understanding in his eyes. It gave Dean enough courage to tell him what he had been unable to tell anyone else, voice wrecked as he did. “Ezekiel…he’s inside Sam. It was the only way.”

Castiel didn’t immediately respond beyond a frown. “Are you telling me that Ezekiel is using Sam as a vessel?”

“Healing him while healing himself,” Dean explained hoarsely, fingers clenching in Castiel’s shirt so tightly they were white. Don’t leave. “There was no other way, Cas, and we were running out of time. Sam was going to die—” Castiel’s gentle fingers over his lips quieted him.

“Shh, Dean,” Castiel murmured. “It’s all right.”

Dean shook his head, dislodging Castiel’s fingers. “No, it isn’t.”

“Does Sam know?”
“No.” The word was a heavy weight forced out of his throat. “He wouldn’t accept it if – if he did know. Ezekiel…he’s too weak; he’d be forced out. And Sam…”

“Would die,” Castiel finished when Dean couldn’t. “Yes, I see.”

Dean looked up at him desperately. “Do you?”

“Was it the best decision? I don’t know.” Castiel’s thumb softly stroked along the curve of Dean’s jaw. “I’ve made worse myself, and you’ve forgiven me. Sam’s your brother; he’ll forgive you as well. Will he see it as a betrayal? Most likely.”

Dean swallowed thickly, opening his mouth to say something, only to swallow his words when Castiel kissed him, hand curving around Dean’s neck to tangle in the soft hairs at his nape.

When Castiel drew back, it was only far enough to brush the words against Dean’s tingling lips. “Someone once said it’s better to ask forgiveness than permission.”

“You think that applies here?”

“I think that no matter what happens, I will be right here with you,” Castiel said softly, brushing a kiss against the corner of Dean’s mouth, his scruff scratching against Dean’s. “I’m not leaving, Dean. I told you.”

So many times. Dean’s breath hitched, and he pressed his face into the crook of Castiel’s face, suddenly overwhelmed with the full force of his emotions. He felt Castiel’s arms curl around him, enveloping him in a familiar embrace.

It was everything that he needed, and everything that he’d hoped for since the failed trial and the sight of the angels falling from Heaven.

When Dean did finally make it into the kitchen, he found the coffee machine empty of the pot and Sam eyeing it peculiarly.

“Coffee isn’t sweet, is it?” Sam asked Dean, not looking away from the coffee machine.

“Not last I checked.” Dean checked the fridge. “Why?”

“Because I saw Gabriel leave with the entire carafe, and last I checked the guy ate sweets.”

“Not really Gabriel anymore,” Dean said, remembering what Castiel had told him. “Not in the way it counts.”

“Yeah, I’m not so sure about that.” Sam huffed, shaking his head. “Tony Stark or Gabriel, they act way too alike. Doesn’t matter if he doesn’t remember.”

“Yeah, well, it matters to the guy, so lay off.” Dean settled on the last of the bacon and some fruit, the latter being so Castiel wouldn’t eye him disapprovingly.

“Why do you care?” Sam asked disbelievingly.

Dean slammed the pan down a bit too hard on the stove. “Since he went and died for us in the apocalypse. Since he gave Cas and me the push we needed.”

Sam was quiet while Dean started cooking the bacon and chopping the fruit. Then, quietly enough that Dean almost missed it with the bacon sizzling, Sam said, “Yeah, I get it.”
Dean nodded briskly, shooting Sam a smile over his shoulder. “Good.” He waved the knife. “Want something?”

Sam’s eyebrows rose. “Bacon and fruit? Pass.”

“Have it your way.”

It wasn’t until Dean sat down with his breakfast that the hammer fell, Sam’s eyes flaring with an unearthly Grace light. Then it wasn’t Sam sitting there anymore, but Ezekiel, body ramrod stiff like he wasn’t sure how to sit comfortably in it and face similarly blank.

“Ezekiel?” Dean had to be sure.

“Castiel cannot stay,” Ezekiel said abruptly, face like stone.

The fork clattered to the plate. “What do you mean he can’t stay?” he demanded.

“He will bring the angels down on us. They are organizing into factions, and they are coming after Castiel.”

Dean couldn’t breathe, his hands clenching the sides of the table tightly. “And you want me to throw him out there? I can’t do that!”

“This place is warded, but not so that we can withstand an incursion of angels. Castiel is in danger, and if he is here, then I am in danger.”

Dean’s eyes snapped to him, narrowed. “You’re in danger? From who? The angels?”

Ezekiel didn’t answer. “If he stays, I will have no choice but to leave.”

“No, wait, you can’t do that.” Dean was breathing too rapidly to be good. “Sam’s not well enough. If you leave now—”

“I know.” Ezekiel did look regretful. “I am sorry.”

“I can’t—” Dean shook his head, hands coming up to clutch at his hair. Damn it, he’d just gotten Castiel back, and now Ezekiel wanted him to send Castiel out there?

He couldn’t – Dean couldn’t – he didn’t – oh hell, he couldn’t breathe—

“Hey, Dean!” The voice was familiar, but Dean couldn’t place it, only that something had pulled his chair back and someone had pushed his head down between his knees, forcefully telling him to count to seven between breathing and then also to follow the other’s breathing, a hand bringing his own up to an unfamiliar chest.

Matching his breathing to that of the other man’s, Dean found his pounding heart gradually slowing, his breathing slowly matching its pace.

“Good, that’s good.” It was Tony; he recognized the voice now that he wasn’t in the midst of a panic attack of the likes that he hadn’t experienced before. “Keep breathing like that. As for you – no, don’t leave!”

Dean’s head snapped up in time to catch Tony hauling Ezekiel up to his feet and slamming him into the counter.

“I knew something was off!” Tony was snarling into Ezekiel’s face, all fury and ferocity despite his
much smaller size compared to Sam’s. “The second I saw those fucking wings, and you’re not Sam, are you? No, Ezekiel.”

“Let me go.” Ezekiel’s voice was calm.

“I don’t think so.” Tony’s fingers visibly tightened in Sam’s jacket. “Why don’t we get started with what you were just telling Dean there to do? You’re an angel, and you’re going to leave Castiel out there at the mercy of the rest of your lot? Last I checked, you don’t do that to family, and I killed the last angel that tried.” He reached back, pulling out an angel sword from his waistband. “I won’t hesitate doing so again.”

Dean surged to his feet, lunging forward, his hand clamping down on Tony’s wrist. “Don’t!”

Tony fixed him with a furious glare, his eyes flaring with a similar light to what Dean had seen earlier in Sam’s. The sight startled him enough that his grip slackened, allowing Tony to shake his hand off.

“You’re not considering what he just said, are you?” Tony demanded, the light dissipating to reveal his brown eyes. “Because if you are, we’re going to have a problem on our hands.”

“You’re not killing him!” Dean snapped, grabbing hold of Tony’s wrist again and forcing it down to his side. “That’s my brother he’s in.”

“Yeah, I noticed,” Tony said flatly, eyes darting back to a calm Ezekiel.

“What’s going on?” Castiel’s voice came from the doorway.

Dean’s head snapped around to find Castiel standing there in soft jeans and a familiar flannel shirt and jacket that were just a bit too large. His heart gave that familiar thump at seeing Castiel in his clothes, but Dean quickly forced himself to focus on the problem, which was Ezekiel and a still visibly vibrating Tony.

“Castiel.” Ezekiel’s voice was soft.

Castiel came closer, his eyes on Ezekiel. “Hello, brother.” His eyes went to Dean. “What’s going on, Dean?” he repeated his earlier question.

Tony wrenched his wrist out of Dean’s grip, stepping back from Ezekiel, his face clearly disgusted. “This guy”—he pointed at Ezekiel—“wants you out because he says it’s too dangerous.”

“The angels are after you,” Ezekiel said completely unapologetically. “I am sure you understand the danger, Castiel.”

Castiel visibly swallowed, his body straightening as he readied himself. “I do.”

“Then you understand you must leave.”

Tony looked dearly like he wanted to say something, but his mouth twisted angrily, his eyes flashing to Dean before going back to Ezekiel.

“Dean?” Castiel’s voice was soft.

Dean trembled, shaking his head. “Cas, I don’t…” He choked on the words, his hand coming up to cover his mouth.

“It’s okay.” Castiel’s hands were on his face, thumbs gently stroking his temples. “Dean, I
understand. Do you want me to leave?"

The answer was out before he even had to think. “No.”

“Do you want me to stay?”

Nodding wordlessly, Dean slumped into Castiel’s hold, hands coming up to Castiel’s waist.

“Then I’ll stay,” Castiel breathed, “as long as you want me.”

“Castiel—” Ezekiel started.

“This isn’t the first time I’ve had to hide,” Castiel interrupted, looking at him. “There are wards I can use.” The corner of his mouth lifted into a small smile. “I’ve always wanted a tattoo.”

“Cas…” Dean couldn’t manage anything else, his eyes burning.

“As long as you’ll have me,” Castiel reminded him gently, his eyes crinkling in the corners. “Now, do you have a tattoo machine here, or are we going to need to go into town for this?”

Dean huffed out a soft laugh, leaning into brush his lips over Castiel’s forehead, eyes closing at the feel. “We’ll get it done in town.”

“And you’re staying put?” Tony asked, looking straight at Ezekiel when Dean glanced over.

Ezekiel’s lips were pressed together, but he nodded. “I trust that you have this handled, Castiel.”

“I do, Ezekiel.” Castiel sounded confident.

“Very well.” Ezekiel pushed by them, sitting down in the seat Sam had been. It took all of a second before Sam was sitting there, blinking rapidly in shocked surprise to find everyone standing and staring at him.

“Wha – Dean?” Sam looked startled, eyes wide. “Weren’t you just sitting?” He glanced back at Dean’s former seat in confusion.

“You passed out, Sammy,” Dean lied, fingers tightening briefly in Castiel’s jacket.

“I…” Sam looked down at his hands. “I don’t remember.”

“That’s generally what happens when you pass out.” Tony’s voice seemed to be forcefully even, and he was giving Dean a sharp look. “You might want to lie down.”

“Yeah, uh…” Sam shook his head, pressing the palm of his hand into his eyes. “I think I’ll do that.”

Once Sam was gone, Tony turned on Dean. “I hope you know what you’re doing, Dean.” The angel blade in his hand glistened in the light as he also left.

“You don’t, do you?” Castiel asked softly.

Dean managed a weak smile, shaking his head. “Never do, but…I think we’ll manage.” He turned his head to press a soft kiss to Castiel’s head, eyes closing.

The flare of Grace-light in Tony’s eyes flashed in Dean’s mind, and he wondered if Gabriel really was as gone as Tony claimed.
While Dean and Castiel were off getting Castiel’s new tattoo (or at least that’s what Tony thought they were doing; he wouldn’t put it past Dean to haul them both to the bedroom), Tony made himself at home by exploring the bunker. It was a lot bigger than one would initially assume, with a ton of bedrooms with amazing mattresses and really fantastic water pressure in the bathrooms.

Whoever had built this bunker had built it with more in mind than just an outpost for whatever they’d needed it for. There was a ton of old tech dating back to the 1950s out in the circular room right under the entrance, and while Tony’s gig was usually more modern tech, he could also dig an authentic piece of old tech if it was in near mint condition. And these were.

“Are you sure you should be doing that?” Kevin’s voice asked as Tony was poking around in the innards of one of the transmitters.

“I’m not destroying anything, kiddo.” Tony pushed apart some wires to get a closer look at the main part.

“From here it kind of looks like you are.”

Sighing, Tony turned his head to look at Kevin, pointing at him with a screwdriver he had found lying around before taking the initiative to poke around the machines. “Hi, I’m Tony Stark, tech’s kind of my gig. If I destroy something, you’ll know because it’s likely to explode.”

Kevin gave him an unimpressed face. “Is that supposed to comfort me? Because all that tells me is that if you do something wrong, this is gonna explode in my face.”

“No, it isn’t. I’m not in the business of making bombs anymore. Clean energy, simple tech, designing better protection and surveillance equipment…” Tony pointed at himself. “That’s me. Not that I’m doing any of the above. I just want to get a better look at this thing; anything we have back where I’m from is in a museum.”

Kevin peered into the depths of where Tony was tucked into, face dubious. “Okay,” he said eventually. “Fine.” He moved out of sight, only to dart back and say, “If you are going to wire something to explode, can you do the basement? There’s a demon down there.” He was gone before Tony could reply.

He didn’t know why he expected anything else. There were angels, so why not demons?

But why the hell was there a demon in the basement?

Later, once Tony had put the machine back together again and cleaned up, he joined Kevin in the library. Kevin was bent over a hunk of stone inscribed with strange hieroglyphics, a pad of paper and a pencil next to him that he occasionally scribbled something on.

Giving the stone Kevin was studying intently a curious look, Tony walked past him and looked the bookshelves over, eyes skimming over the titles. Some were in languages he didn’t understand beyond noting that they were in Greek and some sorts of obscure dialects that must’ve died out years ago. There were a couple of Latin books, and while Tony had taken Latin in his younger years, he didn’t really feel like reading it.

The English books had titles on demons, ghosts, and obscure legends from different parts of the world. Tony picked a fat red one and brought it over to the table, sitting across from Kevin and opening the book to the table of contents.

Sam joined them about half an hour later, carrying a laptop and setting it up at the head of the table.
Kevin occasionally winced and frowned as he squinted at the stone, which was probably the angel tablet he had talked about earlier. His eyes looked bloodshot.

Tony finally couldn’t take it any longer. “Hey, kid, you okay?”

“Oh yeah.” Kevin gave him a distracted smile, nodding. “Fine.”

“You sure?” Tony pressed. “Because no offense, but you look exhausted.”

“No kidding?” Kevin wrote something on the pad, the pen digging into the paper. “This is the second freaking tablet I’ve had to translate. The last one I ended up missing something big like the person taking the trials dying, and I have to get this one right, or we’re all gonna die!”

“Whoa, Kevin!” Sam’s head flew up, face twisted in concern. “It’s going to be all right.”

“You’ve said that all this time, but it’s not!” Kevin’s voice was hoarse, cracking with distress. “And it’s never going to be all right unless I get this done! So yes, I’m fine.” He huffed, drawing the pad closer and bending back down over the tablet, very pointedly not looking at either Tony or Sam.

Leaning back in his chair, Tony shared a worried look with Sam, the other frowning in concern.

Then, mouth thinning, Sam shook his head and looked back down at his screen, returning to whatever he had been doing before.

Tony’s thumb stroked over the corner of the page he was holding, thoughts whirring. There was nothing he could do to help them with this problem. Nothing.

But then why did he feel so guilty?

Dean and Castiel came back in the late evening, having evidently done some other things aside from get Castiel tattooed. Once back, Dean showed Tony to an empty bedroom he could use while he was stuck in their universe; there was literally nothing in it, but Tony didn’t mind. All he really needed was a bed.

Turning his phone off so it could charge, Tony flopped face down on the bed, only bothering to kick his shoes off, hearing them drop with double thumps to the floor. It was several minutes before he could bother to move himself enough to wiggle his jeans off. His hoodie joined it, and then Tony rolled under the covers, falling asleep the moment he was warm.

His dreams were troubled, though he couldn’t say that he remembered them when he woke up. The only thing that stuck with him was the sounds of endless screaming and crying, along with a thundering sound that echoed like a horn.

Groaning softly, Tony dragged a hand down his face, rubbing his eyes. His body was reluctant to get up, so he just lay there, staring up at the ceiling. That there were no windows was all the better, as he had no idea what time it was beyond “potentially early.”

Eventually, he woke up enough to grope for his phone and turn it on, checking the time. It was eight-thirty when the screen brightened, but the most important thing that caught his attention was a text message.

From 212-555-8482:

Sir?
He dropped the phone, his fingers gone slack in shock. The sound of the phone hitting the floor was enough of a jolt to scramble him into motion, and he leaned over the edge to snatch it up, thumb running over the text.

He knew that number.

Not bothering with another text, Tony went straight for calling, phone pressed hard to his ear as he waited with bated breath for the other to pick up.

His call was answered barely after the first ring had ceased. “Sir?”

Tony couldn’t stop the relieved laugh at JARVIS’s familiar voice. “JARVIS?”

“Yes, sir.” JARVIS sounded incredibly relieved. “May I just say how thankful I am to hear your voice?”

“You and me both, buddy.” Tony threw the covers back, jumping into his jeans and nearly falling over in his eagerness. “You’re here?”

“Currently located in Longport, Colorado, but yes. Where are you? I am unable to track your phone.”

Tony hesitated, a faint suspicion prickling at him. “How’d you get here?”

“With the invaluable help of Loki and Raphael, sir.”

“Raphael?” Tony hadn’t heard the name before.

“Also known as Fujikawa Rumiko in our home universe.”

The pieces clicked into place as to Rumiko’s strange email that had so confused Tony. “Ah. How quickly do you think you can get here?”

There was a short pause before JARVIS answered, probably him asking. “Loki says that once we have a location, it will not take us long.”

“Lebanon, Kansas,” Tony told him, dropping the phone on the bed long enough for him to pull on his hoodie. “Outside the bunker, because I’m pretty sure they’ll shoot you if you just show up without warning. It’s by an old power plant, and there aren’t many of those around here.”

“Understood. We will see you shortly.”

Tony hung up, stuffing his feet into his shoes and nearly tripping over his feet. He ran through the hallways, ignoring the questioning exclamations from the others as he passed through the library and ran up the stairs, slamming the door open and taking the last flight of stairs, stopping abruptly at the top, breath coming in loud pants in the cold air.

“Damn it, Tony, what’s going on?” Dean demanded, coming up behind him.

Tony didn’t answer, but he didn’t need to. All of a sudden they were there, standing next to the car Tony had driven. It wasn’t just Loki and Raphael, but also Steve and the Iron Man suit.

Dean jumped, drawing a gun so quickly that it seemed to have come from thin air. “What the hell?”
“Peace,” Loki said calmly, putting up his empty hands.

“God, Tony.” Steve lurched forwards, closing the distance between them to grab Tony in a fierce hug. “You’re okay.”

The hug was so crushing that Tony found himself at a loss for air. Steve seemed to realize this a moment later, quickly loosening it with a regretful “Sorry” but not letting him go entirely.

“I’m fine.” Tony patted his back, hesitating briefly before he returned the hug.

“I’m only going to ask this once,” Dean said shortly, “so who are you?”

“I appreciate that you’ve worked out of the habit of shooting first,” Tony heard a female voice say wryly. “We mean you no harm, Dean Winchester.”

It was Castiel who spoke next. “How do you know his name?”

Steve pulled back from Tony in time for him to see Raphael smile sadly at Castiel, her hair blown back by the cold wind. “Hello, Castiel. It is good to see you.”

“Dean?” Sam had come up as well, his voice worried.

“Stay back,” Dean warned him, his gun still in his hand. His attention snapped to Tony. “Answers, Tony.”

“Ah, this is Steve.” Tony patted Steve’s front, grinning up at him. “The guy in the weird clothes over there is Loki. That’s Raphael. And I think Jarvis is piloting the suit.”

“I’m sorry.” Dean’s voice was calm. “Did you just say that chick over there is Raphael?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m simply here to help,” Raphael interrupted firmly. “In any case, I’m no longer an archangel. I’m only here to find Gabriel.”

Tony’s grin twitched, and he dropped his head, rubbing the back of his head uncomfortably.

He heard the sounds of the suit clanking, and he looked up to see Jarvis approaching, his faceplate retracted and a happy smile on his face.

“It is good to see you, sir,” Jarvis said softly, resting a hand on Tony’s shoulder.

Tony returned the smile, looking up at him. “You, too, J.”

“So you’re just here for him,” Dean was saying, gesturing at Tony with his gun, which was an absolute beauty to Tony’s expert eye. “And that’s it? Then you’re leaving?”

Raphael nodded, eyes somber. “Yes.”

“Wait.” Tony met Dean’s eyes as the other looked at him. “Actually…if we can help…”

“I’d accept help from you, but not from her.” Dean pointed at Raphael. “She’s indirectly responsible for every fucking thing that’s happened to us for the last few years!”

“I’m sorry,” Raphael said, head high.
“You’re apologizing?” Castiel sounded suspicious.

“Yes, brother.” Raphael’s smile was remorseful. “And I’ll apologize a thousand times more for my actions, because I was wrong.”

“Quite a change from when you were trying to reboot the apocalypse,” Dean said, sneering.

“I was wrong,” Raphael repeated. “If I can help now, I gladly will.”

Dean’s mouth twisted, and he looked at Castiel. “Cas…it’s your call.”

Castiel’s eyes narrowed, his gaze on Raphael. “You really want to help?” he asked.

“They’re my family, too, Castiel.”

Nodding briskly, Castiel looked back at Dean. “Let her.”

Face tight, Dean flicked the safety back on his gun and tucked it back in his waistband, gesturing back at the bunker. “Then let’s go inside. As for you”—he pointed at Loki—“do you eat humans?”

Loki’s face was incredulous. “Why in the nine realms would I eat humans?”

“The gods of their universe aren’t the same as ours,” Raphael said, brushing past Loki. “You have nothing to fear from him either.”

Loki’s face twisted into something darkly amused, a small grin flashing across his face as he met Tony’s eyes, though his face blanked out as quickly as it had changed. “I am perfectly harmless,” he promised, though Dean still looked suspicious.

“Very likely,” Steve murmured in Tony’s ears, his warm breath eliciting a startled shiver from him before he could stop it.

“Loki the Liesmith, I know,” Tony murmured back, giving him a small grin. “Come on.”

Once inside, Jarvis took off the helmet and set it down on the table they congregated around. Kevin looked rather flummoxed and distressed at the amount of people in the room.

“When did we decide we were having guests?” Kevin demanded.

“We didn’t,” Dean said, giving Tony a pissy look. “Thank Tony.”

Tony returned the look with his public media smile. “You’re welcome.”

“I’m just saying,” Dean said sharply, “you can’t tell people where we live without vetting them!”

“I didn’t tell them where you lived.”

Dean’s glare told Tony exactly what he thought of that lie.

“There’s nothing we can do about it, Dean.” Sam stood besides Dean, hands on his hips. “Why don’t we get started on what we came in for.”


“All I know is that the gates were closed and the angels cast out,” Raphael said, eyes flickering to a downcast Castiel. “But if the angel trials had been done, then the angels would be locked in, not cast
“It wasn’t the trials,” Castiel said softly, leaning against Dean. “It was a spell. Metatron tricked me.”

Raphael’s mouth twisted funny. “Metatron? I’d wondered where he went off to.”

“He was hiding from us.”

“What spell was it? What ingredients?”

Castiel wet his lips, glancing up at Dean. “The heart of a nephilim, the bow of a Cupid, and my Grace.”

Raphael inhaled sharply, body shifting. “I see.”

“Does that mean anything to you?” Dean asked.

“I’ve no idea what the angel trials are, but I doubt Father would have set those tasks to one seeking to close the gates.” Raphael shook her head, fingers pinching her nose. “And I’ve never heard of that spell.”

“What are you going to be able to do anyway?” Dean demanded. “You’re human.”

“I may not have my Grace,” Raphael said sharply, “but there is someone here who does.”

For a wild second Tony thought she was talking about Ezekiel, but then he noticed she was looking at him. “Whoa, hey. I don’t have any Grace either.”

Raphael smiled, looking at Loki. “Loki does.”

“Isn’t that just weird?” Dean asked Tony. “Didn’t you go around as Loki for a little stint?”

“I wouldn’t know,” Tony said icily, “as I don’t remember.”

“You did say you spent a short time going by my name,” Loki said easily, reaching inside his armor and pulling something up by his neck. “Seeing as how you were from a different universe, I don’t mind.” A silver chain glinted, and he pulled out a shiny vial shaped like an angel, the insides of which were filled with a shimmery and swirling bright light.

Tony’s breath stopped at the sight, his eyes drawn instinctively to the light.

“Is that…?” Dean breathed, sounding stunned.

“Gabriel’s Grace? It is.” Loki stepped closer to Tony, holding it out to him. “This is yours.”

Unconsciously, almost without thought, Tony’s hand opened underneath the angelic vial, letting Loki drop it into his palm. The moment his fingers closed around the glass—

**Wrath, fury, and pure destruction**

He blinked, jolting back into awareness. The vial was still in his hand, and he could feel nothing other than a warmth radiating from it.

Looking up, he found everyone staring at him, and he swallowed hard, suddenly aware of the very real fact that he had a decision to make.
And he wasn’t ready.

“Tony?” Steve sounded concerned.

“Yeah, uh….” Tony squeezed the vial tightly, feeling the edges of the wings dig into his skin. “I – I can’t.” The words were whispered.

“What do you mean you can’t?”

“I can’t do it, Steve.” Tony was bitterly aware of the stunned expressions he was receiving, along with the vivid disappointment on Raphael’s and Loki’s faces. He kept his face turned away from them, unable to handle it but equally unable to handle the reality of what he was holding. “I can’t.”

“You were the one complaining about not remembering anything,” Dean said sharply, heedless of the grip Castiel had on his arm. “Now that you’ve got the chance, you’re not taking it?”

“Because I won’t be me!” Tony snapped, flinching back from Steve as the other tried to reach out to him. “The guy that you’re all talking about, I don’t know who he is, but he sure as hell wasn’t me! And I’m not willing to go back to that, I’m not willing to lose myself!” Tony stepped away from Steve, out of reach of his arms, his body shaking. “Are you going to take that choice away from me?” he asked hoarsely, meeting Steve’s stricken eyes.

“Is it what you want?” Jarvis’s question was quiet, his face inscrutable.

“Yes – yes, it is.” The vial was flaring hotly in Tony’s hand, reacting to the visceral emotions roiling through him.

“Anthony—” Loki started.

Steve stopped him, shaking his head. His face was torn. “Death said something to us that you didn’t hear,” he said haltingly. “It was…’Free will is a choice, one that not everyone will take. It’s what one does with the choice that decides the war.’” His eyes were glittering. “And this is your choice, Tony. I won’t force you to do anything you don’t want to.”

Tony’s breath hitched, and he swallowed, nodding, tucking the vial with Gabriel’s Grace closer to him. “Thank you.”

“That was what it was all about,” Raphael said stiffly, eyes tight. “Wasn’t it, Castiel?”

“Yes, it was.” Castiel gave Tony an understanding smile. “Free will is what I’ve been fighting for all this time.” His expression darkened, and he scowled at Raphael. “Does Naomi ring a bell, Raphael?”

Raphael flinched, shoulders hunching. “I’m sorry,” she said, sounding lost.

“Sorry isn’t enough,” Castiel said bitterly. “Not for what she did to us for all these years. There’s no going back from that, Raphael.”

“I know.” Raphael’s throat rippled as she swallowed. “Did she Fall, too?”

Castiel pressed against Dean, evidently seeking the comfort that the other instantly gave him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “She’s dead.”

Raphael’s jaw tensed, and she nodded once. “I see. Did you…”?

“It was Metatron,” Castiel said flatly.
Raphael took a breath, squaring her shoulders. “Then we’ll deal with him, one way or another.” She shot Tony a look. “Not contingent on what you decide to do,” she said reassuringly. “Either way, we’re going to take care of Metatron and reopen the gates of Heaven.”

Sam huffed, mouth spreading in a disbelieving grin. “That’s all well and good,” he said, “but how?”

Raphael waved a dismissive hand, brushing back her hair as she did. “We’ll figure it out. Isn’t that your specialty after all, Winchesters?”

“Writing it as we go,” Dean said, a smile flickering across his face. “That’s us.”

“With a little less smiting than last time,” Castiel murmured, the corner of his mouth ticking up in a reluctant smile.

“There will be no smiting,” Raphael promised.

“Not the least because you can’t manage it,” Dean sniped, grinning madly. He laughed, squeezing Castiel tightly to his side. “Okay. We can do this.”

“Does this mean I don’t need to translate the tablet?” Kevin asked hopefully.

“If you have the tablet of Heaven on hand, then we’ll need that,” Raphael said. “Any information that the Scribe put down is useful, even if he was the one to cast the spell. He can’t have lied on the tablet, not while Father told him what to write.”

Not needed for the discussion now, Tony stepped backwards, head ducking as he slipped the chain of the vial over his head and tucked it under his shirt.

Loki came up to his side, green eyes dark. “There are spells that will hide the vial from other eyes,” he said quietly. “Just so you know.”

“Thanks.” Tony glanced askance at Steve, who was looking at him worriedly. “I’m gonna head out.”

Steve frowned, taking a step closer. “Where?”

“Out.” Tony shifted, glancing up to where the exit was. “I need to get out.” He left before either of them could protest, though he heard Steve quickly follow after him.

“Tony—”

“Alone, Steve.” Tony’s hand tightened on the banister. “Please.”

“Tony…” Steve shifted uncomfortably from foot to foot, biting his lip. “Are you all right?”

Tony’s mouth twisted. “I will be. I just need to clear my head, okay? I’ll be back.” He studied Steve for a moment longer before adding quietly, “You deserve better than me.”

Steve frowned at him. “What do you mean?”

“Uh…I’m sorry about what I said before – about you being jealous.” Tony rubbed his face. “I was angry and hurting, and I… I just need you to know that I’m sorry – I didn’t mean it the way you heard it.”

“It’s okay,” Steve said softly, one side of his mouth coming up in a sad smile. “You were right anyway. I don’t expect you to feel the same—”
“That’s the thing,” Tony interrupted him, turning around fully to face him. “I’m sure I would in any other circumstance, but something – I’m messed up, Steve. Broken.” He shook his head. “Nothing’s happening at the moment, but any other time…I would. In a heartbeat.”

Steve’s eyes were wide, his hands clenching the bottom of his shirt tightly. “That’s… You’re not messed up, Tony.”

“Aren’t I?” Tony’s voice was wry. “I look at you, I look at Natasha – hell – I look at a porn magazine, and I don’t feel anything. And I would’ve – before. Something messed me up, Steve, and you don’t deserve the dregs at the bottom of a trash can.” He shrugged, hand pressed against the vial resting over his collarbone. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” Steve whispered furiously, taking the few steps separating them and stopping a step below Tony. “You shouldn’t be sorry, Tony. I’m sorry you feel that way, but it’s okay. I’m fine with waiting for long as you need.”

Tony looked to the side, keeping Steve in his peripheral vision. “And if I’m Gabriel again?” His voice was quiet.

“I fell for Gabriel first, and then all over again with you,” Steve admitted. “It makes no difference to me.”

Tony gazed helplessly at him. “I don’t…” He didn’t deserve him.

“It’s not a question of who’s worthy,” Steve said, reading Tony’s mind. “It’s a question of who you want. And I want you…but only if you also want it.” He stretched up, fingers gently catching hold of the side of Tony’s face and dipping it down so he could plant a gentle, close-mouthed kiss against Tony’s lips. “Only if you want,” he repeated, breathing against Tony’s lips.

Tony swallowed dryly, hand coming up to Steve’s by his face. “Give me time?”

“Always.” Steve dropped his hand, taking a step down to put space between them. “I’ll let them know you’ll be back soon.”

“I might spend the night in a motel,” Tony said, looking down at his shoes.

“I’ll let them know.” There was no judgment in Steve’s tone.

Tony looked up at Steve through his eyelashes, giving him a watery smile. “Thanks, Steve.”

Steve smiled back at him, eyes brighter than Tony had seen in a long time. “Whatever you need, Tony.”

As Tony left, he shot Steve’s retreating back one last glance before the doors shut between them.

He had a decision to make.

Chapter End Notes

Don't be mad at Tony. He's only human at the moment, and he's frightened. He had no idea what was going on last time he reclaimed his Grace, and this time he's fully aware of what it entails. And that's terrifying.
Also, it might seem relatively straightforward as to what's happening with Tony and Steve, but nothing's been resolved except for Steve finally putting his feelings out there in the open.

In any case, happy holidays!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

THE CHAPTER YOU’VE BEEN WAITING FOR!
*clears throat*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After hacking an ATM terminal for some much needed cash, Tony spent the rest of the day driving out in Lebanon. The town (or village, maybe? There weren’t a lot of people here) was quiet and small. There was no supermarket conglomerate like Wal-Mart or Target here, but Tony wasn’t even sure why he’d expected something like that. There were smaller grocery stores and some goodwill stores, but that was about the limit of what this town offered.

He ate at a small diner that had some really good pie and coffee, going back there for dinner and smiling at the waitress who served him.

It was quiet, no one knew him, and it was exactly what Tony needed.

He refused to think about the vial hanging around his neck that contained Gabriel’s Grace. He refused to think about what was potentially being discussed in the bunker. He refused to think about any of those things, needing to keep his mind clear.

The one thing that this trip to this universe had served to do was erase the pounding silence in his head. There was always continuous chatter in the back of his head, though Tony had effortlessly tuned it out from the moment he arrived. It was something that stank of age-old habit, even though he’d never experienced something like it before.

Still, it wasn’t something he was going to question. At least the quiet was gone, and it made it almost easier for him to think, not being alone in his head.

It also made it easier for him to fall asleep in the crappy motel bed he’d leased for the night. It was a different motel from the one he and Castiel had stayed in, because while there were no motels actually inside Lebanon – small town that it was (218 people, really?) – there were a few in the nearby vicinity.

In the morning he had coffee in another diner, checking the news on his phone. There were reports of strange and violent weather elsewhere in Kansas – freak thunderstorms, hail storms, and strong winds that the weathermen couldn’t explain. There were also dozens of reports of missing people pouring in.

Unable to continue looking at the depressing news, Tony put the phone away, turning his focus to outside. The outskirts of Lebanon weren’t any more populated than Lebanon – Kansas just wasn’t populated that much in general – but it seemed to see more life in general as it was near a highway.

A violently red-haired woman driving a large bus pulled to a stop at the intersection across the street from the diner. She turned, her head facing Tony’s general direction, though she didn’t seem to see him through the glare on the windows. A moment later she was gone, pulling away.
A sort of anxiety prickling at his nerves, Tony finished his coffee and left enough cash to cover his small bill and a significant tip. He nodded at the waiter and left, standing on the curb for several minutes as he considered if he should head back to the bunker now or try stretching his alone time out a little bit more.

He’d been gone a whole day, and he hadn’t really planned to stay out much longer. Besides, they’d probably start worrying soon, and Tony didn’t want to cause any more discomfort than he already had.

Pulling out his car keys, Tony headed for the car, stopping at the door when the back of his neck prickled in warning, all his hairs raising.

Keeping his breathing steady, Tony pretended to check something on his phone, quickly checking his surroundings. He saw nothing except for some military personnel rounding the corner and what looked like a businessman rounding the other side.

Wait…

Those military personnel… They weren’t walking like military. And if there was one thing Tony knew, it was how military personnel walked; it was something habitual, so ingrained that even when off duty they had a certain stance to their frame. Even Steve had it, though it disappeared the more relaxed he was.

“Excuse me, sir.” A pleasant voice from behind Tony had his fingers tightening on his phone, though he didn’t react in any other way.

Slowly putting his phone back in his pocket, Tony turned, giving the woman who had addressed him a pleasant smile. “Can I help you?”

“Yes.” The woman smiled at him, though it didn’t reach her eyes. “My car won’t start, and I don’t know why.”

“Have you called your tow company yet?” Tony asked, keeping his bearing as casual as possible. “Out here it could take hours for them to arrive.”

“Oh, not yet. I’m hoping it’ll be something small so I can get it to the nearest mechanic. Would you mind giving it a look?” The woman gestured back at a Honda Civic.

“Sorry, I don’t really know anything about engines,” Tony lied, keeping that smile in place. “Now, if you’ll excuse me…” He made as if to open his car.

All the warning he had was the way the woman’s eyes turned pitch black before she struck, one hand grabbing his throat and pinning him to the door.

Scrambling, Tony pulled out the sword he still had on him and stabbed it in her before she could react. Her eyes and mouth flared white as she screamed. Tony was moving before she hit the asphalt, running as the military personnel and the businessman he’d noticed earlier were instantly on his tail.

Tony was by no means out of shape, but he also wasn’t the kind of man to run for exercise. That being said, he could definitely hit a sprint like the best of the average runners, but whoever these guys were (demons, something in him whispered), they definitely weren’t human and didn’t share the same limitations as he did.

Turning around the block, Tony raced across the street, hoping to lose them in some of the side streets before he could potentially head back and drive out.
That giant bus he’d seen earlier was parked at the side, and Tony ran past it, breath coming in harsh pants. He could hear the people on his tail shouting at each other, but it didn’t matter. All he needed was to get away—

A furiously red-haired woman wearing a bus driver’s hat stepped into view, grinning. At the same time, a powerful force slammed into him, lifting him right off his feet and throwing him backwards.

He landed on the asphalt with a pained grunt, skidding backwards. Lying there for all of a few seconds, Tony scrambled to his feet, only to be thrown back once again, this time rolling to a stop at the feet of the military personnel he had been evading. They glared down at him with unearthly pitch black eyes, hauling him to his knees and keeping him down. One wrenched the sword out of his hands, disarming him before he could even think to use it.

Panting heavily, his bruised ribs throbbing with the abuse he had just put them through, Tony wrenched against the iron hold the soldiers had on his hoodie, eyes fixed on the smug grin of the red-haired woman who approached him.

She reached out to stroke one finger with bright red nails down his cheek, tutting softly. “Now who are you?” she asked softly, hazel-green eyes wide in excitement. “I’ve not seen you before.”

“No one,” Tony breathed, jerking his head away from her hand, only to be brought short as she grabbed hold of his hair, forcefully holding him still. He inhaled sharply, eyes tightening in pain.

“How about this.” The woman’s tongue ran across her red lip. “A name for a name, hm? You are such a curious little thing.”

“You first. Only polite.”

The woman’s smile was chilling. “Such a gentleman. Abbadon.” Her eyebrows raised pointedly at him.

The name sent shivers down Tony’s back, and the Grace hidden under his shirt pulsed in warning. “Tony.”

“Well, Tony,” Abbadon purred, fingers tangling in Tony’s hair and pulling just sharply enough to
bring tears of pain to his eyes, “what do you say we spend a little time together?”

Anything Tony could have said was moot as something slammed across the back of his head, knocking him out cold.

A shock of cold water brought him to his senses, coughing and spluttering as he spat the fetid taste out of his mouth.

“Wakey, wakey,” a sing-song voice sang, coming from behind him. A hand trailed feather-light on the back of his neck before disappearing, and a brutal wrench yanked his head back, forcing a pained gasp from his throat. “Oh good. You’re up.”

“You just soaked me,” Tony gasped, blinking up at Abbadon’s face. “What’d you think would happen?” The Grace was still a warm weight at his collarbone, and he thanked every force he’d ever believed in for Loki’s foresightedness.

“Sassy.” Abbadon let go of his hair, circling around to stand in front of him, arms folded across her chest. “You’re going to tell me where the Winchesters are.”

Tony blinked up at her, wrists trying the ropes they’d bound him in before tying him to an uncomfortable chair. They were in a large, dreary warehouse, the windows boarded up. There was no way he was getting out of these ropes without someone killing him. “What makes you think I know?”

“You reek of angel, sweetheart, but you’re human. I can do simple math. Where are the Winchesters?”

“There are angels everywhere, or did you miss that meteor shower?” Tony shook droplets of water out of his face.

“True enough,” Abbadon’s lips curled into a smirk. “But you’re a hunter; the Winchesters will always come for a hunter. What about that angel you stole the sword from?”

Tony shot her a chilly stare. “What makes you think she’s alive?”

Abbadon’s mouth curled into a smile. “You killed an angel then? Let’s just see.” Quick as a snake, her hand snapped out to wrap around the back of Tony’s neck, and her mouth opened, a wisp of black smoke exiting and entering Tony’s parted lips. “Show me what you’ve seen.”

And Tony – there was a flare of heat inside him, like something igniting a match and exploding into flame. Abbadon jerked back, but he barely noticed. He could scarcely breathe as the heat surged up through him, and he coughed, orange sparks leaving his mouth.

“You’re not human,” Abbadon whispered, eyes wide, scanning Tony’s figure.

“That’s me,” Tony said hoarsely, coughing again. The heat had subsided, though he could still remember what it had felt like. “One hundred percent human and jackass.” He grinned up at her.

With a resounding smack, Abbadon forced his head to the side. Tony tasted blood as he bit his tongue, screaming in pain seconds later when something stabbed into his thigh. When his eyes finally focused, he saw the angel sword stuck in his thigh.

“Let’s try this again, shall we?” Abbadon had him by the face, her nails digging into his skin. Her fingers snapped, and she pointed at someone behind him. “How do you feel about a change in meat
sack? This one should do nicely, and we’ll get an in with the Winchesters.”

Before Tony could breathe, Abbadon had stepped backwards, a howling scream filling the air, and something black and thick forced its way down his throat.

There was a foreign presence inside him, something alien that should not there. It was smoke and fear and pain and anger and evil, and he wanted it gone.

The heat flared, hotter and larger than before, and Tony screamed, pain surging through him as the entity screamed with him. Something crackled in him and died, heat flaring through his extremities and centering in his lungs and heart, scalding his insides with the force of which they exterminated the foreign entity.

Finally, gasping for air, Tony slumped in the chair, every inch of him sore and tingling with the aftereffects of whatever had happened. The pain of the sword in his thigh was inconsequential compared to the burning remnants of the demon that had been in him.

When he gathered enough energy to look up at Abbadon, he found her standing there, stunned surprise and fear on her face. “Had enough, sweetheart?” he whispered, grinning up at her. Something wet trickled down the corner of his mouth; he tasted warm metal.

With a furious scream, Abbadon swung her arm. Tony curled inwards as a tremendous force slammed into him, fracturing and cracking bones. He coughed, blood splattering the cement.

The phone dug into the back of his ass, and Tony was abruptly reminded of a failsafe that he had built into this model, a way to contact emergency services. And a way to contact JARVIS. “Emergency code authorization alpha-Stark,” he gasped out in a rush, only for a vicious backhand to silence him. But it was enough.

“What did you do?” Abbadon demanded angrily, nails digging bloody splices into Tony’s neck as she lifted him and the chair bodily, heedless of the way he choked.

“Game over,” he choked out, grinning bloodily, breath hitching painfully when Abbadon let him drop to the floor, the chair rattling his injured body. Her hands curled into fists, and he screamed when he felt the bones in his legs shatter.

Panting, breath coming out in sharp whimpers, Tony dropped his chin to his chest, eyes squeezed shut. He had to hold on for only a little bit more…


“He contacted me,” Jarvis’s even voice said through the voice synthesizer of the armor.

“’Lo, Abbadon,” Dean’s voice said.

Tearing out the sword in his thigh, Abbadon whirled, eyes wide and mouth bared as she took in what Tony had already seen: Loki, Steve, Jarvis, Dean, and Sam. With a furious scream, she threw out her hand in Tony’s direction, a force propelling out from her palm and hurling him into the wall.

The chair shattered under the forceful impact, dropping Tony the ten painful feet to a jarring landing on the concrete. No sound escaped him, even as he felt his ribs move in ways they shouldn’t, puncturing something that shouldn’t have been punctured.

There was screaming and shouting and what sounded like lightning, but Tony couldn’t see, his vision graying. The Grace he was wearing was pulsing like a heartbeat, so much stronger than his
You're dying, something in him whispered.

It was something Tony dimly acknowledged as a fact. His body was growing numb, none of the numerous injuries he'd garnered registering in the haze.

It's not your time.

Wasn’t it? He’d died two times that he knew of, and neither of them had stuck. Maybe this one would.

The Grace seemed to pulse in protest at the thought, and Tony hacked out a glob of dark blood, thinking that wasn’t good.

He did have a shot at survival, didn’t he? One last card to play.

And he didn’t want to die.

Somehow he found the strength to pull the vial out of his shirt, his trembling fingers finding the stopper and yanking it out. Grace surged up and out, enveloping his entire world in white.

Tony was standing, his body free from any injuries and his mind clear and alert. There was nothing but white around him, but he wasn’t alone.

“About time,” a voice said.

Tony turned his head, unsurprised to find another man standing there with hazel eyes and light blond hair. He was wearing jeans, a flannel shirt, and an olive-colored jacket. “Gabriel?”

“Guilty.” Gabriel waggled his eyebrows, grinning at Tony. “But then so are you.”

“You don’t look like me.”

“Thought it’d be easier for you like this. This was my last vessel before Lucifer killed me.” Gabriel’s lips twisted at the memory.

“Why am I seeing you?” Tony demanded, hands curling into fists at his sides.

Gabriel shrugged. “Grace takes a bit of time to settle back in; thought I’d do something a bit different this time.” He tilted his head to the side, smiling slightly. “Thought I’d try reconciling my human and angel sides.”

“You said we’re the same,” Tony said tightly, remembering Natasha’s words.

“We are,” Gabriel said simply, head high. “One and the same, you and me. You’re me, and I’m you. But memories make the man, and my memories make me a very different man.” The corner of his mouth lifted. “Angel.”

“I don’t feel the same.”

“Human and angel, ’course you don’t.” Gabriel’s eyes were soft.

Tony was silent for a moment, considering. “I can’t go back.” His tone was resigned.

“No, you can’t.”
“Will I notice anything?” His breath hitched.

“Nothing,” Gabriel assured him, smiling gently. “All that’ll happen is that we’ll remember, our Grace and human soul reintegrating. It’ll be so seamless you won’t even notice.”

“Like an amnesiac regaining his memories,” Tony murmured, glancing down at his feet.

“Exactly.” Gabriel’s hand stretched out to him, palm face up. “Ready?”

Tony looked at the hand, so unfamiliar but familiar. And for the first time since he’d woken up, it felt like he was doing the right thing. In lieu of a verbal answer, he took the proffered hand, clasping it tightly in his own.

Gabriel’s visage morphed, turning taller, his hair darker, his eyes browner, and his clothes changing until an identical image of Tony stood there, smiling at him.

Then everything was white and light and he remembered.

No one had been happy to hear Steve tell them that Tony had left to spend some time by himself. Even more so when hearing that Tony was probably going to spend the night elsewhere, but by that time there was nothing to do about it. Steve had waited roughly fifteen minutes before giving them the news, knowing exactly what was likely to happen if he told them immediately.

Jarvis had given him a raised eyebrow that told Steve he knew exactly what he had done, but he also hadn’t said anything, evidently understanding that Tony needed to be alone. Loki and Raphael had looked less happy, but they hadn’t protested.

Dean had been the most vocal, warning Steve that it was dangerous for Tony without the proper protections.

Steve had brushed it off, trusting in Tony’s ability to protect himself, but now he wished he’d listened. Because this wasn’t how it was supposed to have happened. Tony was supposed to have returned that morning; Jarvis wasn’t supposed to have gotten an emergency alert from Tony’s cell that was only activated when Tony couldn’t physically get to it.

Thank God Dean and Sam were professionals and organized quickly, joining Steve, Jarvis, and Loki and leaving Castiel, Kevin, and Raphael behind. They left in minutes, Loki’s spell snapping into place around them and flinging them to the coordinates Jarvis had gotten.

Steve’s tactical mind instantly took in their surroundings: a warehouse, dimly lit, windows boarded up, people blocking the exits, and four people in front of them. One was a red-haired woman crouching over a man in a chair; two others were people dressed in military uniforms and holding assault rifles.


“He contacted me,” Jarvis answered for Tony, who – God – was bleeding from his mouth and had a sword sticking out of his thigh.

“’Lo, Abbadon.,” Dean cocked a gun at her.

Abbadon whirled, eyes wide, wrenching the sword from Tony’s thigh with the movement. She took them in, eyes turning pitch black, letting loose a piercing scream of fury, her other arm sweeping in Tony’s direction.
She hadn’t even touched him, but Tony was flying through the air, hitting the opposite wall with a sickening thud, the chair shattering into pieces and his body falling to the concrete. There was no noise from him, not even a whimper; Steve was terrified that he was dead.

“Came quickly, did you, boys?” Abbadon said, still with those pitch black eyes. “And brought company.” The black faded into normal.

“You will regret that,” Loki said quietly, a gleaming knife in his hand.

“Oh, will I?” Abbadon chuckled, her hand flying up.

Dean and Sam were thrown back, but Steve felt a force slam into him before dissipating, his ribs flaring warmly. Green sigils came to life in front of Loki, dancing as they repelled whatever Abbadon had tried.

“You’ll have to try harder than that, Abbadon,” Loki said, grinning madly. His form dissipated in a green mist, another him quickly popping up behind Abbadon and swinging his knife down.

Steve was focused on the others, bringing his shield up to block the bullets from the assault rifles. Then Jarvis was there, blocking the rest and knocking both men down with well aimed repulsor blasts and several missiles from his own arsenal.

Steve threw his shield, the projectile arcing around the confined space of the warehouse, bouncing off corners, columns, and the ceiling at one point to knock down the enemy before returning to his hand, Steve swinging around to roundhouse kick a man in the head, not holding his strength back. The man’s neck gave way with a sickening crack, but he was still alive, his eyes pitch black.

Abbadon was screaming, lightning crackling and thunder storming outside as she fought Loki, who was giving her a run for her money with his self-made Enochian wards as protection.

A moment later, the man Steve had been fighting screamed in pain, his body crackling orange before collapsing to a heap on the floor. Sam stood there, a bloody knife in his hand.

“Thanks,” Steve panted, nodding.

Sam nodded, quickly moving on to the next demon that came at him.

The air stilled dangerously for all of a second before the floor started shaking, the walls of the warehouse rattling ominously. Sheer power crackled through the air, weighing down on Steve ponderously until he could scarcely breathe for how thick it was.

There was blinding light in the corner from where Tony had fallen, and Steve looked over without thinking, eyes widening when he saw Tony standing, eyes a blinding white and an aura of light emitting from his body. His arms were stretched open, and behind him were the absolutely gigantic shadows of enormous wings, looming threateningly.

Scorching light seared Steve’s eyes, forcing him to shut them, though the afterimage of those wings were etched into them, and he could still see the blinding light through his eyelids, which wasn’t dimming at all.

There was an earth shattering roar, a loud screeching sound like that of thousands of bells ringing discordantly, and the floor rippled, windows shattering and cement cracking down the middle, throwing Steve down. He landed heavily on his side, arms thrown up over his face as that light penetrated everything.
Then as suddenly as it had started, it was gone. The warehouse darker than what it had been before even with the light streaming through the now open windows.

Steve hesitantly uncovered his eyes, taken aback by the sheer devastation around him. Bodies were strewn about, eyes bloody, scorched holes and their ears bleeding. Jarvis lay there several feet away from him, and Dean and Sam had curled up by a wall, both slowly uncovering their eyes. Loki seemed rather peeved at having been knocked over.

There was no sign of Tony or Abbadon.

A loud scream came from above them, and Steve reflexively brought his shield up over his head, only to see two bodies smash through the remnants of the windows and land on the floor, rolling apart.

One was Tony, and he got to his feet, eyes glowing an unearthly white, a manic grin on his face. “Hey, Abbadon.” His voice rung with power, practically shaking the air around him.

Abbadon wiped off a trail of blood by her lips, slowly standing. “You have me at a disadvantage.”

“What, don’t recognize me?” Tony’s grin twitched. “Can’t really blame you; I didn’t bother with your kind. Name’s Gabriel.”

Abbadon gave a short laugh. “Gabriel? You’re looking kind of stunted for an archangel there.”

Tony looked down, bringing a hand up to flex it. Then he looked back up, eyes still glowing. “Think that doesn’t mean I can’t take care of you, sweetheart?” He was behind her. “Think again.”

Abbadon snarled, bringing the sword she was still holding down on him, which was blocked effortlessly by Tony’s forearm. He reached out a suddenly scorching white hand, touching empty space when Abbadon wrenched away.

“Slower than I expected,” she noted, her smile a mixture of glee and fear.

“Fast enough for you,” Tony said calmly. He brought his hand up, snapping his fingers at the same time Abbadon threw her hand up.

They went flying at the same time, Tony punching a hole straight through the wall. Abbadon hit the opposite one, punching through the material like it was paper.

When they didn’t immediately reappear, Steve rushed to the exit, followed closely by the others. He pushed the door open in time to see Tony and Abbadon practically wrestling standing up.

Then Abbadon twisted around behind Tony, bringing the sword down from underneath to stab it through Tony’s chest.

“Oh shit,” Dean breathed from next to Steve.

But Tony didn’t react beyond clenching his hand around Abbadon’s, holding the sword in place. “Wrong sword, kid.”

Then, without a word, he swung Abbadon up and over his shoulders, slamming her into the ground. Pulling the sword out of his chest, Tony flipped it around and stabbed it through Abbadon’s chest, the other hand coming right onto Abbadon’s face.

With a piercing scream, Abbadon’s body flared with blinding white light. Steve caught a brief
glimpse of wings arching out from Tony’s back before they disappeared, and it was just Tony crouching over a dead body with burnt out eyes.

Tony seemed to shake himself, slowly straightening out. He was still bent over, his hand clutching his chest, when Steve cautiously approached him.

“Tony?” Steve’s heart was in his throat.

Tony’s hand dropped, and he stood straight, turning his face to Steve and smiling. The unearthly light in his eyes slowly faded into his normal brown, and then he was just standing there, so very him. “Hey, Steve.”

The shield clattered to the ground, but he didn’t care, rapidly closing the distance between them to clutch Tony in a bone-breaking embrace.

There was no hesitation from Tony, who responded immediately to hug back just as tightly.

Steve ducked his face into the crook of Tony’s neck, inhaling the acrid tinge of fear and blood and sweat and something that was uniquely Tony, a scent of ozone, fire, lightning, and other. A dry sob wrenched its way out of his throat before he could stop it, his body shaking with the force of it.

“Hey.” Tony sounded vaguely alarmed, his grip tightening. “It’s all right.”

“I know.” Steve’s voice was hoarse, but his smile was bright when he drew back to look Tony in the face. “It is.”

Tony peered up at him dubiously, his hands dropping to Steve’s arms. “Then look like it.”

Steve laughed breathlessly, stepping to the side and wiping at his stinging eyes. Tony’s hand slid up to his shoulder, squeezing it comfortably before dropping to his side and he looked over at Jarvis, who seemed to be frozen.

“Well?” Tony had a strange smile on his face, his eyes soft. “Nothing to say, J?”

“Sir…” Jarvis’s voice was a mere whisper that Steve’s enhanced hearing barely caught.

“Come on, kid.” Tony took several steps closer, arms open. “Don’t be shy.”

The armor dismantled itself, Jarvis stepping out of it, the suit closing itself up behind him. He seemed strangely hesitant to approach Tony, but Tony didn’t care, meeting him in the middle and pulling him into a tight hug that Jarvis unhesitatingly returned, his face and eyes disbelieving.

“That’s it,” Steve heard Tony murmur into Jarvis’s ear. “It’s fine, J; it’s me.”

Jarvis buried his face in Tony’s shoulder, but Steve still heard the muffled “Yes, Father.”

Heart in his throat, Steve looked away, eyes catching on the rather gobsmacked look on Dean’s face, one that was a mixture of incredulity and sheer disbelief. Sam’s face was blank, brow furrowed, and he was holding himself stiffly. Loki had a faint smile on his face, watching Tony and Jarvis.

Steve crouched to pick up his shield, sliding up his arm. He glanced up in time to see Tony flicking Jarvis under the chin and getting a watery smile in return.

“So you’re Gabriel now?” Dean asked loudly, getting Tony’s attention.

Tony grinned brightly, the edges just a tad sharp. “Dean-o! So good to see you! Last I saw you was
– what? – back with Dick? Glad to see you and Castiel got together.”

A muscle twitched in Dean’s jaw. “Yeah… thanks to you.” The words sounded strangled.

“I take full credit for the good deed,” Tony quipped, stepping back to pull the sword out of Abbadon’s chest and wipe it clean on her shirt.

“How come that didn’t kill you?” Dean demanded.

“’Cause it’s obviously not mine,” Tony drawled, flipping the sword several times in the air before it disappeared up his sleeve. “Castiel has it.”

“So whose sword is that?”

Tony’s smile slipped, his eyes shuttering. “Someone I don’t regret killing.” After a brief moment of reflection, he shook his head, smile brightening again, teeth flashing. “What do you say we head back? Give ’em the good news?”

Being Tony, he didn’t wait for a response, simply snapping his fingers. Steve abruptly found himself in the bunker, almost on top of a startled Kevin.

“Watch it!” Kevin yelped, jumping back.

“Sorry,” Tony said shamelessly, rolling his shoulders.

Raphael was staring at Tony with wide eyes. “Gabriel?”

Tony looked at her, smile softening. “That’s me, sis. How you doing?”

“I…” Raphael shook her head, a slow smile spreading across her face. “Fine. So you did it after all?”

“Eh… didn’t really feel like dying today.” Tony shrugged, eyes darkening at the memory. “And does it feel good to be back.” He looked at Loki, eyebrows raised. “How’d you manage it anyway?”

“Raphael,” Loki answered simply, inclining his head in Raphael’s direction. “It was in the crater you created.”

“What’d it come in? A tree?”

Loki smirked at him. “A flower – a daffodil to be more precise.”

Tony made a face. “A flower, really? I guess that does explain some things, though…” He didn’t elaborate, but his right hand flexed in front of him, almost as if he was trying it out.

“So, Castiel,” Tony said suddenly, looking at the other man, “how you feeling?” His smile was rueful. “Sorry I couldn’t help before.”

Castiel shook his head. “You did, Gabriel. Not in the way I expected, but you did.”

Tony’s smile widened slightly, his head ducking. “I’m glad.” His gaze switched to Sam, smile dropping off his face like water. “Sam… you’ve been quiet.”

Sam started, blinking. Dean gave him an odd look, brow furrowing.

“But then you’re not really Sam,” Tony continued in a dangerously soft tone. “Ezekiel.”
Sam’s chin tilted up, his voice wavering as he answered haltingly, “Gabriel. I was not certain that it was you.”

Steve blinked, taken aback by the unfamiliar cadence of the words. It wasn’t the way Sam spoke, and judging from the frown on Raphael’s face, she noticed it as well. Loki had narrowed his eyes, and Jarvis’s eyes were flickering between Tony and Sam warily.

“Oh, I’m me.” Tony’s eyebrows rose, a chilly smile flashing across his face. “But you’re not you.”

Sam – or Ezekiel, really – frowned. “I do not know what you mean.”

“It’s been a really long time,” Tony said, eyes dropping to his fingers, trailing them along the tops of a chair. “But did you think I wouldn’t recognize you?” His eyes went back to Ezekiel. “Come on… Gadreel.”

Raphael blinked, arms dropping to her sides. Castiel inhaled sharply, head snapping up.

“Gadreel?” Dean demanded, his face a mixture of stunned betrayal and horror. “You mean you’re not Ezekiel?”

“I thought it was weird that Ezekiel would ask for Castiel to leave, throw him out there like that,” Tony continued softly, eyes fixed on Ezekiel, who had dropped his gaze to the floor. “But of course you wouldn’t want Castiel here, not if he’d draw the angels to him.”

Ezekiel – Gadreel’s eyes met Tony’s again, his jaw tightening. “They would hunt me down.” His tone was soft.

“What the hell is going on?” Kevin demanded, distressed. “Dean, you didn’t say anything about Sam being freaking possessed! And who the hell is Gadreel?”

“Guardian of Eden,” Raphael said softly, eyes hard, “and the reason humans were thrown out when he let Lucifer past the gates. Also indirectly started the rebellion, the Fall, and our Father leaving.” Her smile was sad. “You were quite influential, Gadreel.”

“And I am sorry,” Gadreel said, looking back to Tony, face pleading.

“You lied to me,” Dean accused him, stepping away from him. “Are you even healing Sam?”

“Yes! I didn’t lie about that.” Gadreel twitched, stiffening when Tony and Raphael both moved in response. “Sam Winchester is healing,” he said in a quieter tone. “I promise I didn’t lie about that.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Tony confirmed. “He really is healing Sam, though I’d love to know just what shape the kid was in that you had an actual angel jump in, Dean.”

“He was dying,” Dean said stiffly, eyes fixed on Gadreel. “He was dying, and he’d given up.”

“So how’d you get an angel in him?”

“He consented,” Gadreel said.

Tony snorted derisively. “You’re telling me that the kid who said no to Lucifer until it was time to throw down the cards said yes to you? If I know Sam Winchester, there’s no way in hell he would’ve ever considered that unless you tricked him.” He looked displeased. “Consent is supposed to be informed, Gadreel.”

“I made a promise,” Gadreel said, eyes glittering. “I promised that I would save Sam; anything I did,
I did with Dean’s consent.”

Tony shot Dean a look, to which the other flushed shamefully, averting his eyes. “Not quite the consent you needed, brother,” he said quietly.

Gadreel nodded stiffly. “I know. Would you throw me out, brother?”

Arms folded across his chest, Tony smiled, the sight cold. “Well, you did indirectly cause every sorry thing that’s happened today by letting Lucifer into the Garden of Eden.”

“And I have repented for that, brother,” Gadreel said, eyes earnest. “A thousand times more so in the prison of Heaven. I am sorry for what I have wrought with my mistake.” He paused, swallowing. “But I had no idea what Lucifer would do.”

“Yeah.” Tony’s voice was soft. “He always was good at that.”

Raphael was looking at Tony. “Gabriel?”

Tony’s eyes flickered to her before returning to Gadreel. “Why Ezekiel?”

“Because…I had heard that he was noble and righteous…” Gadreel’s eyes dropped.

“Everything that you weren’t.”

“Yes.”

Tony made a considering noise, arms swinging to his sides. “Well, who am I to lecture you about mistakes.” His smile was self-deprecating. “I’ve made my fair share, as has everyone in this room. Except for Steve, probably.”

“I’ve made mistakes,” Steve protested, keenly aware of all the eyes that flashed to him.

“Picking fights in alleys doesn’t count, Stevie.” Tony grinned at him before refocusing on Gadreel. “In lieu of an overly long and really pretentious speech, I’m just going to say it: you’re forgiven.”

Gadreel reeled back, shocked. “Really?”

“From my end, yeah.” Tony shrugged, smiling faintly. “You made a mistake, but it’s not the end of the world. Though it almost was,” he added, head tilting in thought. “But that’s not the point. You made a mistake, and you say you’ve repented.”

“I have,” Gadreel insisted. “And I – I want to redeem myself.”

“Then get out of Sam.” Tony clicked his fingers, sweeping them up Sam’s body. “Step one to being a better angel – get out of the kid that you wrangled an uninformed consent out of. Step two – get your own vessel. Step three – help us unlock Heaven and kick Metatron out.” He made a face. “I always thought he was a pretentious dick.”

“Probably because you were one yourself,” Raphael said.

“Shh.” Tony flapped a hand at her. “My point still stands.” He looked straight at Gadreel, eyebrows raised. “Well?”

“I will help,” Gadreel promised, looking askance at a still betrayed looking Dean. He next turned to Castiel. “I am sorry, brother.”
Castiel’s face was blank, but he inclined his head. “I understand, though I wish you had told us the truth.”

Gadreel’s eyes were sad. “Would you have listened?”

“I unleashed the Leviathans,” Castiel said tightly. “I do know what it’s like to make a decision and watch its catastrophic effects unfold. So, yes, I would have listened, Gadreel.” His hand came up to Dean’s opposite shoulder. “And Dean would have as well.”

A muscle jumped in Dean’s jaw, but he nodded. “If you’d told us the truth, yeah. It’s not like I would’ve known who Gadreel was anyway.” His smile was blank.

Gadreel closed his mouth, jaw rippling as he swallowed. He looked back at Tony. “I cannot fly,” he said quietly, eyes downcast.

“Not in him, I know.” Tony stepped close to him.

“He will die,” Gadreel said.

Tony shot him an unimpressed look. “What am I – chopped liver? Come on; get out and don’t burn anyone’s eyes out. That’s all we need for today.”

Gadreel looked up at Raphael and Castiel, face troubled, before he nodded and closed his eyes. He lit up, his skin glowing from within.

“Close your eyes.” Tony’s voice was even.

Steve did, though the light still pierced through his eyelids. When it disappeared, he quickly opened them to find Tony gently lowering Sam’s unconscious body to the floor.

“What did you do, sasquatch?” Tony murmured, hands hovering over Sam’s chest. He pressed them against Sam.

The reaction was immediate, Sam jerked awake, gasping like he’d been drowning. Only Tony’s hand on his chest stopped him from hitting his head against Tony.

“Easy there.” Tony stood, stepping back from a visibly confused Sam. Turning his head to the side and speaking to thin air, he said, “Let’s go.” He vanished a split-second later, the pages of the books rippling in the wake of the displaced air.

“What – Dean?” Sam looked up at Dean, completely confused. “What happened?”

Dean looked down at him, face tight. He opened his mouth, breathing in. Then, “Sammy…there’s something I need to tell you.”

Sam made a confused face, unsteadily getting to his feet. “What?” He gripped onto the back of a chair to keep himself steady, wincing and pressing a hand to his chest. “Ugh, what hit me?”

Dean shot a panicked look at Raphael. “I thought Gabriel healed him!”

Raphael’s face was unreadable. “He did, but you do still feel the lingering aftereffects of angelic possession, especially if the angel is injured.”

Sam looked uncomprehending for several seconds before horror slowly spread across his face. “Dean…you didn’t…”
“Sammy…” Dean didn’t try to defend himself.

“You…” Sam closed his eyes, fingers tightening on the back of the chair he was gripping; he took several deep breaths through his nose, then opened his eyes. “Why did you do it?” His voice was soft.

Steve shifted, uncomfortable with watching this argument between them. It should be taking place behind closed doors, but neither of them seemed to care about their audience. Hell, Castiel was watching, too, though his face was lined with a weary sadness, his eyes fixed unwaveringly on Dean. Kevin stood behind Castiel, biting his lower lip in a nervous tic.

“You were dying,” Dean explained hoarsely. “There was no time—”

“But there was time to get an angel in me?” Sam sounded betrayed. “You didn’t even tell me, Dean. When were you going to?” His voice turned accusing. “Or were you never going to tell me at all?”

“Of course I was going to tell you!” Dean protested, though it sounded feeble to Steve’s ears. “But you wouldn’t have agreed—”

“So why did you do it?”

There was a soft rustling noise beside Steve, and he turned his head to see Tony and an unfamiliar black-haired man standing there. Tony inclined his head in greeting when their eyes met, though his focus quickly switched to the fight.

“Sam—”

“Bzzt.” Tony made a cutting motion with his hand, and Dean’s voice shut off, mouth working but no sound coming. Sam seemed similarly afflicted judging from his stunned expression and the way his mouth dropped open. “Work it out on your own time later, boys. We’ve got bigger fish to fry and not that much time to do it.”

Raphael’s gaze slid to Tony. “Metatron?”

Tony’s answering smile was grim. “Metatron.”
Chapter End Notes

Maybe it seems a bit like a cop-out for Tony/Gabriel to get his memories back the day after he said he couldn't do it, but Tony has the absolute worst luck, and Abbadon was anyway out and hunting for Winchester blood. I watched the second episode of Season 9 before writing this chapter, just because I needed to see what Abbadon was up to.

The Gadreel arc will not be the same as in the show. Kevin will not die. And I had a ridiculous amount of Gadreel feels while writing this story. I hope to give you the same amount, if not more.

BUT AHhhh Gabriel's Back OKAY AND HE'S PISSED
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

You have no idea how much trouble this chapter gave me. I was seriously doubting my writing abilities while writing this one, and I felt like complete and utter crap. Finally I managed it. Apparently the characters just really needed to have it out with each other.

In any case, I do hope you enjoy. The chapter doesn't seem like I had a great deal of trouble writing it, so now you know.

Despite the impression Gabriel had given the others, he really wasn’t doing as well as they thought. This was only the second time in his very long lifespan that he’d ever reintegrated his Grace with his human soul, but it had been far more turbulent this time. Even now his Grace roiled around inside of him, unsettled and chaotic.

Smiting Abbadon had loosed some of the tension and destruction that surged through his Grace, but it hadn’t done enough. It felt worse because he was operating at a fraction of his total power, the little Grace he had recognizing that it wasn’t enough to adequately defend himself from larger threats (though it was still nothing to sneeze at considering the state the rest of his siblings were in).

The grief, fury, and turmoil he had been in before dying against the Leviathan was also there, and taking in his Grace had brought it all back. He hadn’t meant to come back, not really. He hadn’t even thought it was a possibility that his Father would do it. Smiting the Leviathan should have been it – do not cross Go, do not collect 200 dollars – but here he was again. Alive. Whole (mostly). And pissed off.

Because he was furious at Metatron. What was that little upstart thinking? Shutting down Heaven and throwing everyone out? Sure, Gabriel had known that Metatron had left shortly before he himself had left the roost, but why? And why would he go so far as to shut Heaven’s doors to everyone?

Not even the departed could enter Heaven. Reapers were shut out as well. Gabriel had seen them milling around the warehouse after he’d dispatched Abbadon, having been drawn there by the backlash his Grace had caused when he’d taken it back into himself. Most had had several tagalongs with them, human souls that looked rather stricken and panicky about not being able to go straight to Heaven the way they should.

Metatron had thrown the entire balance of this universe entirely out of sync, and Gabriel was not happy about that. It wasn’t his responsibility anymore, but he was here, and that meant he was going to deal with it. Castiel had called him for help, and Gabriel was going to do his damn best to give it to him.

Gabriel had made a lot of mistakes in his life, but he wouldn’t ever regret standing with the humans. Castiel had stood with the humans as well, and that meant Gabriel was on Castiel’s side. There were questions he needed to ask his little brother, but those could wait until he figured out a way to get into Heaven and kick Metatron’s ass out and open the gates.
But before even that, he needed to make sure that Gadreel found his vessel and returned safely. Gabriel could understand why Gadreel had done what he had. He’d gone into hiding himself for a long time, and for no other reason but because he couldn’t stand the fighting in his family. Gadreel had a far better reason for hiding, since Gabriel had no doubt that if any other angels found him, they’d tear him apart.

Angels weren’t necessarily the forgiving sort, especially for a mistake that had cost them their Father. Gabriel looked away as Gadreel conversed with his chosen vessel, mind whirring with thoughts and plans. He’d forgiven Gadreel, but that was in large part based on the message his Father had given him. Besides, Lucifer hadn’t yet shown his true colors at the time he’d tricked Gadreel, and anyone would have fallen for the Morning Star back then, as bright and beautiful as he had been.

Shivering at the memory of the last time he’d seen Lucifer, just as bright and beautiful and utterly terrifying to behold with his wrath and pain, Gabriel refocused on Gadreel entering his vessel, having obtained the consent needed to do so.

Once Gadreel was all sorted out, Gabriel barely gave him enough time to look down before he whisked them both back to the bunker and into the middle of a furious spat between Dean and Sam Winchester, two remarkably well-adjusted humans who had absolutely not saved the world several times over.

Eh…Gabriel really wasn’t in a position to throw stones here. Besides, what else had he expected after outing Gadreel as being inside Sam and then pulling him out? This was just the cherry on top of a truly remarkable sundae of bad decisions made by Dean Winchester; Gabriel had a separate one for Sam, and that one was bigger than Dean’s simply because he’d unlocked the Cage to let Lucifer out and been guzzling down demon blood. Dean’s sundae had gotten slightly smaller when he’d torn Gabriel a new one because he could respect the guts it took to tear an archangel a new one, though he suspected Dean didn’t have much of a self-preservation instinct.

Hunters usually didn’t.

“So why did you do it?” Sam’s voice sounded utterly betrayed, and Dean looked absolutely stricken.

“Sam—”

As interesting as it was watching them fight like this, they just didn’t have the time. Gabriel muted their voices with a sharp slicing motion. “Bzzt. Work it out on your own time later, boys. We’ve got bigger fish to fry and not much time to do it.”

Raphael understood instantly. “Metatron?”

Gabriel curled his lips into a grim smile. “Metatron. He knows I’m here by now.”

“Why would he not have sensed you earlier?” Loki asked.

“Bit of a big thing, me getting my Grace back,” Gabriel said, smiling idly. “You probably remember what Lilith said… That big of a disruption doesn’t go unnoticed.”

“Is he going to be looking for you?” Steve asked sharply, body tensing.

“Nope.” Gabriel popped the “p,” shrugging. “At least not if he’s the same as I remember.”
“What do you mean?”

“Big, scary archangel versus tiny angel? He’s going to be hiding.” Gabriel bit out a sharp grin.
“‘Sides, it’s not like he’d have any luck finding me anyway. I do know how to hide.”

“He has the might of Heaven behind him,” Gadreel pointed out, frowning thoughtfully.

Gabriel looked over to Raphael. “Hey, Raphael, did Michael have any idea where I went off to?”

Raphael’s mouth twisted at the reminder of Gabriel’s long absence from Heaven. “No,” she admitted reluctantly. “We did look.”

Gabriel grinned up at Gadreel. “Beauty of hiding among the pagans. No one expects an angel.”

Dean had a look that screamed “no kidding,” though he said nothing as Gabriel still had a hold on his voice.

“Who is to say that Metatron has not changed since you last saw him?” Loki asked pointedly.

“He hasn’t.” Gabriel rocked back on his heels. “Tell me, Castiel, what was he like?”

“Deceitful,” Castiel said simply, face blank. “But that’s not what you’re asking.” He hugged himself, eyes fixed on a point above Gabriel’s head. “When I found him, he was hiding with the Tribe of the Two Rivers, asking for payment in stories because he found them to be interesting. He said that free will was what gave humans the ability to tell so many different stories.”

So he’d been obsessed with stories. “What about us – the angels?”

Castiel’s lips parted, his eyes sharpening. “He said…after Father left…’the archangels took over. And they cried, and they wailed. They wanted their Father back.’” His voice was even as he said it, even though his eyes were accusing. “‘But then…then they started to scheme. The archangels decided if they couldn’t have Dad’”—his voice wavered for the first time—“‘they’d take over the universe themselves.’” Clearing his throat, Castiel’s voice turned back to normal. “He said that. And then he said you would have wanted the Word of God, so he fled.” He looked accusingly at Gabriel and Raphael. “Is that true? Or did he lie?”

Gabriel inhaled sharply, gaze cutting to Raphael. “Raphael—”

“It’s true.” Raphael’s voice was harsh, eyes hard. “He had left, and we wanted Him back.”

“Taking over the universe?” Gabriel demanded disbelievingly. “When the hell did you decide that?”

“It was after you were gone, Gabriel,” Raphael snapped. “Don’t act all high and mighty. You disappeared, and it was just Michael and me, and we were lost. There was no one to turn to, our only guidance the last message that you gave us after Lucifer was locked away. We wanted our Father back…” Raphael flicked her hair back, face stony. “So we tried to get His attention.”

“By throwing the equivalent of a tantrum of a three-year-old?” Jarvis sounded disbelieving.

“It doesn’t matter.” Raphael shrugged dismissively. “It didn’t work.”

Sam and Dean looked like they wanted to say something, both glaring at Gabriel. He waved at them, raising his eyebrows pointedly.

Voice back, Dean immediately spat out a furious, “So you started the apocalypse because you thought it’d bring God back? It didn’t work the first time, so why the hell did you think it would
work the second time?"

“I was alone,” Raphael bit out. “Alone and furious. I didn’t make the best choices, but I did the best I could.” Her lips thinned. “I regret my actions now that I’ve experienced humanity, but the reasons for why we did it stand. We wanted our Father back, and we would have done anything for that to happen.”

“It didn’t work,” Castiel said tightly. “And you forced my hand—”

“No one forced you, Castiel; you made your own choices—”

“And who forced me to kill my brethren? Who refused to listen when I said there was another way?”

“There was no other way!” Raphael looked furious enough to breathe fire. “Not if we wanted to get His attention—”

“And you got it obviously,” Gabriel interrupted. “But not in the way you expected.”

“Stay out of this, Gabriel; you’ve nothing to do with this.”

“I don’t? Did I lose the memo that kicked me out of the family?”

“You left!” Raphael turned on him viciously. “And Father still saw fit to reward you for your cowardice.”

Gabriel blinked, taken aback by Raphael’s sudden vehemence. “You think I asked for it? You think I asked for Him to bring me back twice?” Because he had been fully prepared to die in that warehouse, knowing exactly what he was doing to destroy the Leviathan. That he was still here, alive and kicking, was a wholly unexpected surprise that Gabriel didn’t want to inspect too closely.

“But you were,” Raphael said flatly. “You were saved. As was Castiel. As was I, and Azazel, Lilith, Uriel, and Zachariah. But he favored you, even though you left and hid—”

“Should I have stayed and watch you all tear yourself apart?!”

“You left us, Gabriel! You were the Messenger, the one who carried Father’s word, and you left us!” Raphael shouted. “You didn’t help, you didn’t talk, you just left! And then when you did finally step in, when you finally made your presence known,” she continued in a quieter tone, “we felt you die.”

“Then should I have stayed?” Gabriel demanded, his fury causing the lights to flicker ominously. He barely noticed the flinches from the others, too focused on Raphael and the age-old feeling of betrayal and hurt that had never gone away. “Should I have watched you fight and tear at each other about where Dad went? Should I have waited around and just told you ‘I don’t know’ whenever you asked Dad was? Because He doesn’t tell me everything! I’m just His Messenger, and without Him, my job was defunct! While you guys were plotting the fucking apocalypse, I was down here, with the humans.”

“Doing what? Playing pagan? Being a Trickster? You were no better than us, Gabriel.”

A light bulb shattered. “If you don’t think I didn’t try to find Him while I was gone, then you’ve got another one coming. Because I tried. I tried, and at least I didn’t try to destroy humanity while I was at it.” His voice rose in a shout, all the lights blowing out at once. “Because we were supposed to protect them, Raphael! Not destroy them!”

“Fucking hell!” Dean cursed to Gabriel’s right, a loud crashing noise the result of him tripping over a
chair and knocking it and himself over in the sudden dark. “Fucking ow.”

“Dean?” Castiel sounded worried.

Heaving in calming breaths, Gabriel squeezed his eyes shut, snapping his fingers irritably to fix the damage he’d inadvertently wrought. The sudden shift from darkness to light was blinding for the others who didn’t have supernatural vision, and they were clearly giving him a wide berth that he didn’t mind taking.

Raphael blinked rapidly, pupils contracting to pinpoint pricks. “Gabriel—”

“Don’t, Raphael,” Gabriel snapped, shaking his head abruptly. “I don’t want to hear it.” He inhaled, the light next to him shattering with the gesture. Impatiently waving his hand over it, he repaired it, fingers rubbing together when he was done. “We’ve got other problems to focus on.”

Everyone was eyeing him warily, almost as if he might blow up the bunker in a fit of pique.

“I’ve got a handle on it,” Gabriel snapped, shoving down the tumultuous roiling of his Grace. “I’m not going to explode the place; that’d be stupid.”

“No kidding.” Dean had pried himself free from the chair he had toppled over and fallen onto and stood up. “Not the least because we’d come back and kill you.”

“Cry me a river and weep, Winchester.” Gabriel rubbed shaky hands through his hair, anger and the old taste of betrayal and hurt still surging through him.

“You need to focus, Tony,” Steve cut in, voice firm. “Do you have a plan?”

Gabriel laughed shortly, the sound harsh. “Do I? Break into Heaven and kick Metatron’s ass.”

“That is not possible,” Gadreel protested, face worried. “You do not have the power for such an assault, not right now—” His voice cut off as Gabriel muted it, his hand closing into a fist at his side.

“I’ve got enough,” Gabriel said calmly, looking away from Gadreel. He wasn’t surprised that Gadreel had noticed, given that he was the only other being currently capable of seeing souls and Grace, but that didn’t mean he wanted it known. “Besides...a full frontal assault’s not really my thing.”

“Then you would sneak in?” Loki asked, eyes flickering suspiciously between Gabriel and Gadreel. “How?”

“I’ve got ways.” Gabriel shifted, his wings fluttering slightly and inadvertently brushing against Gadreel’s tattered ones, which recoiled reflexively, the other’s Grace ringing with sudden terror; it was gone as quickly as it had appeared. Shooting Gadreel a look out of the corner of his eyes, Gabriel continued as if nothing had happened. “But those ways are probably locked up as tight as the rest as Heaven.”

“So you don’t have a plan,” Dean snipped.

“I’ve got a plan if I can get into Heaven, and that’ll have to happen from the inside.”

“All the angels were cast out,” Castiel reminded him. “Metatron won’t help you.”

Gabriel scowled. “Then I’ll force him to help me,” he said curtly. “If I can get him down here—”

“Face him when he has the entire might of Heaven at his beck and call?” Raphael snorted. “You’d
lose, Gabriel – archangel or no.”

“I’m open to suggestions then.” Gabriel rocked back on his heels, looking around pointedly. “But I doubt any of you have a plan that’ll work—”

“Hunters,” Sam interrupted, frowning in thought. “There are hunters in Heaven that can help.”

“Human souls can’t travel outside their own personal heavens,” Raphael protested. “It would be impossible for them to help, even if they could.”

“It’s been a while for me,” Sam said slowly, eyes slightly pinched, “but I’m pretty sure I remember that a small group figured out how to get through the different heavens.”

Dean nodded shortly. “Sam’s right. Ash’s got a pretty sweet setup there; it’s ’cause of him we made it as far as we did when we were up there. He even hacked into angel radio.”

Gabriel’s eyebrows rose. “Sounds like a guy I’d like. Does he understand Enochian?”

“According to what he said,” Dean said. “It’s how he knew we were up there.”

“Definitely a guy I’d like,” Gabriel muttered, running a hand through his hair. “Okay.” His hand dropped to his side. “I’m gonna need a laptop to work my magic on.”

“After that little blackout you caused, I’m not giving you mine,” Kevin protested.

Sam narrowed his eyes at Gabriel. “How do I know you won’t go looking up porn?” he demanded.

“Please, Sam, give me some credit.” Gabriel grinned. “I do know when it’s time to buckle down and stop playing.”

“I can confirm that this is true,” Jarvis added, a small smile tugging at his lips. “However, your laptop may not be the same by the time he is finished.”

Sam froze, slowly turning to pin Gabriel with a narrow-eyed stare. “If you fry it, you’re getting me a new one,” he threatened.

“I’ll do you one better and build you a new one.” Gabriel’s grin broadened at Sam’s suspicious look. “C’mon, sasquatch; Tony Stark’s brain isn’t just for show.”

Once Sam was gone, a slow smirk spread across Dean’s face. “How’s it feel to be a comic book hero?”

Gabriel pursed his lips, head tilting to the side. “You know that nothing in those comics is actually true beyond our backgrounds?”

“What do you mean by comic books?” Steve asked, sounding alarmed.

“Okay, Cap…” Dean grinned boyishly. “I think you’re just going to love this.”

Jarvis cleared his throat pointedly, eyebrows quirking meaningfully. “Perhaps this can be done at a later time?”

“Actually,” Gabriel interrupted, eyes catching on Sam entering the room again with a laptop under his arm, “you guys can go ahead and do what you need.” His eyes flickered between the two brothers, who hadn’t looked at each other even once since Gabriel had cut their argument short, which was truly a remarkable feat considering the library wasn’t that big. “This’ll take me a little time
Gabriel set up the laptop on the table, keeping half an ear on Dean asking Steve, “I can show you—”

Sam interrupted him. “Actually, Dean, if we could talk?” His tone made it clear that it wasn’t a suggestion.

It wasn’t until Dean and Sam left the room that Gabriel looked up from the screen, which was booting up, to meet Gadreel’s eyes. The other looked vaguely troubled, which reassured Gabriel as it let him know that Gadreel did feel guilty about practically violating Sam. It also meant he’d been right in extending forgiveness to his little brother.

Though Gadreel had been inadvertently responsible for everything that had happened following humanity’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden, not all the blame could be laid at his feet. And he had been punished long enough. The brief sense memory of feeling that sickening fear in Gadreel’s Grace flashed through Gabriel’s mind, and he gave Gadreel a speculative look before tabling it to deal with at a later point.

Shooting a glance over his shoulder to where Sam and Dean had left to have their private talk, Gabriel pressed his lips together and refocused on what he needed to do to set up a secure connection to Heaven and have even half a chance at contacting this Ash.

Dean felt literally sick with nerves, and not the good kind. He was all too aware of what he had done to Sam by agreeing to Gadreel’s possession in the first place. He had hoped for a little bit of time before his actions would be called to account, but his luck was never that good.

He’d gotten lucky occasionally – lucking out with Cas – but most of his life had been one misery after another. This was just one more mistake to add to the pile, but it wasn’t one he regretted.

How could he, when Sam was still alive to yell at him for it? It would’ve been a greater mistake if he’d let Sam go.

Sam waited until they were alone before he turned to Dean, his face set in stone. “We need to talk about this, Dean.”

Dean managed a small, nervous chuckle, his stomach roiling. “Talk, then. We’re here, aren’t we?”

Sam stared at him for a moment, expression warring between disbelief and incredulity. “I can’t believe it. You don’t regret what you did, do you?”

“You’re alive.” Dean ran his tongue along the inside of his lips, eyes sweeping up Sam’s form. “Can’t regret that.”

Sam huffed angrily. “You told an angel to just hop on in me without asking if it was okay. You tricked me. You don’t regret that? Not even one little bit?”

“I regret that I had to do it,” Dean admitted, “but I don’t regret you being alive.”

“It was my time, Dean, my time. It was my decision, and you took that away from me. And for what? Because you didn’t want to be alone?”

“Because it wasn’t your time!” Dean burst out. “The only reason you were dying was because of the trial—”
“Which I was supposed to finish,” Sam interrupted. “But you stopped me. I let it go, Dean. You didn’t.”

“What was I supposed to do? Let you die?”

“Damn it, Dean, yes!” Sam looked furious. “How many times have we done this already? Hell’s still open and Heaven’s closed, and we’ve got Crowley in our dungeon. What’s the upside to me being alive? Because I gotta tell you, I don’t see one!” He spread his arms.

“You’re alive, Sam.” Dean took a step closer to him, desperate to get him to see what Dean had. “You’re alive, and we’re together, fighting the good fight. The way it’s supposed to be.”

“I’m supposed to be dead. Not alive.” The words were uncompromising. “But I’m not, because you decided you knew better. Be honest with me, Dean. You didn’t save me for me – because you thought it wasn’t my time – you saved me for yourself. Because you didn’t want to be alone.”

Dean blinked in stunned surprise, uncomprehending. “What are you talking about?”

“You can’t stand the thought of being alone.” Sam’s words were piercing. “You’ve got Cas now, but that’s not enough, is it? You have to have me, too. I’ll say this much about you, Dean: You’re certainly willing to make the sacrifice, as long as you’re not the one being hurt.”

Dean’s throat was tight as he forced the words out. “As long as we’re being honest here, you’d do the same thing for me if the situation was reversed, and I was dying.”

Sam looked at him, eyes pitying. “No, Dean. I wouldn’t. Same circumstances, I wouldn’t.”

It was almost like he’d been shot in the heart, and Dean knew from intimate experience what that felt like, but this was worse. It was like being shot in the heart and Lucifer beating him up while wearing Sam; it was like Castiel leaving him high and dry without even a warning and a goodbye; it was everything Dean had ever experienced in Hell multiplied by a thousand.

And he didn’t know how to react, stricken beyond all words. All Dean could do was stand there, staring at Sam in horrified disbelief with those words ringing in his ears: “I wouldn’t.”

Sam held his eyes for a minute longer, letting those awful words hang in the air between them before he said softly, “I’m going to check on Gabriel.” He left without another word, leaving Dean standing there.

It took a moment before his knees threatened to give way, and he blindly reached out to the nearest support, grabbing hold of a chair and using it to keep himself upright. His vision grayed out, a roaring sound in his ears.

It was probably the reason why he didn’t hear Castiel repeating his name in an increasingly panicked tone. But he did notice when Castiel grabbed hold of his shoulders and shook him, snapping out a sharp “Dean!”

Dean blinked, focusing his eyes on Castiel. “Cas…”

Castiel’s grip didn’t lighten, but a little bit of tension seeped out from his frame. “Sam didn’t tell me anything. What happened?”

“I…” Dean swallowed, unable to get the words out. When he did finally manage something, it wasn’t what he had wanted to say at first. “You were right, Cas.” His voice was weak.
“About what?” Castiel’s tone was aggravatingly neutral. Dean needed him to shout, to scream, anything other than this neutral tone that didn’t judge him.

A hoarse laugh escaping him, Dean’s shoulders slumped in Castiel’s hold. “This blew up in my face, Cas. He won’t forgive me – not for this.”

“Of course he will. Just give him time—”

“He said he wouldn’t do it for me,” Dean blurted out, the words burning his throat. Castiel froze, fingers digging into Dean’s shoulders, and he continued doggedly, the only way he knew how. “If the situation was reversed, he’d let me die.” Dean drew in a ragged breath, desperately wanting to reach out but unsure how. “Tell me that means he’ll forgive me for this, Cas. Look me in the eye and tell me that again.”

Castiel’s eyes unwaveringly met Dean’s, his grip solidly reassuring. “Sam is your brother. No matter what happens, he will always love you.”

“That’s not a yes.”

“What he needs from you is different from you need from him,” Castiel said softly. “You would tear the world apart for him. You’ve done the same for me.”

“And Sam wouldn’t.” The words were sour in his mouth, leaving a nasty aftertaste.

“Sam grew up differently from you,” Castiel said. “You gave him a home, a life that you didn’t have, and you sacrificed your own for that. That he doesn’t understand it should mean something to you, Dean.”

“That he doesn’t need me as much as I need him?” Dean muttered bitterly, not looking at Castiel.

“That you raised him right,” Castiel said fiercely, his grip tightening. He stepped closer, his chest mere inches from Dean’s now. “You were a child, and you only had yourself to depend on and Sam to cling to. Now I see you here, and I’m so happy that you are, because there were a thousand ways that it could have gone wrong, and I would never have met you or fallen in love with you.”

The word “love” had Dean’s heart skip a beat like it always whenever Castiel said it; it wasn’t a word that they bandied around casually.

He looked up, forcing himself to meet Castiel’s eyes. “Would that have been so bad?” he managed to whisper. “You would never have Fallen—”

“If you even for one second think that I regret Falling for you, you are delusional,” Castiel snapped furiously. “If I had to do it all over again, I would without hesitation. I Fell for you once, and I’d do so all over again because you are worth it. I would tear the world down for you, Dean Winchester, and I would do it to keep you safe. Sam may have his priorities sorted but I don’t, and I don’t care.” One hand slid up to Dean’s neck, his thumb brushing the skin behind Dean’s ear. “Do you remember what I told you when we started this?” he murmured.

Dean swallowed, eyes closing as he remembered that day they had gone to face Dick, and what had come after Gabriel had handled the Leviathan. "You’re my priority, Dean. Not the Earth, not Heaven, and not the rest of humanity. You.”

“Yes,” he said roughly, eyes stinging suspiciously.

“That hasn’t changed.” Castiel’s eyes were soft. “The world could burn as long as you’re safe. And I
promise you, Dean, you won’t ever be alone. I know,” he continued slowly, “that I haven’t always been here for you the way you needed this past year, and I’m sorry. But I’m not leaving you. I won’t ever leave you.”

Castiel pressed their foreheads together. “You and Sam have been through so much together; I know I can’t replace him.”

“You were never a replacement—”


Dean snorted despite himself, flushing when the noise got a pleased grin from Castiel. “I think you’re great.”

Castiel’s grin had a rather mischievous edge to it now. “Do you want a hug?”

The snort of laughter escaped him before he could stop it, and Dean pulled him into a tight hug, one which Castiel instantly returned. “I love you, too, you know,” he whispered roughly, Castiel’s familiar scent soothing the hurt Sam had left behind.

Castiel shifted in his grip, his arms sliding up Dean’s back. “I know. And I know you’re going to go out there and help Gabriel, and you’re going to help reopen Heaven’s gates because that’s just the kind of man you are. But remember that you need to help yourself, too.”

“If I forget, you’ll just remind me.”

“I will.” Castiel’s voice was amused. Then, “Do you want to go out now?”

Sighing, Dean tucked his nose into Castiel’s warm skin, nudging his foot in-between Castiel’s feet. He didn’t say anything, but then he didn’t have to. Castiel understood.

While Dean and Sam were hashing out the newest problem between them, Steve joined Gabriel as he worked on setting up the laptop. Castiel had left five minutes after Dean and Sam, evidently intent on joining them; Gabriel mentally wished him luck. Raphael sat on Tony’s other side, arms folded across her chest and a stony expression on her face. Gadreel was hovering behind Gabriel, his presence almost enough to make Gabriel shoo him off but not enough so. Kevin had disappeared, probably off to do prophet-like things, Gabriel didn’t know. Jarvis and Loki had pulled out books and were leafing through them.

Chewing his lower lip in a very human habit, Gabriel started gently easing Grace into the computer so it could do what it needed to. Hacking into angel radio with something not designed to do so would be quite a feat, but Gabriel had literally been born to make miracles.

“What do you mind me asking what you’re doing?” Steve asked seven minutes into the process.

“At the moment I’m just getting this ready.” Gabriel withdrew his Grace, feeling the computer hum in response. It was peripherally connected to him, and that meant he could access the Host via the computer without worrying about anyone tracking him down with it. It was the ultimate proxy. “The tricky part will be getting this Ash’s attention. He may not be tuned into the Host at the moment, so it’ll depend on luck.”

“I guess we’ve been pretty lucky so far,” Steve said, smiling shyly. “It wouldn’t be too much to hope for.”
Gabriel’s answering smile was distracted. “We’ll see.” He tweaked the settings so the keyboard would type in Enochian, and he tested it out briefly to see if it worked.

Once he was assured that it would indeed transmit in Enochian, Gabriel moved onto actually getting it to transmit. He’d have to send out the equivalent of an open call to get Ash’s attention; there was no way to get into Heaven from down here, but up there they should still be able to see what was going on.

He hoped.

Gabriel was quite literally flying blind here, nothing but hope and belief keeping him going. He hadn’t a clue as to what kind of spell Metatron had put together in his absence, and he could only begin to fathom how it worked. It was nothing his Father would have sanctioned. Shutting his family out of Heaven was one thing, but preventing the dead from resting?

Gabriel was seriously going to give Metatron a piece of his mind the moment he got his hands on the little shit.

“I’m sorry,” Raphael said suddenly, startling Gabriel.

Gabriel blinked at her, unable to mask the surprise he felt. It took him a split-second to realize what she was apologizing for, and then he returned his gaze to the screen. “Nothing to apologize for.” His answer was flat.

“You’re wrong. I took my anger out on you, and I shouldn’t have.” Raphael’s eyes were practically boring a hole in the side of Gabriel’s head.

Gabriel ignored her for several more seconds before giving up and facing her. “What do you want me to say, sis? I’m sorry, too? I’m not.”

“You shouldn’t be sorry for leaving us.” Raphael’s eyes dropped to her hands on the table. “We shouldn’t have put you through that.”

“No, you shouldn’t have.” Gabriel’s voice was quiet. “But what’s done is done. We can’t fix it.” Then, because he did feel guilty for it, he added, “I’m sorry for leaving you to deal with it.”

Raphael’s smile was confused. “I thought you said you weren’t?”

“I’m not sorry for leaving. I’m sorry for leaving you to deal with it alone. There’s a difference.” Gabriel tapped his fingers on the cool surface of the laptop, considering. “I could’ve handled it better than running off to join the pagans,” he conceded reluctantly, giving her a faint, sheepish smile.

“We pushed you too far.” Raphael dropped her hands into her lap. “We’ve both made mistakes, Gabriel. Let’s let bygones be bygones?”

It wasn’t quite enough, but it was a start at easing the age-old sense of betrayal and hurt he had carried ever since leaving Heaven. Taking in a long breath, Gabriel agreed. “Bygones.”

Opposite Raphael, Steve seemed intensely uncomfortable at having been present at such an intimate conversation, while Jarvis seemed to be doing his level best to be engrossed in his book. Loki had a strange look on his face, his fingers distractingly caressing the pages of the book he was holding (Gabriel was abruptly reminded of the lost soul he had met in the sewers of Berlin).

Gadreel didn’t mind as angels had little concept of privacy given the constant connection of the Host. But humans did, and Gabriel would have to remember that in the future. It was too easy to slip into
old habits in his old universe.

Sam slipped back into the room, discomfort and a faint sense of guilt radiating off him, though it was all tempered by a simmering fury not directed towards anyone in the room.

“Good chat?” Gabriel asked casually, following Sam’s fidgety movements with his eyes.

Sam nodded distractedly, rubbing a hand over his face. “Where are you with it?” He gestured at the laptop.

“Transmitting,” Gabriel answered, looking up at Sam. “Open call to one Ash, last name unknown since you didn’t give me any, and now it’s up to him if he picks up.”

Sam nodded again, gaze considering. “Try Doctor Badass,” he said eventually.

Gabriel raised an eyebrow. “Nickname?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, can’t hurt…” Gabriel added another sentence to the open call, setting it on a repeating loop every three minutes. It might drive the Host crazy to hear the same thing in an infinite loop, but he didn’t really care; they could tune out if they needed to.

“I am sorry for what I did,” Gadreel told Sam somberly, his expression regretful.

“Yeah, I’m sure you are,” Sam replied bitterly. His frame was tense. “But it’s not you who has to apologize.”

Gadreel frowned, evidently uncomprehending. “But I violated you.”

“You wouldn’t have done it if Dean hadn’t told you to.” Sam’s face was hard. “But thanks. You’re the only one who has apologized.”

“You weren’t too hard on your brother, were you?” Gabriel asked, getting Sam’s attention.

Sam looked incredulous. “He did it against my wishes. He was thinking of himself like always, not about me.” He scoffed. “Why do you even care?”

“Because I’m also a brother,” Gabriel said easily, calmly meeting Sam’s betrayed eyes. “And I get where he’s coming from. He didn’t do the right thing, but I understand.” He chuckled under his breath. “Boy, do I understand.”

Sam snorted derisively. “This is coming from the guy who stuck me in an endless loop just to teach me a lesson that I shouldn’t save Dean from his own decisions. What changed your attitude?”

“Life.” Gabriel shrugged dismissively, tipping the chair back to rest on its back legs. “People change, sasquatch. I’ve got a better idea of what makes humans tick now.”

“Because being human for about as long as you didn’t remember changed you,” Sam noted skeptically.

“Yes,” Gabriel said simply, meeting Sam’s eyes, “it did.” He smiled, letting Tony slip forward and Gabriel slide back. “Humans are funny like that.”

Sam blinked down at him, visibly disconcerted, clearly not expecting that. “Really.”
“Believe me or don’t believe me, I don’t care,” Gabriel said flatly, running out of patience to deal with the stubborn kid. Winchesters had always been trying to talk to; he had no idea how Castiel managed it, and he was in a relationship with one (Gabriel was glad about it but still). “But whatever Dean did, he did the best he could.”

Sam’s eyes tightened. “That’s the problem.”

Gabriel shrugged, dismissing the conversation. “Your loss, kiddo.” His message was still pinging out into the ether, and in the back of his mind the Host was complaining about the repetitive message that no one was responding to, with most wondering about the strange name.

Gadreel read Gabriel’s amusement correctly. “It is rather annoying,” he admitted.

“Tough luck,” Gabriel said unsympathetically, fingers itching for something else to do now that he was just waiting for a response from Heaven.

Loki shelved the book he had been perusing, his focus on Sam. “You are brothers, are you not?” he asked frankly.

Sam seemed understandably wary of where this was going. “Yeah.”

“Then why would you not expect him to save you?” Loki sounded honestly curious.

“It’s not that he did it,” Sam said, his tongue wetting his lower lip. “It’s how he did it, and why.”

Loki studied him for a moment, eyes sharp. Eventually he said, “I do not understand your grievance. You are alive, and your brother saved your life. Why are you upset with him?”

“I wouldn’t expect you to understand,” Sam said heavily, “but what Dean did was not okay. He should have just let me go, but instead he tricked me. He lied to me, and there was someone else inside me.” His jaw tightened as he glanced at Gadreel. “I don’t care what his excuses were; there is no way any of that will ever be okay.”

“Brothers will go far to protect their siblings,” Loki said. “I have learned this from my own. You should be glad to be alive, to have someone who cares about you.”

Sam huffed out a breathless laugh. “Of course you don’t understand; you’re not even human.”

“But I am,” Steve said. “And I understand where Dean’s coming from.”

Sam gaped at him wordlessly, betrayed. “You…?”

“There’s little I wouldn’t do for those I care about,” Steve continued, eyes darting to Gabriel and back. “If there was even a chance in hell that I could save someone who was dying, I’d take it. In a heartbeat. Because at least that means they’re alive to be angry about it.” His smile was faint.

“So you would take someone like Gabriel inside you without knowing he’s there?” Sam demanded, shooting Gabriel a glare when he snorted at the double insinuation in his words. “Against your wishes?”

“I’d be mad,” Steve admitted honestly, the tips of his ears pinkening slightly at the double insinuation that he’d also caught. “I’m not saying that you don’t have the right to be upset. I’m not saying that what your brother did was right. I’m saying that I understand what he did, and that in the same situation, I’d probably make the same decision. I’d much rather have the other person alive and furious at me than have them dead.”
“So I should forgive him,” Sam said flatly. “Because it’s understandable.”

“I’m not saying that,” Steve answered calmly, his thumb tapping the surface of the table. “It’s up to you what you decide to do. But before you make a decision, you should try to see it from your brother’s point of view. Only a desperate man would do what he did, and you should ask yourself why.”

Sam inhaled deeply through his nose, fury and hurt radiating off him in waves. His jaw tightened, but he said nothing else.

Raphael huffed, looking completely unimpressed with the lot of them. She rolled her eyes when Gabriel shot her a pointed look. “This has been so incredibly touching,” she said dryly, “but let’s get to the point. Has there been anything yet, Gabriel?”

Gabriel grimaced, eyes flickering to the computer screen where only his message to Ash blinked. “No.” He ran hands over his face and through his hair, interlinking them behind his neck. The Host was sounding increasingly irritated with the repetitious message bouncing into their midst, and to be quite honest, Gabriel was getting impatient himself.

“But we’ll get an answer soon?” Steve asked hopefully.

“One can hope.” Gabriel looked to the side when he felt Dean and Castiel join them. There was a soul-deep pain radiating out from Dean that made Gabriel’s Grace ache, but his face was blank and he didn’t look at Sam beyond an initial assessing glance.

“Hey, Castiel.” Gabriel raised his eyebrows when Castiel looked at him. “Mind giving me my sword back?”

Castiel looked briefly surprised at the reminder. “Ah, yes. I’ll go get it.”

“You mean you’ve left an all-powerful sword that belongs to me just lying around?”

Castiel didn’t reply beyond snorting, but he did look vaguely guilty when he left.

“Why did you give him your sword?” Loki asked curiously.

“Had no idea how to use it before,” Gabriel answered, flashing back to the utter confusion and hurt he’d felt when he’d been all too human. “And Castiel did.” Hael’s sword slipped into his hand, startling Steve and Raphael. “Not that it really mattered in the long run,” he continued, running a thumb up the sharp blade, mouth turning down as he remembered what had happened.

“Whose is that?” Raphael asked sharply.

“Hael’s,” Castiel’s voice said, sounding guilty. He had Gabriel’s sword in his hand, and his eyes were fixed on Hael’s. “I’m sorry you had to kill her.” His voice was quiet as he held out Gabriel’s sword hilt first.

“I’m not,” Gabriel said bluntly, his hand fitting around the familiar hilt, the energy of his sword humming through his Grace in greeting. “She was judged, Castiel.” He flipped Hael’s sword around, pushing it into Castiel’s hand.

Castiel’s hand closed reflexively around the hilt, his throat rippling as he swallowed. “But you didn’t remember.”

“Some part of me did,” Gabriel said softly, remembering the daze he had been while killing Hael.
“And no matter the reason, what she wanted to do was unacceptable.” His smile was flat. “So I don’t regret it, and you shouldn’t either.”

“What did she want?” Dean asked, coming up behind Castiel.

“To become one.” Gabriel wasn’t surprised to see Dean looking uncomprehending, though both Raphael and Gadreel inhaled sharply.

“That’s not good, is it?” Dean demanded, alarmed.

“It’s all right, Dean.” Castiel’s hand curled around Dean’s wrist. “She can’t do it anymore.”

Dean frowned. “You don’t want to tell me,” he accused.

“You don’t need to know.” Gabriel stared back unapologetically as Dean frowned down at him. “It’s an angel thing.”

“Oh, it’s an angel thing,” Dean said sarcastically.

“Yeah, it—” Gabriel cut himself off as the computer pinged an alert. The legs of the chair slammed into the floor as he reoriented himself in front of the computer, eyes fixed on the response Ash had sent.

THIS IS DR. BADASS. WHO’S ASKING?

“Oh, hello there,” Gabriel murmured, uncaring of the way Gadreel was leaning over his shoulder in sudden interest. He quickly adjusted the frequency to hook into the one Ash had used, isolating their conversation from the rest of the Host. GABRIEL.

“He responded?” Raphael’s eyes were bright with excitement.

“Yes, he did,” Gabriel breathed, eagerly anticipating Ash’s response.

GABRIEL THE ARCHANGEL?

ONE AND THE SAME.

“That’s not English,” Sam said from behind Gabriel.

Gabriel didn’t respond, fingers tapping impatiently against the keyboard as he waited for Ash to reply.

When the answer came, it was radiating with suspicion even in text. WHAT DO YOU WANT?

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT BREAKING OPEN HEAVEN?

This time the response took longer to come. PROVE YOU ARE WHO YOU ARE.

“Suspicious,” Gabriel noted, brow furrowing. He glanced back at Dean and Sam. “He wants me to prove my identity.”

“Tell him Dean and Sam say hi,” Dean said.

The response was quicker this time. YOU’RE WORKING WITH THE WINCHESTERS?

“I need a bit more, Dean.”
“Tell him Sam says hi to Bobby and hopes he’s enjoying himself up there,” Sam said urgently.

When the response came, it clearly wasn’t Ash saying it. YOU IDJITS, WHAT’VE YOU GONE AND DONE NOW.

Gabriel couldn’t help but grin as he read this out, liking this Bobby.

“That’s Bobby, all right,” Dean murmured, his mouth tugging into a grin.

Ash sent another message before Gabriel could respond. SO YOU’RE GABRIEL. WEREN’T YOU DEAD?

RUMORS OF MY DEATH WERE GREATLY EXAGGERATED.

WHAT WERE YOU SAYING ABOUT HEAVEN?

WE’RE GOING TO BREAK IT OPEN, BUT WE NEED YOUR HELP.

“What’s happening?” Steve asked as Gabriel quickly explained what he would need from Ash and anyone else he could get to help.

Gabriel grinned up at him, exhilaration surging through him. “We’re going to break into Heaven. Castiel, where did he cast the spell?”

Castiel’s lips thinned at the memory, his eyes pinching. “Where Naomi did her…” He shivered slightly. “Where Naomi was,” he managed, not meeting Gabriel’s eyes.

Gabriel shot Raphael a look, but his sister averted her eyes. Castiel had said something before about Naomi, though Tony hadn’t understood it. “Okay,” he said neutrally, intending on wrangling the answer out one way or another.

It took several minutes for Ash to get back to Gabriel. THERE’S ONLY ONE ANGEL UP HERE. WE WILL NOTICE.

I’LL DISTRACT NEM.

“Gabriel,” Gadreel murmured once he read this.

“I’m the only one who can, Gadreel,” Gabriel said. “Besides, it’s not like he’ll be able to catch me.”

“I don’t like this,” Castiel said, arms folded across his chest.

“You don’t have to like it.” Gabriel typed out what Ash would need to get into the angels’ part of Heaven. “It’s happening.”

“What?” Steve’s voice was sharp.

When Gabriel didn’t respond, Gadreel did, ignoring Gabriel’s disgruntled glare. “Gabriel will distract Metatron while the hunters gather the materials.”

“More like when they start their own spell,” Gabriel said before Steve could begin to protest. “Anything else they can do incognito until they start breaking into the non-human part of Heaven.”

Gabriel could feel Gadreel’s eyes boring disapproving holes through his skull. “That is not allowed, Gabriel.”
“Contractions, Gadreel, use them.” Gabriel looked up at him. “We’re throwing out the rulebook here, brother. Either fall in line or get out.”

Gadreel stared down at Gabriel, face conflicted. Eventually he just nodded, that ridiculously defined jaw of his vessel tightening, and settled back, eyes fixed on the screen.

Gabriel looked back as well, reading what Ash had sent him last. WILL LET YOU KNOW WHEN READY. STANDBY FOR DISTRACTION.

“All right, then.” Gabriel sat back in his chair, a mixture of nervousness and excitement sitting in his stomach.

“What is it?” Jarvis asked anxiously, eyes darting between the computer screen and Gabriel’s face.

Gabriel looked up from the screen, meeting everyone’s eyes separately. “We wait,” he said simply.

His Grace roiled in anger as he remembered the Reapers around the warehouse and the lost souls behind them, clear evidence of the lost balance. Metatron’s time was coming.

Chapter End Notes

I got the idea for getting the hunters in Heaven involved from this one post somewhere on tumblr that I swear I reblogged but can't find anymore. In any case, it's an idea that stuck with me and I thought it'd be great to use. So guess who we're seeing next chapter? 8D

Hope you enjoyed this chapter. It was like pulling teeth to write this one, so I hope it's good.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Okay, I'm really, terribly behind with answering to comments, and I'm sorry about that, but I AM reading all of them and they're all precious to me.

In any case, this is Chapter 14, and Chapter 15 will be out on Monday, and there's a lot planned for that. Like, a lot. Heaps. And that's where the second act ends and the third act begins.

But this is Chapter 14, not 15, so I hope you enjoy.

And...HAPPY NEW YEAR. Best wishes and all the luck for this new year, and may it be a fantastic one for all of you! I've got a lot planned for 2015.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Heaven wasn’t all the Bible hyped it up to be. Sure, it was kinda cool that you didn’t have to worry about starving or getting thirsty or dying, but that was about it. You could also sort of manipulate your own personal heaven once you got good at it, but there were people on Earth who could do the same without dying and getting dumped into an isolated corner of Heaven.

Not that Ash’s Heaven was that isolated anymore since he’d figured out how to get through different heavens and connect them.

It was cooler now than it had been when he’d first come to realize that he was in Heaven, and that was only after a hell of a lot of work. He still wasn’t done either, because it was a damn shame that so many people in Heaven were disconnected from each other.

It was also rather funny considering that while Heaven was rather disjointed in itself, it was connected peripherally to Earth. It was both separate and together with it, and Ash found that really fascinating. Time ran slower up in Heaven than it did on Earth, but things that happened on Earth washed over into Heaven.

Take the Winchesters. They’d died plenty of times, popped up in Heaven, and then been resurrected for whatever reason. It was rather maddening at first, but after the last time when angels had been after Dean and Sam, Ash hadn’t seen them since. But that didn’t mean whatever they did on Earth wasn’t felt in Heaven.

After the apocalypse that they averted, there had been that frigging civil war among the angels. Ash’s sweet little setup had nearly fried keeping track of all the chaos. Then there’d been the purge of several thousand angels, all at the hand of one Castiel. That didn’t even come close to the utter chaos that had reigned when Castiel had up and declared himself to be God.

Ash had bunkered down in his own little heaven during that fiasco, keeping it warded against just about anything he could think of. When it eventually blew over, the main thing on angel radio had been the Leviathan, and Ash was rather glad that he wasn’t on Earth to deal with that. Angels seemed rather terrified of those things.
Whatever had dealt with the Leviathan had blown a lot of power that could be felt in Heaven, though Ash had no idea who or what it had been, only that it disappeared as quickly as it had appeared.

But none of that held a candle to what had happened recently. It had been felt everywhere when the gates to Heaven had slammed shut on the angels, locking them all out except for one that Ash could tell. Even without his tech, Ash could feel that something was wrong – missing. The very atmosphere of Heaven seemed restrained, like it was holding its breath or something.

Ash had no doubt that the Winchester brothers were smack in the middle of this. They usually were.

It was one thing that all the hunters Ash had managed to contact agreed on. His little gathering had grown with every hunter’s death. He had been rather stunned to find Ellen and Jo in Heaven and in two separate ones. He’d found Ellen first, and she hadn’t let up on him until he’d found Jo as well. From there finding Bill Harvelle had been a piece of cake, and Ash had left them to their rather tearful reunion.

Ash had told the Winchester brothers that he hadn’t had any luck finding their parents, and it had held true until that civil war. Whatever the angels were doing had disrupted Heaven enough that he stumbled into several different heavens that he hadn’t been able to before, and one of them was the personal heaven of one John and Mary Winchester. Both had been rather surprised to find a complete stranger in their heaven, though they’d followed him willingly enough when he explained what he was doing.

This time Ash had been all too happy to be around when Ellen and Jo had it out with John. Mary had seemed rather amused at Pamela’s waxing about her extraordinarily handsome sons.

There was nothing that could really top Ash finding John and Mary Winchester after searching for them for so long, but he was rather surprised upon finding the heaven of Deanna Campbell and then being unable to find her husband since he’d been resurrected. Some months later in Earth time, Samuel Campbell was back in Heaven and all the crankier for it. He’d then told John and Mary that they had two skilled hunters for sons, and he was proud to be their grandfather. Ash also stumbled across Rufus around the same time, and the grumpy guy only grumbled about that “damn Bobby Singer” before following Ash back to the Roadhouse.

It was shortly before the gates to Heaven had slammed close that Ash found Bobby Singer. The man’s personal heaven had that new and shiny feeling to it that Ash had gotten used to in his travels, and he didn’t really want to know what had finally taken down Bobby Singer, because it must have been nasty.

When Bobby came to face to face with John, probably no one expected Bobby to deck him and then tear into him about what he was thinking about raising his boys like that and that he was damn lucky that they’d grown into the fine men they were today. Bobby and Rufus also ended up having something of an emotional reunion that ended up being resolved through lots of drinking.

Well, fine men or not, the Winchester brothers ended up causing a lot of trouble both Earth- and Heaven-side. And Ash couldn’t help but wonder how the hell they were going to fix this problem.

There was little to nothing the hunters could do about anything. They had no idea who was responsible beyond the angels clamoring angrily for Castiel, and human soul or not, Ash didn’t want to know what an angel could do to them up here in Heaven, which was their home turf.

It had been a rather normal day in Heaven – or what passed for normal since the gates had closed – when things seemed to go to shit.
Ash’s personal heaven had become the de facto meeting point for everyone, being as heavily warded as it was. It also had the most seating space, being a replica of the Roadhouse and all. Ellen definitely had not looked teary-eyed upon seeing it for the first time.

Ash had been enjoying a game of poker with Jo and Pamela when everything started shaking around them. There was an unfamiliar rush of power tingling at his skin, and the light outside the Roadhouse brightened, not a good sign considering that Heaven was supposed to be stable.

Jo shot Ash an alarmed look, fingers clenching tight on her stick. “What’s going on?”

Ash dropped his own to the pool table, mind on his computers. “I don’t know.”

Practically everyone crammed into the room with him, the shaking subsiding by the time Ash sat down and scanned angel radio for any sign of what had happened.


Ash stared at the sudden burst of chatter that filled angel radio. Even though it was just text, the shock, amazement, and hope that burst through the angels was clear as day, and Ash really wondered who this “Gabriel” was that they were chattering about.

“Someone called Gabriel,” Ash answered after the hundredth exclamation of that name. “He just got his Grace back.”

“So that’s what we felt?” John asked, pressed uncomfortably close to Ash’s back.

“Hell of a thing to happen when angel gets his Grace back,” Samuel said roughly, voice disbelieving.

“That ain’t no ordinary angel,” Bobby said, sounding faintly incredulous. “That’s an archangel.”

Everyone turned to stare at Bobby.

“You know who it is?” Rufus demanded.

“Never actually met him in person aside from the one time we tried to kill him, but the boys did.” Bobby folded his arms across his chest, unruffled by the sudden attention. “They met him as a Trickster before finding out he was really Gabriel. Last I heard, though, Lucifer’d killed him.”

“Obviously not,” Mary said, looking down at Ash. “What does this mean?”

“Do I look like the guy with all the answers?” Ash stood, making sweeping gestures. “Out, out! Give a man some room to breathe.”

Jo didn’t move, giving him an amused look. “Just the guy who discovered how to travel through Heaven,” she teased.

“Aw, psh.” Ash pushed her out as well, keeping the door open in case of any other unexpected developments.

Everyone was standing around in the main room, waiting on Ash.

He gave them all an unimpressed look, tossing his hair back over his shoulder. “I’ve no idea what just happened,” he declared.

“What does angel radio say?” Pamela asked, coming by him to brush his shoulder with her own.
“Just his name: Gabriel.” Ash looked resentfully at the toppled chairs from the earlier earthquake from Gabriel getting his Grace back. “And that he regained his Grace. They were a bit focused on those two details.”

“No surprise there,” Bobby said. “Since he was dead and all.”

“What does him being an archangel have anything to do with anything?” Samuel asked Bobby.

Even in Heaven, Bobby was still the go-to guy for lore and monsters. “Do I have to spell everything out for you? An archangel, like Michael and Lucifer, and you know who those two are. They’re not to be messed around with.”

“So he can reopen Heaven,” Deanna stated.

“Doubtful,” Bobby disagreed. “He may not want to help.”

“Last I heard, angels like Heaven being open to them,” Samuel pointed out.

“You ain’t met this angel,” Bobby said, snorting. “Should’ve seen him… He was dressed up as a janitor and having the life. Didn’t seem to want any part of Heaven.”

“But Lucifer killed him?” Ellen asked.

“It’s ’cause of Gabriel the boys locked Lucifer and Michael in the Cage,” Bobby said, having already explained this back when Ash had first found him and after Bobby had beaten John up. “That was after he was dead.”

“I think he’ll help,” Jo stated, face obstinate. “Ash?”

“It’s up in the air, Jo,” Ash said, not necessarily wanting to get her hopes up. “But what can I say… angels seemed pretty excited to have him back.”

“So we wait then,” Mary said firmly, giving her husband a quelling look. “Wait and see what happens.”

“You guys will do the waiting,” Ash said, wiggling his fingers at all of them as he backed up in the direction of his computer room. “I will go and keep an eye on angel radio. Make sure everything’s cool.”

He grabbed a beer before sitting down, swigging down a large mouthful and wishing that he could get drunk up here. It was potentially possible if he really tried, but there was no fun in literally forcing oneself to get drunk, and it was over as soon as your concentration was shot.

Settling back in his chair, Ash checked angel radio and noted that apparently the demon Abbadon was dead. Then, moving his attention to the screen that usually showed where the angels were in Heaven, Ash paid attention to the one dot that had been the only one there since Heaven had shut its doors.

Jo joined him some time later, setting down another cold beer for him before settling down in a second chair. “Anything?” she asked.

“Nope.” Ash threw his empty bottle in a trash can, pleased when it disappeared the moment it touched the bottom.

“This is boring,” Jo said, sulking.
“Regret dying?”

“Sort of.” Jo’s teeth flashed in a small grin. “Don’t miss the pain.”

“Yeah, that’s nice.” Ash grinned back, his head tipping back as he drank, his eyes skimming the screen devoted to angel radio. He frowned upon reading it. The angels were sounding awfully irritated.

Jo noticed his look. “Something wrong?”

“Maybe.” Ash set the beer down, leaning forward over the keyboard.

WHERE’S THAT MESSAGE COMING FROM?

IT KEEPS REPEATING.

IT’S GETTING ANNOYING.

WHO’S SENDING THIS THING?

WHO IS DR. BADASS?

It was the last one that had Ash snapping to attention, his entire focus narrowed in on angel radio. Someone was trying to get into contact with him, and not very effectively either.

It took a few seconds, and then the message the angels were complaining about popped up: PAGING DR. BADASS IN HEAVEN.

“No way,” Ash murmured, fingers tapping against the desk as he considered what he should do.

Someone was going through a lot of trouble to get his attention. And who was Ash to deny them?

THIS IS DR. BADASS. WHO’S ASKING?

“Ash?” Jo sounded alarmed. “What’s going on? Who’re you talking to?”

“We’ve got contact,” Ash said, knee jiggling as he waited for the mysterious person’s response.

“You’re kidding me.”

The response, when it popped it up, surprised Ash. GABRIEL.

“Nope.” Ash quickly typed back asking for confirmation. GABRIEL THE ARCHANGEL?

ONE AND THE SAME.

“Why would an archangel be contacting me?” Ash asked, suspicion rising in him. No angel knew of Ash’s little setup up here, and he liked it that way. Who’d told Gabriel that Ash could get into angel radio and understand Enochian? And who’d told Gabriel about Ash’s self-imposed nickname?

WHAT DO YOU WANT? Ash sent the response off without guilt.

HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT BREAKING OPEN HEAVEN?

“Jesus Christ,” Ash breathed, sitting back and running his hands through his hair.

“What’s going on, Ash?” Bobby’s gruff voice demanded from right behind him. Jo must’ve fetched
him.

“It’s Gabriel,” Ash said, still in disbelief.

“What does he want?” It was Ellen this time on Ash’s other side.

“He wants to break open Heaven.”

Jo’s eyes widened. “That’s a good thing, isn’t it?”

“Just hold on,” Bobby growled, waving a hand in Jo’s direction. “This could be a trick for all you know. I thought you said no one knew you had this?”

“No angel does,” Ash agreed, frowning at the conversation he had open with this “Gabriel.”

“Check and see if he’s who he says he is,” John ordered a few feet away from Ash.

PROVE YOU ARE WHO YOU ARE.

The response, when it came, wasn’t what Ash expected. DEAN AND SAM SAY HI.

So the brothers had told Gabriel about his little setup? YOU’RE WORKING WITH THE WINCHESTERS?

“They’re working with an angel?” John sounded disbelieving.

SAM SAYS HI TO ONE BOBBY AND HOPES HE’S ENJOYING HIMSELF IN HEAVEN.

“It’s him,” Ash announced. “Sam says hi and hopes you’re enjoying yourself in Heaven,” he informed Bobby.

Bobby snorted. “Idjits, what’ve they gone and done now.”

Ash didn’t bother hiding a smirk as he sent that to Gabriel. He followed this with another message.

SO YOU’RE GABRIEL. WEREN’T YOU DEAD?

The fact that Gabriel quipped back with a pop culture reference greatly endeared Ash to the archangel. WHAT WERE YOU SAYING ABOUT HEAVEN?

WE’RE GOING TO BREAK IT OPEN, BUT WE NEED YOUR HELP.

“Obviously not dead, and he wants to open Heaven up.”

“Ask him what he needs,” Samuel urged. “He’s gotta be contacting us for something.”

WHAT DO YOU NEED?

THE LAST INGREDIENT OF THE SPELL THAT WAS CAST: CASTIEL’S GRACE. IT’S TYING IT TOGETHER; TAKING IT OUT WILL DISABLE THE SPELL LONG ENOUGH FOR ME TO GET IN AND DISABLE THE REST.

Ash’s tongue darted out to lick his lip as he thought. HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO FIND THAT?

WHERE THE SPELL WAS CAST IN THE MIDDLE OF HEAVEN. YOU’LL HAVE TO GET INTO THE ANGELS’ PART TO GET THERE, AND IT WON’T BE A JOB FOR JUST ONE
OF YOU. SAM TELLS ME YOU’VE GOT A NETWORK OF HUNTERS; USE THEM.

“This is going to be groovy,” Ash said, pushing back and running his hands through his hair, his knee jiggling in excitement and nervousness.

“What did he say?” John demanded.

“He wants us to break into the angels’ side of Heaven and get the last ingredient of the spell that was worked. Says it should disable the spell long enough for him to get in and do the rest of it.”

“The angels’ part of Heaven?” Ellen sounded disbelieving.

“That’s going to be dangerous,” Mary mused thoughtfully.

“We could do with a little danger,” Samuel said.

“Speak for yourself,” Bobby said grumpily. “This is gonna be a shit storm of the likes I ain’t seen since the Leviathan.”

“Ash,” Pamela said, her hand coming to rest on Ash’s shoulder, “what do you think will happen when we go into a section we’re not supposed to be in?”

“Ugh.” Ash glanced at the screen with the single dot of that damn angel. “There’s not going to be any hiding from him once we’re in.” He told Gabriel as much.

Gabriel’s response was surprising.

I’LL DISTRACT NEM.

“Shouldn’t be a problem,” Ash said once he’d taken in that statement. “Gabriel’s going to run distraction.”

“How kind of him,” John muttered. He grunted a moment later as Mary evidently smacked his chest.

Ash ignored the small squabble as he read what Gabriel sent him next as to what they would need to do to get into the angels’ part of Heaven. There were a lot of sigils and stuff that Ash had no idea existed and he suspected that no human had seen before. There were also instructions for what to do once they found Castiel’s Grace, which was essentially just gather it into a small container that would isolate it.

It would apparently weaken the spell enough for Gabriel to squeeze through the barrier and take care of the rest.

“So we’re doing this?” Jo asked Ash.

“We’re doing this,” Ash agreed, silencing everyone else in the room. WILL LET YOU KNOW WHEN READY. STANDBY FOR DISTRACTION.

He looked up at everyone, grinning excitedly. “So who’s ready for some major ass-whooping?”

“Idjits,” Bobby muttered, stalking out of the room.

Ash elected to ignore that since Bobby was just a major grump.

It took them about a day Earth-time to get everything pulled together. Most of it was just weapons they could use to distract the angel, who neither Ash nor Gabriel had named for fear of getting his attention, but there was also a little spell that Pamela put together so they could pinpoint where
exactly they needed to do the ritual to get Castiel’s Grace.

Once the spell was done, Ash was not entirely surprised to see that they needed to get into a part of Heaven that wasn’t accessible through the use of sigils. This wouldn’t have been any fun if it were that easy anyway.

But it did mean that they’d have to rely on more distractions than just Gabriel could give them. So they divvied up into different groups that would break into parts of Heaven that were off limits to humans at the same time. Hopefully that’d confuse the evil angel enough that he wouldn’t get to the site on time.

“So everyone’s got the plan straight?” Ash said once it was all set out. “Communicators working?”

“Copy that, Ash,” Jo said, smirking at him.

“So, Team Harvelle, Team Singer, Team Winchester, and Team Campbell,” Ash listed off, looking at each separate team. “You’ve got probably only two minutes to get it right, even with Gabriel running interference.”

“This ain’t gonna be my first rodeo, son,” Bobby said, sharing glances with Rufus, his partner on this venture.

“It’s ours,” Mary said, looking up at John, “but it’ll work out.”

“First time for everything.” John said, thumb rubbing over the barrel of the gun he was holding. “Can’t be any different from facing down a demon.”

“You’d be surprised,” Bobby said dryly, the only one of them present who had actually faced down a renegade angel and lived to tell the tale (for a while more, anyway).

“Have you gotten in touch with Gabriel yet?” Bill asked in his usual soft-spoken voice.

“I’m gonna time it just right,” Ash said. “That way our host won’t know in which direction to go after he’s distracted with our partner. Everyone get in their positions.” He put fingers to his ear. “I’ll give the mark when it’s time.”

“Good luck, boys,” Pamela said, flashing all of them her signature eye-crinkling smile. “And girls.” She winked at the women. “I’ll be rooting for you from here.” She would also be cloaking them as best as she could given her psychic abilities.

“Thanks, Pamela,” Bobby said, moving with Rufus to their allocated spot in the Roadhouse where they’d paint the sigil that would get them to their spot in Heaven.

It was Team Harvelle that would be getting Castiel’s Grace because they had the largest team with three people. Ellen had been rather insistent on Jo not accompanying them at all, but Jo had squashed her concerns pretty thoroughly by saying she’d just go off on her own then; Ellen had capitulated pretty quickly after that.

Half his mind on the assembled teams out there and the rest on contacting Gabriel and getting the ball rolling, Ash took a breath, aware that once he sent this message to Gabriel, there’d be no take backs. It was all or nothing from this point on. And he’d have to hope that the hunters out there were capable enough of pulling this off.

Considering that all of them were in some tangential way related or linked to the famous Winchester brothers, Ash had no doubt they were the best of the best. So with one last breath, Ash pressed the
After the mess in Hell, Bobby had actually been relieved to end up in Heaven. Then he’d realized that Heaven was fucking boring and wished for something to alleviate it. It was also damn creepy living in a never-ending loop of your best memories, especially if the other people in it weren’t real.

So Bobby had been utterly relieved to see Ash appear in his heaven one day. He’d also been rather relieved when Heaven ended up being in trouble. He was just downright thrilled to be doing something about it now. Really. Because it meant he wasn’t sitting on his ass waiting for his boys to pull it together and solve it.

At least now he was actually going to help in some small way. It wasn’t large, but it was enough.

And Rufus was here, someone Bobby had worked with before.

So here they stood, waiting for Ash’s mark so they could get the doors to Heaven open. Bobby would never have guessed that one day they’d be helping the angels, especially after the shit they’d pulled over the last several years.

After a small stretch of time that seemed like an eternity to Bobby’s nerves, Ash’s voice finally crackled in bright and clear over the earpiece. “All systems go.”

It was Bobby who drew the sigil, his hand steady and sure. It flared bright white, and then Rufus and he pushed open the door and stepped through.

Bobby was rather mildly surprised to find himself in a rather sterile looking hallway. A glance shared with Rufus showed his old friend to be just as perturbed.

The angelic part of Heaven was looking to be rather drab and decidedly…not-angelic.

“I don’t like this,” Rufus muttered, shifting his gun.

“You and me both.”

Bobby drew another sigil on the wall on the opposite end of where they’d come in, this one intending to lead them into another part of Heaven. They’d do the same thing several other times before ending up in the Garden, which was where they’d planned to meet up once they were done with the distracting.

This time he and Rufus ended up in what looked like an absolutely gorgeous meadow. When the next sigil went up on a tree and they stepped past it, there was an enormous library, and Bobby’s fingers instantly itched at the knowledge at his fingertips.

“Cool it,” Rufus said, amused.

“Shut it,” Bobby muttered, glad he didn’t blush easily.

This time, when Bobby drew the sigil that would land them in the Garden, their transition didn’t go smoothly.

The very foundation of Heaven seemed to be shaking to pieces around them as they stepped through the door, and they clutched each other reflexively. There was a loud screeching sound, one that had Bobby’s ears ringing, and then something seemed to snap into place.
They slammed into the Garden, the transition from white nothingness to green foliage surprising. They crashed into the ground, having appeared floating sideways in the air. Gravity didn’t like humans any better up here, it seemed.

Bobby shared a disconcerted glance with Rufus. “What the hell?”

The other teams were around them, but there was no sign of Jo, Ellen, or Bill.

And Bobby had no doubt that the doors to Heaven had been blown wide open.

Jo’s last vivid memory of when she had been alive was her insides being held together by tape. And pain. A hell of a lot of pain, but once you were in that much pain…it just didn’t seem to register anymore.

She wasn’t alive anymore, at least not in the most technical sense of the word, but this world was still pretty damn real to her. And while a lot of things about Heaven sucked, this was her new home, and she was going to defend it with everything she had. It didn’t matter if she’d died; she would always be a hunter.

“You ready for this, baby?” Ellen asked her, marker at the ready for the sigils.

As irritated as Jo could be about her mother’s overprotectiveness, she knew Ellen only cared. “Born ready, Mom.”

“That’s my girl.”

At her other side, her dad smiled proudly, a man of few words. Not that it really mattered, because most of what he said was expressed through actions.

“All systems go,” Ash said through their earpieces.

The sigil was painted in a matter of seconds, and then they were pushing through the door and inside what looked like a large lobby. It was eerily silent and completely empty of people. Ellen took point, Bill taking up the back, and Jo in the middle. They had never hunted together before, but they seemed to know what to do instinctively.

The small charm Pamela had given Ellen let them know in which direction they had to go to head to the place where the spell had cast and they could gather Castiel’s Grace.

Jo so clearly remembered the awkward angel and his increasing desperation as the apocalypse progressed. He had been their most powerful ally in their fight against the demons, angels, and Lucifer himself, but Castiel hadn’t been strong enough to turn the tide by himself.

No matter what mistakes Castiel had made since her death – and Jo knew they were numerous from Bobby’s diatribes on the subject – he didn’t deserve this. And Jo was going to help any way she could.

Somewhere else in Heaven, their friends were running distraction by popping into as many off-limit parts of Heaven as possible. Somewhere on Earth, the archangel Gabriel was distracting the angel who had cordoned off Heaven. And somewhere else in Heaven, Jo was standing with her parents, about to make a hole that an archangel could push through.

It wasn’t the afterlife Jo had envisioned for herself.
It was almost better.

“We’re almost there,” Ellen said over her shoulder, holding the charm out in her left hand. Her right held a gun.

“And where would that be?” a soft-spoken voice asked from behind them.

The three of them whirled, guns clicking threateningly, only to come face to face with a light brown-haired woman in a formal suit, a benevolent looking smile on her face.

“You’re the angel?” Jo blurted out before either of her parents could speak.

The angel frowned slightly, the smile slipping. “I’m one of them.”

“You said there was only one,” Ellen hissed, speaking to Ash.

“There’s only one on the monitor!” Ash sounded panicked. “And he’s nowhere near you!”

“You thought I was Metatron?” The woman chuckled once. “My name is Naomi. And you’re Ellen, William, and Joanna Harvelle.”

“The angels were locked out,” Ellen said, her face set in those familiar steely lines that promised bloodshed. “How are you still here if you didn’t cast the spell?”

Naomi’s smile dropped. “There are ways to hide in Heaven, especially when one is near death. Fortunately for me and you, the actual spell caster is rather out of practice at killing angels and didn’t finish the job. Now, where were you going? Humans aren’t allowed here.”

Ellen jabbed the butt of her gun into Jo’s ribs when she tried to answer. Jo hissed in pain, glaring at the back of her mother’s head.

“Someone higher up on the ladder decided we were,” Ellen answered. “And if you’re not going to help us, then you’re going to leave us alone.”

“Gabriel.” Naomi said the name like it was simultaneously a blessing and a curse. “I thought it was him I sensed. Let me guess: you’re going to open the gates of Heaven?” Her smile was disbelieving. “How?”

“You’re going to help?” Bill demanded softly, his eyes sharp.

“Of course I’m going to help!” Naomi’s answer was like a whip. “You think I wanted this? I tried to stop Castiel, but he didn’t listen.” She closed the distance between them, heedless of the guns they pointed at her. “What was your plan?” she repeated.

Ellen’s gun dropped slightly, the muzzle pointing to the floor. “Get Castiel’s Grace. Gabriel says it will let him into Heaven to do the rest.”

“That won’t be possible.”

“Why?” Jo didn’t like the way Naomi had said it.

“You think I haven’t looked for Castiel’s Grace, hoping to break the spell myself?” Naomi shifted in a very human way, wetting her lips before she spoke again. “What Metatron did, he used Castiel’s Grace to lock the gates shut. It’s not there anymore. It’s been dispersed into the very atmosphere of Heaven.”
“Ah fuck,” was Ash’s very eloquent response to this.

Ellen’s face tightened. “You mean there’s no way to break the spell?”

“I can’t.” Naomi spread her hands helplessly. “I have almost no power left for myself, not after I almost died. But, you see, it’s almost impossible to kill an angel in Heaven itself, which is the only reason I’m still alive.”

“That’s not an answer.”

“I can’t break the spell, but Gabriel could. If he was able to get in.”

There was something about the way Naomi said it that had Jo’s alarm bells ringing. “What do you mean ‘if’?”

“There’s no way for an angel to get in or out of Heaven unless they’re Metatron,” Naomi said, the words falling like heavy weights. “Human souls could manage it if given a door, but Grace can’t.”

Ellen pressed fingers to her ear. “Ash, are you getting this?”

Ash’s response was harried. “Getting it, transmitting it to Gabriel… He might not respond—” His tone changed to surprise. “He says do it – it won’t be a problem.”

Naomi was frowning. “This spell can’t be broken by brute force—”

“He says do it! He’s got a human soul.”

Naomi blinked, evidently not anticipating that. “But—”

“Are you going to trust the archangel with a plan or are you just going to insist it can’t be done?” Ellen demanded. “Either get a move on or let us go!”

Naomi switched gears so quickly it was almost dizzying. “Well then.” She seemed to huff, quickly walking past them, her heels clipping noisily against the tile. “You won’t be able to do it, and it’s easiest to open a locked room from inside. Quickly. I’ve been shielding your presence from Metatron, but he’ll be here soon.”

Naomi led them to a sterile office room, one with a padded chair with locks in the corner, and a large desk and chair on the opposite end.

“What are you going to do?” Jo asked when Naomi stopped in the middle, looking at the chair with a strange expression on her face.

“What is an angel if not Grace?” Naomi’s answer was cryptic, but her smile sly when she looked at Jo. “And what is Heaven but not Grace itself? I can weaken the lock to let Gabriel slip past if he’s able, but only just. And it will alert Metatron. Are you sure you’re prepared to do what is needed?”

“You do what you need,” Ellen said firmly, giving Jo a pointed look that told her to stand guard. “We’ve got your back.”

Naomi’s smile brightened for a brief second before her gaze dropped to the floor and her eyes closed. Her skin started glowing from within, an ephemeral glow not unlike that of the lights of the room. It hurt to look at, and Jo glanced away, biting her lip as she focused on the hallway outside that could be seen through the glass.

“I’m still holding out hope I’m dreaming,” her dad muttered from next to her, “but when has a hunter
ever had the luck.”

“Never.” Jo couldn’t help but laugh, because it was so true. This was like a dream, and Jo could only hang on tight and hope that she woke up safe and sound.

Jo had no idea what was happening, only that the light from Naomi was so painfully bright that it was hurting her eyes even though she wasn’t looking at her. There were also minute vibrations in the ground, similar to an earthquake.

One moment it was just the four of them, and then a portly man with thinning hair and watery eyes was standing in their midst, pure fury radiating from him. “Naomi. And guests.” His smile was patronizing.

There were three answering gunshots, but they did nothing aside from apparently annoy Metatron.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Metatron demanded.

“Stopping you,” Jo snapped, because she never had learned when to back down and shut up when it was good for her.

Metatron brought up a hand, and they went flying, smashing through the glass and hitting the wall outside. Jo thudded painfully against it, her head slamming against the hard material.

Naomi was just a white light in the room, Metatron a dark shape at the outskirts of it, and Jo’s eyes were watering just looking.

Then it was gone, and Naomi stood there, smirking at Metatron, visage as calmly unruffled as it had been when she had first appeared. “Too late.”

Metatron’s mouth opened, but a thundering sound drowned out whatever he might have said. Jo’s hands clapped over her ears, futilely trying to shield them from that awful noise. It sounded like fire and death and lightning and thunder and righteous fury.

The floor at Naomi’s feet was bubbling white, and then it erupted like a volcano.

Jo felt something grab at her sleeve before her vision whitened out, and then they were standing in what looked like a park, her parents next to her and Naomi’s back facing them.

“Wh-what the hell just happened?” Jo stammered, hands shaking violently. “Where are we?”

“The closest human heaven I could reach,” Naomi said, not turning around. “Gabriel would have burned you to ashes considering his wrath.”

“So it worked?” Ellen sounded breathless.

Naomi didn’t answer, but she didn’t need to. The world around them seemed to ripple, and Jo felt something prickle at her skin, a wash of power blowing past her that dried her mouth from how potent it felt even from this distance.

“Yes,” Naomi said quietly. “Now you see.”

Jo didn’t ask what they were supposed to have seen because it was probably pretty obvious. Gabriel was furious, and they wouldn’t have survived it at point zero.

A moment later, Naomi’s body seemed to brighten, the light blinking into existence for a fractional second before disappearing. She shifted, inhaling deeply.
What happened?” Ellen demanded.

“The gates are open.” Naomi sounded reverent. “He did it.”

“That’s great!” Excitement surged through Jo.

Naomi turned to them, happiness on her face, only for a surge of horror to cross it seconds later. Her eyes widened, lips parting in what was clearly stunned shock.

Jo’s excitement was tempered by wariness. Of course they couldn’t have nice things. “What now?”

There was no answer. Naomi disappeared with an audible flutter of wings, leaving them stranded in a personal heaven of a complete stranger. And something had obviously gone FUBAR.

Bill summed it up rather eloquently with a simple word: “Fuck.”

The earpiece crackled into life. “Hey, guys, where the hell are you? Heaven’s open, and these guys are going nuts.”

That was all well and good, but Jo had the foreboding feeling that something much worse was looming on the horizon. Being dead would do that to one’s sixth sense.

“Well,” she said, looking at her parents, “guess it’s just one more day in the afterlife of a hunter.” She hefted her gun over her shoulder, hooking her thumb through a belt loop of her jeans. “What do you say we round up the others?”

Channeling Dean for that brief moment was totally worth the unimpressed look she got from Ellen.

Chapter End Notes

There was another post on tumblr saying that there were no wings around Naomi, so it was entirely possible that she wasn't dead, and something else happened instead. Besides, that wasn't an angel sword that Metatron stabbed her with. And since I do like more female characters, I thought I'd keep her and give her a chance.

So now we got a chance to look at Heaven's side of the issue from the humans' point of view. I hope you all enjoyed this little foray into the afterlives of Ash, Bobby, Jo, and the others. As you can see, they're all doing splendidly and kicking ass.

Please let me know what you thought!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

It's only about 7,600 words, but this chapter has a lot of stuff going on, and it's all happening at a pretty quick pace. This is also the end of the second act (arc?).

So while the length of this chapter isn't really much, the content should probably make up for it. Even if you guys will probably want to scream at me for more than one reason by the time you finish reading it.

So...happy reading?

(You guys may or may not want to punch Gabriel/Tony while reading this. I wouldn't know.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Anything yet?” Dean demanded several hours later. He had a steaming cup of coffee in his hands that Gabriel eyed enviously.

“Coffee?” Gabriel asked hopefully.

Dean paused, eyes flickering from his coffee to Gabriel. “You drink coffee?” He sounded doubtful.

“Survey says yes.” Gabriel gave Dean a hopeful smile.

Dean seemed taken aback at the sight, though his eyes narrowed seconds later. “Get your own.”

Gabriel did, the coffee machine and a mug appearing before him. Scant seconds later Kevin’s outraged cry could be heard echoing through the bunker.

“Sir…” Jarvis sighed.

Gabriel raised an eyebrow, getting a second mug and offering it to him. “Coffee?”

Dean rolled his eyes. “Why did I expect anything different?”

“I wouldn’t mind some,” Steve told Gabriel.

Gabriel gave the second mug to him, grinning at Jarvis, who was trying and failing not to look amused.

“So,” Dean continued pointedly, gesturing at the laptop, “anything?”

“They’re getting ready,” Gabriel replied noncommittally, warming his hands. “Heaven runs on a different clock than we do.”

“Slower or faster?”

“Generally slower.” Gabriel tipped his coffee in Dean’s direction. “So it’ll be a little while. Chill.”
Castiel was studying Gabriel with a curious expression. “ Doesn’t that just taste like molecules?”

Gabriel paused thoughtfully, remembering his first days on Earth. “Depends on which tongue you use,” he answered eventually. “I’ve been eating human food on and off for a while, so I know how to enjoy it. You having some trouble?”

“Not anymore.” Castiel looked crestfallen at the reminder of his human status.

“Settle into your vessel next time you try, and focus on the human sensations. It takes a little practice, but you’ll get there.”

“So you think you can retrieve my Grace.”

“It’s on the agenda,” Gabriel agreed. “But top of the list is kicking Metatron’s ass.”

“What are you planning on doing with the S-O-B anyway?” Dean demanded.

“Not kill him.” Gabriel’s smile was grim. “Nah…but he’ll probably wish he was dead when I’m done.”

Steve made a pained noise. “Is that necessary?”

Gabriel met his eyes. “Trust me, Steve, he deserves all that and more. What he did…” He pressed his lips together, shaking his head once.

“It was that bad?” Steve’s tone was somber.

“Pretty bad.” Gabriel tipped his chair back, balancing on the back legs and putting his own feet up on the table. “Threw the whole balance out of whack. Souls can go down into Hell, but no one’s getting into Heaven.” His smile was dark. “Makes for a bit of a mess.”

“You mean no one’s getting into Heaven at all?” Dean sounded disbeliefing.

“Salting and burning’s not gonna do any good.” Gabriel grinned mirthlessly. “There’s nowhere for the souls to go. So you can see why I’m a bit pissed at Metatron.”

“I’m sorry,” Castiel said, pained.

“Hey, no, it wasn’t your fault.” Gabriel waved a hand. “He’s the Scribe, playing with words is his thing. He could sweet talk a crossroads demon into selling her black soul if he wanted. Or maybe I’m mixing him up with Lucifer.” He made a dismissive noise.

“I thought that’d be your job,” Steve said. “Being the Messenger.”

“I’m just the mouthpiece. Metatron put the words to paper – or stone as the case may be.”

“Kevin wasn’t very impressed,” Dean noted.

“The prophet.” Gabriel could still sense Kevin in the kitchen, probably sulking over the lack of coffee. “He seems rather down.”

“Wants to go home.” Dean frowned down into his coffee. “But as long as it’s not done…” He trailed off, mouth twisting.

“Kid’ll have demons and angels on his tail if he goes off on his own,” Gabriel agreed. “Yeah, no, that’s a problem. But you can’t keep him cooped up either; he’s getting pretty bitter.”
Dean didn’t seem at all happy to hear that. “You got any tips then?”

“Who – me?” Gabriel put up his hands. “Short of warding the kid and giving him hex bags, there’s nothing I’d recommend. Being a prophet’s a lifelong job; he’s always going to have a target painted on his head.”

“Too bad there aren’t any archangels to take care of any threats,” Dean said snippily.

Gabriel’s gaze hardened. “Hey, now. I went off because of you. Don’t put all your eggs in one basket. I’m not going to be around forever, and babysitting prophets was never in my job description. That’s all Raphael.” He gestured at her.

“Yes, well, I’m human,” Raphael said. “Seeing as how the prophet’s still alive and with you, I think he’ll be fine.”

Sam snorted from the corner of the library, his nose in a book. “For a given definition of ‘fine.’”

Annoyed with the kid’s pessimism, Gabriel threw a wad of paper at Sam, hitting him right on the head and getting a bitch face for it. “Commentary from the peanut gallery is not accepted at this point.”

“There are no peanuts,” Gadreel said, sounding confused.

“It’s a figure of speech,” Castiel told him.

Gadreel didn’t look impressed with this explanation.

Dean snorted despite himself, then pretended to look elsewhere when Sam glared at him next. “So you think there’ll be anything else on it tonight?” he asked, obviously fishing for a different subject.

“Doubtful.” Gabriel nudged the laptop with his shoe, smirking at the outraged “Hey!” Sam gave him at the action. “But I won’t be sleeping anyway, so I’ll keep an eye on it. You go off to bed.”

“That’s not what I was asking.”

“It’s what I’m saying, kiddo.” Gabriel’s lips twitched at Dean’s insulted expression. “Get some rest while it’s possible. Same goes for you, Castiel.”

“I assume we don’t count?” Loki asked wryly, delicately turning the page of the book he had been reading for the last hour. It was the thickest tome the library offered.

“I assume you’re wise enough to know when you need to sleep, unlike these geezers.” Gabriel gestured sharply at Dean, Castiel, and Sam.

“We got along just fine before,” Dean said.

“I’m sure. So how about a little added incentive; go to bed now, and I won’t wake you up with my patented wakeup call.” Gabriel grinned at Dean’s wary face. “I’ve been told it’s really rude—”

“Knowing you, it’s obnoxiously rude and not funny to anyone but you,” Dean interrupted, going over to Castiel. “Come on, Cas. If it’s anything like the idiot box he put us in, I’d rather not find out.”

Steve looked curiously at Gabriel as Dean and Castiel left. “Idiot box?”

“Don’t ask,” Sam muttered, also leaving the room. “Fucking Herpexia.”
Gabriel couldn’t help the snort at the memory because that had been *priceless*. Definitely one of his better tricks, even if he’d kind of overplayed his hand at the end.

“Herpexia?” Steve sounded perplexed.

Shaking his head, Gabriel waved a dismissive hand. “Probably better if you don’t know; it’s in the past of my very illustrious career as the Trickster.”

“There’s no career in being a Trickster,” Raphael said dryly. “How many hunters did you run into?”

“There was always one that came in at the tail end of my streak. The Winchesters were the only ones that got a decent shot in that would’ve killed a real Trickster. Say what you will about them, they’re damn good hunters.”

Raphael nodded in agreement. “Let’s not tell them.”

Gabriel’s lips twisted in amusement. “Yeah, let’s not.”

They slipped into another silence, this one broken intermittently by the soft murmurs elsewhere in the bunker that Gabriel tuned out. The Host buzzed in the back of his mind, hatching smaller plots concerning Castiel and in general worrying about the future and what was going on with the Winchester brothers.

And down in the basement, through extensive warding that would have even given a Knight of Hell pause, Gabriel sensed the demon Kevin had referred to earlier. He’d already noticed that this demon wasn’t quite as demonic as the average demon, almost as if he still retained some vestiges of his humanity. It was curious, and Gabriel couldn’t help but wonder about what Sam had gone through to put him at death’s door and tip Dean’s hand to let Gadreel into his dear little brother.

Ten minutes later, Raphael left them, giving the laptop one last inscrutable look before going off to her own bedroom.

It was about then that Steve couldn’t hide the little furtive glances he kept shooting Gabriel. It wasn’t like he’d been exactly sneaky about it before, but it was getting painfully obvious now.

But Gabriel wasn’t exactly the most mature bulb in the box, and he didn’t really want to have this conversation. Because he knew exactly what it was going to be about. The last conversation Tony had with Steve was vividly clear in his memory, if only because of the tumultuous emotions that had been going through him at the time.

Five minutes and Steve cracked. “Can we talk?” he blurted out, briefly meeting Gabriel’s eyes before dropping them to the table. His cheeks were flushed a faint red.

Taking his feet off the table, Gabriel let his chair rest on the floor, studying Steve wordlessly. Finally, he looked up at the others still in the room. “D’you mind leaving us for this? Gadreel, turn off your ears.”

Gadreel frowned, uncomprehending. “Why would I—”

“I will explain in a private room,” Jarvis assured him, taking hold of his arm and leading him out.

“Humans can be strange.”

“You speak as if you are not human.”

“Not entirely, no.”
Loki gave Tony a pointed look that very clearly said “good luck” before he left, taking the thick tome with him.

Tony pushed the lid of the laptop down so it wasn’t so obviously in their faces. Then, discomfort a pit in his stomach, he gave Steve a weak smile. “No one’s going to listen in,” he promised.

“Okay, good.” Steve took a breath, nodding. His face turned resolute, his jaw taking on that stubborn slant. “Do you remember what we talked about before you went off?”

“Before I went off and got kidnapped by a crazy demon?” Tony asked wryly. “Yeah, I do.”

Steve fidgeted, his fingers flexing nervously. “Do I have to say it?” he asked helplessly after a moment. “You remember.”

Tony chewed the inside of his mouth, eyes dropping to his own hands on the table. “I’m not good with emotional conversations,” he said finally. “Never have been.”

“You did pretty well last time,” Steve offered, smiling weakly.

“Conversations preceding my imminent death don’t count.” Tony grimaced, already feeling guilty for putting that hangdog expression on Steve’s face. “Forget I said that.”

“Well, you’re not dying this time,” Steve said, face obstinate. “But we can still do this.”

Tony inclined his head, keeping his face clear of any emotion. “The ball’s in your court, Steve,” he said softly.

It took Steve another minute of anxious fidgeting before he started, “You said you were ‘broken’ before…”

Tony remembered. It was so odd reconciling those emotions now that he was fully himself and had all his memories. “Angels don’t have a sexual orientation the way humans do,” he settled on saying, rubbing the side of his head. “The best approximation that you’d understand is asexuality, and it was pretty confusing to regular, old human me when I had no idea what was going on.” He smiled wryly. “I did a really messy job of it, Steve. I had Grace in me that shouldn’t have been there”—something flashed in Steve’s eyes—“and it meant that some of Gabriel was in there with Tony. But not enough to remember; just enough to influence me.”

“So you don’t like sex.” Steve’s tone was neutral.

Tony laughed, shaking his head. “Don’t get me wrong, I love sex. Sex is fun. Sex is messy. Sex is awesome. But I don’t need it. Before Afghanistan, I did have a human sexual orientation. It’s why I was so confused later because that was missing. I might’ve said I was broken, but I didn’t have the whole picture. I just had an angel’s sexual orientation.”

Steve studied him for a moment, face carefully blank. “You don’t have to mince words, you know,” he said eventually. “I’m not a kid.”

Tony gave him a lopsided smile. “Get to be my age, everyone’s a kid, Steve.” It took a few seconds for him to admit, “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Steve’s answering smile was pained. “It’s going to hurt either way. But I need to hear it. You said before to give you time.”

“You’re my best friend, Steve. I’ve not had one of those before.” Tony shifted, rubbing the side of
his neck before letting his hand drop. “Most of my relationships have gone to hell one way or another,” he continued, looking askance as he remembered his siblings, the pagans…Kali. “I’d had one serious relationship in my life. Her name’s Kali.”

Steve’s brow furrowed. “The Hindu god?”

“That’s her.” Tony smiled fondly in remembrance. “Bit of a spitfire, strong-willed, gorgeous, and powerful. It didn’t really work out in the end…” He all too clearly remembered her finding out that he was really Gabriel and the fake sword she had driven through his chest. He’d planned it that way but…

“Death said you don’t love like humans.” Steve’s tone was too even, and he didn’t meet Tony’s eyes. “That when you do…it’s all-consuming.”

“Did he.” Tony thought it strange Death would say something like that; it wasn’t the type of thing he’d usually meddle in. “Can’t say it’s not true. We’ve done some crazy things for love.” Little Castiel was all the proof he needed.

“Do you love?” The question was soft.

Tony considered the question, eyes on his hands. He rubbed over the knuckles of his left hand as he responded. “When you strip all of us away, angels were made to love. Made to love our Father, made to love our Father’s creations… But we weren’t made to fall in love. Not really.” Gabriel smiled, feeling the weight of all his years bearing down on his shoulders. “It’s where the problems started,” he continued softly. “The nephilim, the restrictions that some of us took too far…

“Castiel’s in love with Dean.” The change in subject obviously surprised Steve. “That kind of devotion doesn’t come lightly, Steve. We can love or hate, and it’s a fine line between the two.” Lucifer flashed through his mind, and Gabriel’s Grace tightened at the memory. “I love,” he answered Steve’s question, “but I’ve not been in love.” His grin was dark. “Too terrifying for me, and at the heart of it all, I’m a coward.”

“You’re not,” Steve objected heatedly. “Don’t say that—”

“I’ve been around a lot longer than you’ve known me,” Gabriel interrupted him gently. “I’m no hero, Steve. Everything I’ve done, I’ve done because I don’t want to make things worse. I left my family because I couldn’t stand the fighting. I hid among the pagans because I couldn’t face them after I left. I became a Trickster because I got bored. I was on the fence during the apocalypse for the longest time because I was tired. And when I finally took a side…” He shrugged, looking off to the side.

“I may only have known you for a fraction of your lifetime, but I do know you, Tony. None of what you’ve done for us are the actions of a coward. Don’t put yourself down like that. Love is terrifying, but it’s also one of the best things that we have. Don’t hide.” Steve’s eyes were glittering suspiciously as he swallowed, head held high. “So tell me the truth. Can we do this, or can’t we—”

Tony cut him off with a hard kiss, half out of his chair. His hands were fisted in Steve’s shirt, and he could feel the startled grunt that escaped Steve, though the other caught on quickly.

Just as suddenly as he’d initiated it, Tony drew back, eyes going over Steve’s flabbergasted face. “I can’t give you an answer, Steve.” His words were quiet in a futile attempt at lessening the blow. “Not the one you want.”

Steve pulled in a deep breath through his mouth, blinking rapidly. “Then what was that?”

“Call it an apology,” Tony smiled apologetically at him, flattening out the creases he had made in the
shirt. His hand lingered over the hard pounding of Steve’s heart before he withdrew it, fingers curling in. “You’re a braver man than me,” he continued. “And you deserve better.”

Steve didn’t respond immediately. He’d closed his mouth, and there was a familiar tension to his jaw that had Tony’s heart giving a painful thump in his chest. When he did finally move to answer, it was with a small smile that was made all the more painful to see for how it wobbled at the edges. “I wish you’d see what I see in you. I won’t push this…but…” He blinked, the smile vanishing as he looked off to the side. “Thanks.” The word was choked out, but before Tony could do anything, Steve had bolted.

Staring after Steve, Tony sank back down in his chair, guilt and regret rising in his chest. There was no way that conversation could have ended on a better note.

But he could have handled that more maturely.

The taste of Steve on his lips, Tony buried his face in his hands and cursed himself for being such an idiot.

About an hour later, Gadreel came into the library, hovering hesitantly around Tony before standing very solidly in Tony’s line of sight.

Tony didn’t speak immediately, his head buried in his hands and his elbows on the table. He kind of wished he could sleep, but that was an impossibility now. At least there were no nightmares to contend with.

“What do you want, Gadreel?” Tony asked eventually, picking his head up enough to meet his eyes.

“Jarvis,” Gadreel started slowly, “he is not human.”

Tony tilted his head to the side. “No, he isn’t. But he told you that.”

“I had thought it strange at first,” Gadreel admitted. “That perhaps Father had Created something new after I was locked up. But that isn’t the case, is it.”

“No,” Tony agreed easily. “Jarvis is wholly my own. Is that going to be a problem?”

Gadreel shook his head. “Perhaps once. But no more. If I may ask…how did you make him?”

Tony ran a hand through his hair, rubbing his scalp hard. “Sometimes I think it was luck,” he said eventually. “Some happy happenstance of coding that came together just right to create sentience and a new soul. I was human at the time, so I’ve no idea how I even managed it. But I did.” His lips quirked into a small smile. “It was as much a surprise to me as it was to you when I discovered what I’d done.”

Gadreel was silent for a moment, his face considering. “He looks human,” he settled on saying.

Tony nodded, humming. “Jarvis is an artificial intelligence, and I gave him a humanoid body so he can better interact with humans. He feels emotions, but differently so than humans do. The hallmark of an artificial intelligence is the ability to learn and adapt to new situations more quickly than humans can. So Jarvis may look human, but he really isn’t.”

Gadreel seemed torn as to what he wanted to say next. Tony didn’t prompt him, giving him the time to work through whatever he was thinking about.
When Gadreel did speak, it wasn’t what Tony expected. “Jarvis told me why I should ‘turn my ears off.’” He looked fidgety. “From what I understand of human relationships, a good outcome would result in both partners being present in the same room. That Steve is not here…it did not go well?”

Tony’s hands clenched into fists, his knuckles white. “No,” he answered tightly.

Gadreel thankfully dropped it. “I’m sorry,” he offered hesitantly.

Nodding curtly, Tony left it at that, slowly relaxing his hands. There had been no other outcome. But he could have handled it better. Damn it.


Gabriel looked up at him, smiling gently. “If Samael is forgiven, then so are you.”

“Lucifer?” Gadreel was incredulous. “Forgiven?”

“Samael – Lucifer – exercised his free will, even if he did it badly. It’s what Dad wants all of us to do, at some point or another.” Gabriel studied his hands, rubbing his fingers together. “The last message Dad gave me – about two years ago or so – was one of forgiveness.”

Gadreel sank down in a chair, voice weak. “He gave you a message?”

“Surprising, I know.” Gabriel chuckled, shaking his head. “But, yeah, He did. It’s not the only reason I forgave you, but it’s part of it.”

“How can you?” Gadreel sounded distressed. “You were right. I was responsible for guarding the Garden, and I failed in my responsibility. I let Lucifer past me, I let sin in, I caused the Fall. So how can you forgive me?”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Gabriel said sharply. “You made a mistake, and bad things happened, but we’ve all made them. And you’ve been punished long enough.” He leaned forward. “What happened in Heaven’s prison, Gadreel?”

Gadreel flinched imperceptibly at the reminder, his Grace shivering. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb. You think I didn’t notice?” Gabriel let his own Grace brush against Gadreel’s, lips thinning when the other instinctively recoiled, both physically and metaphysically. “What happened?” he repeated, his tone gentler.

Gadreel shivered, fingers clenching tight on the armrests. “Do you know what it’s like there?” He stared ahead, gaze distant. “They cut you off from the Host, from every other angel. You’re alone. And there is just one other, the one responsible for guarding you. The only one you see, hear, and talk to.” Gadreel’s voice dropped. “His name is Thaddeus.”

The name was only vaguely familiar to Gabriel. “What did he do?” He kept his tone neutral.

Gadreel’s eyes snapped to Gabriel’s. “Does it need saying?” His voice was rough.

Gabriel let his sight focus on Gadreel’s Grace, taking in the numerous scars and flaws that he’d seen before and took on new meaning now that he knew. The implications made his own Grace shudder in anger and disgust. “No one stopped him?”

Gadreel’s laugh was derisive. “No one cared. Who would? I let the snake into the Garden, caused
the ruin of humanity and the absence of our Father. I deserved it.”

“You didn’t deserve that.” Gabriel kept the anger out of his voice through sheer force of will. “You made a mistake; you trusted someone who should never have betrayed you. But no matter what happened, you did not deserve that. If I ever get my hands on Thaddeus…” He bit back the numerous invectives that threatened to burst forth.

Gadreel stared at him, eyes wide. “Where were you?” He sounded lost. “Would you have stopped it?”

Gabriel’s mouth soured at the reminder. “I left,” he admitted, looking off to the side. “I couldn’t handle the fighting. So, like a coward, I fled. I didn’t go back to Heaven for millennia. And even if I’d been there…no. I don’t think I would’ve stopped it.” It was the truth, but boy, was it awful.

Gadreel didn’t seem surprised at the admission, but disappointment still surged through him, darkening his Grace. “You have changed,” he noted. “That you would care now…”

Gabriel chuckled, grinning wryly. “Being human’ll do that to you. Gives you a whole new perspective on things.”

“You want to help.” Gadreel’s fingers flexed in the air before he settled them on the table. “Why? You could have gone home – back to where you have been staying.”

Gabriel’s gaze dropped to the table, guilt and anger warring in him. “I left once,” he said quietly, “and I won’t leave again and leave you alone. Not if I can do something about it first. I owe that much to you. Besides…I’ve got a bone to pick with Metatron.” He smiled grimly.

Gadreel’s eyes were dark. “You owe us nothing.”

“Au contraire, brother.” Gabriel’s smile was self-deprecating. “There’s a lot I owe you. Do you know what it means to be an archangel? Beyond a weapon?”

Gadreel seemed uncomprehending, so Gabriel continued. “We’re the eldest, the ones who are supposed to lead. We’ve done a shitty job of it so far, and I know that. But that doesn’t change the facts. The younger angels – they look up to us. And we’ve failed them on so many counts. I won’t fail them on this. I won’t fail you.” He met Gadreel’s eyes. “No matter what happens, Gadreel, you’re not going back into Heaven’s prison. Not if I have anything to say about it.” He grinned. “And I’ve a lot to say about it.”

Stunned, Gadreel was speechless, even his Grace motionless.

Determinedly, Gabriel extended his own Grace in the equivalent of a hug, pushing forward despite Gadreel’s instinctive flinch, giving his brother the comfort that had been denied him ever since the Fall. At the same time, he surged up and enfolded Gadreel in a physical hug, bringing him in close.

Gadreel’s Grace quailed for several agonizing moments. Then it just seemed to heave one long shuddering breath before slumping into Gabriel’s Grace, tentatively curling into him and soaking in the comfort and love Gabriel unselfconsciously gave him.

Tightening his arms around Gadreel, Gabriel rested his cheek in Gadreel’s dark hair. He’d messed up horribly with Steve, but this one thing…he could do right by.

When Raphael showed up in the morning in the library, Gabriel was in no mood to mince words after the incredibly emotionally taxing night he’d had. “You’re going to tell me about Naomi.”
Raphael came to a halt, visibly discomfited. “Why do you want to know about her?”

Gabriel inhaled audibly, giving her a sharp look. “You think I’m blind, Raphael? Deaf? Castiel has obvious problems with her, and it’s not just because she’s an angel. Something else happened.”

Raphael didn’t respond immediately, sitting down slowly in the chair next to Gabriel. When she did speak, her voice was tight. “You’d been gone for some time, and Michael and I had some concerns about the others. What we assigned Naomi to was the equivalent of a surveillance department, something akin to your S.H.I.E.L.D., I believe.”

“That doesn’t explain it.”

“No, I’m getting there.” Raphael held herself stiffly. “If there was a chance that one of the lower ranking angels would rebel, she would wipe the slate and start them from the basic settings.”

Gabriel blinked, horror surging through him. “Raphael—”

“Raphael—” Raphael snapped. “But we were worried, and it was the only solution we could find—”

“You thought the best way to handle the possibility of more angels rebelling was to brainwash them?”

“It worked!”

“How many angels did you violate, Raphael?”

Raphael’s eyes glittered, her jaw tight. “All of them at some point or another. Some more frequently than others. I’m told that…Castiel was a frequent visitor.”

“Raphael.” Gabriel groaned, feeling sick at the possible ramifications. “What the hell were you and Michael thinking?”

“We didn’t want more of us to Fall,” Raphael said roughly. “Anything that would prevent more of us from splintering off and rebelling…we’d do it. It did work.”

“Angels are not puppets for you to control and mold to your will. Where the hell did you even get the notion that it was a great idea to do that to our family and for years?”

“We were supposed to love and serve our Father,” Raphael said tightly. “We were not supposed to have free will, Gabriel. Any dissension in our ranks had to be stomped out quickly, lest more follow.”

Gabriel stared at her, jaw working. “Guess we were all proven wrong on that front,” he said eventually, tension coiling in him. “There’s no going back from this, Raphael.”

“You think I don’t know that?” Raphael shook her head, rubbing her face with both hands. “You don’t need to tell me this again, Gabriel. I’ve been human now for almost four decades, and I know how highly we value free will and the ability to make choices. I took that choice away from our siblings, and I regret that.”

“It’s going to be a mess dealing with that.” Gabriel ran hands through his hair, pulling at the strands as he thought about the mass of confusion that his siblings were in at the moment. “Such a fucking mess. Where the hell do we even begin?”
“Castiel tried, you know,” Raphael said, looking straight ahead. “And he did partly succeed, though only in one way. He preached free will and freedom from destiny, but his followers simply discarded one leader for another.”

“Free will was supposed to be for humans, not for us,” Gabriel said, all too clearly remembering the shock and turmoil he’d been in when Loki had talked to him about the possibility. “And we’re so resistant to change… Dad made a mistake when it came to us, and we’re still mopping up the pieces.”

Raphael didn’t respond immediately, eyes fixed on Gabriel. “Had I still been an archangel,” she said eventually, “I wouldn’t have hesitated to strike you down for blaspheming Him in such a way.”

Gabriel’s smile was dark. “And now?”

“And now I find I agree with you. No wonder they fought so viciously against the idea of Paradise.”

“Yeah, no wonder.” Gabriel settled back in his chair, arms folded across his chest. “And no wonder the angels fought so viciously for it, brainwashed as they were.” His tone was sardonic.

Raphael flinched, and then glared at him. “There’s no need to rub it in, Gabriel. You don’t exactly have clean hands yourself.”

“No, but at least I didn’t make the order to continually violate my family’s minds.” Gabriel turned when he heard someone coming.

“Does it matter anymore?” The question was quiet. “Naomi is dead, and no one else will take up her mantle.”

Gabriel didn’t respond, as Loki had entered the room. Loki paused upon seeing the two of them sitting there, evidently taking in the tension simmering between them.

“Your relationship with your family is far worse than mine is,” Loki said eventually, his voice dry. “I do commend you on such a feat.”

“This is nothing,” Gabriel said, snorting. “Go back to the Fall, and then come talk.”

“I think not.” Loki’s lips quirked in a wry grin. “Has there been any word yet?”

Gabriel shrugged. “Not yet. But I’m betting soon.”

Loki’s eyes dropped to the silent laptop. “What was your plan?”

Gabriel hummed, the corner of his mouth ticking up in a small smile. “Send Metatron on the equivalent of a wild goose chase. Just flaring my Grace will be enough to put him in a right tizzy.”

“That is not much of a plan.”


Loki studied him. “You are greatly displeased with him.”

“You heard me last night,” Gabriel said flatly. “Displeased is the least of it.”

“If I had my own abilities, Metatron would not know what hit him,” Raphael groused.
“He’s not going to either way.” Gabriel’s Grace flared with sharp anger.

“But you will be careful,” Jarvis’s voice said sharply. He was standing there in the undersuit, face lined with worry.

Gabriel gave him a gentle smile. “I’ll do my best, J, but I can’t make any promises. Metatron won’t be able to catch me, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

“He’s damn slippery,” Dean said, appearing behind Jarvis and patting his shoulder. “He’ll be fine.”

Gabriel’s smile widened. “Thanks for your vote of confidence, Dean-o.”

“If the shoe fits.” Dean shrugged. “You’ve given us the slip more than once.”

“High praise from a Winchester.” Gabriel’s smile wavered when he saw Steve slink in, and he abruptly remembered their conversation. “Morning, Steve.”

Steve didn’t respond beyond a weak smile, not meeting Gabriel’s eyes. He was radiating enough misery that even Dean noticed, and he looked at Steve in obvious concern, eyebrows crinkling.

“You okay?” Dean asked.

Steve shrugged. “Had some trouble sleeping.”

Jarvis shot Gabriel a worried look before looking back at Steve. His youngest really was too perceptive.

Castiel joined them, effectively cutting off any further questions from Dean by kissing the corner of his mouth in greeting, pushing some steaming coffee into his hand.

Dean smiled down at him. “Thanks, Cas.”

Steve looked so stricken at the sight that Gabriel had to turn away, guilt rising in him. Raphael looked at him sharply, but a brisk shake of his head cut off any questions.

He couldn’t do something out of pity.

The Grace he’d put into the computer flickered suddenly, registering contact. Gabriel snapped to attention, leaning forward in anticipation.

Gadreel had evidently sensed something, as he appeared scant seconds later, urgency in his bearing. Sam and Kevin followed after him, both looking rather bedraggled.

Gabriel tensed, half rising out of his seat as he waited.

ALL SYSTEMS GO.

“That’s my cue.” Gabriel slowly unfurled his Grace, letting the light enter his eyes.

“Good luck,” Raphael said evenly, meeting his eyes unflinchingly.

Gabriel gave her a brief smile, then took off. He appeared in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, miles away from any sign of human life. Hovering over the roiling waters and looking up at Heaven, Gabriel was a bright beacon for anyone who knew what to look for.

The Host was a riotous clamor in the back of his mind, alarmed and surprised cries at his sudden
presence filling the silence.

You want to play with the big boys, Metatron? Gabriel let his voice fill every corner of the Host. Then let’s play.

He had no doubt he had Metatron’s attention now. Flaring his Grace once more, Gabriel moved from the Pacific Ocean to the Arctic Circle, streaking across the barren landscape and expelling his energy at a rapid pace, poking and prodding at where he could have once entered Heaven.

Too shy to join me?

With a sweep of his wings, Gabriel was suspended in outer space, radiating enough energy and light resembling that of a supernova.

It was all for show, but Metatron wouldn’t know. Gabriel could bluff with the best of the big leagues.

Fury powering his actions, Gabriel hurtled through time and space, propelling himself directly into the closed gates of Heaven. He pulled short of slamming into them, instead just skimming past them and letting his fury surge through Heaven.

Then, as he was skimming the Antarctic, Gabriel heard Ash’s transmission, linked as he still was to the computer in the bunker.

Naomi says Castiel’s Grace is gone, and that the spell won’t allow Grace in or out, but human souls can get through.

Gabriel didn’t react at the mention of Naomi beyond a brief moment of surprise that she was apparently alive and not dead. But it was the mention of Castiel’s Grace being gone that did it.

Rage coursed through him. Did Metatron really think he could steal an angel’s Grace and use it to power a spell that violated the balance of the universe without facing the consequences?

The fact that the spell didn’t allow Grace in was a bit of a trickier issue, but not by much. Not for the first time, Gabriel wondered how much his Father had known when resurrecting him.

Do it! Gabriel snapped over the line, wings snapping out furiously into the waters of the Atlantic Ocean.

But you can’t get in—

Human souls can get in, and I’ve got a human soul. DO IT!

Ash didn’t reply, and Gabriel curled his Grace in momentarily before letting it surge forward in a virtual explosion in the vacuum of outer space. It was all light and no energy, and Gabriel was an expert at putting on a show.

He felt the change in the veil between Heaven and Earth practically instantly, feeling it as Naomi’s Grace pierced through the barrier. Reining in his Grace, Gabriel pushed forward into the space she was creating, feeling the resistance as the spell met his Grace.

Wings snapping impatiently, Gabriel packed together his Grace in a dense ball and let his entirely human soul envelop him, shielding everything angel. He hung there, suspended in nothingness, for what seemed to be an eternity.
The spell gave way as Naomi’s Grace retreated, leaving a hole large enough for him to slip through. It was tight, and the spell clung insistently to the faint tendrils of Grace that smoked through his human soul, but he could do it.

Within the space of a human second, Gabriel made it through, his Grace exploding forth with the wrath of a volcano. He felt the Grace of Naomi and several human souls disappear in a split-second, and all that was left was the feel of Metatron.

Gabriel coalesced into human form in front of Metatron, letting his wrath radiate off him. He smiled coldly at the way Metatron flinched back. “Long time no see, Metatron.” He slowly circled Metatron. “Gotta admit, this isn’t what I pictured for a reunion.”

The stench of terror coming off Metatron’s Grace was tremendously satisfying. “Gabriel. How did you make it in?”

Gabriel’s lips thinned into a mockery of a smile. “Wouldn’t you like to know?” He took a step closer to him, relishing the way Metatron flinched back. “Did you think you could get off scot free, Metatron? After what you’ve done?”

“No one should have gotten in.”

“Always prepare for the worst,” Gabriel said flatly, his sword slipping into his hand. He let Metatron look at it for a moment before he said softly, “Do you regret what you did?”

“Regret?” Metatron let out a short laugh. “Regret?” Anger filled his tone, overcoming his fear. “The only thing I regret is letting you push me around. I regret letting you all chase me from my home. I regret not doing this before!”

“End the spell, Metatron.” Gabriel’s Grace flickered at the edges of it, feeling it out. He could draw no power from Heaven given what Metatron had wrought, but he still had enough to weaken the spell. “And maybe I’ll be lenient.”

“You can’t break it!” Metatron shouted, the energy of Heaven snapping around him. “And you can’t stop me. You’re just one archangel…” He grinned maniacally. “And I’ve got the might of Heaven behind me.”

Gabriel squared his shoulders, pinning Metatron in place with an icy glare. “Then I pass judgment on you, Metatron.” The words rang through the Host with the power they carried.

“Oh, not that.” Metatron snorted, his form glowing bright with power. “That was always supposed to be Michael’s job, Messenger. You really think you’ve got the guts to do it? You, who couldn’t face down your own siblings?”

Wings spreading out behind him, Gabriel raised a glowing hand. “Think I can’t? Think again.” He flashed out of sight for a brief moment before throwing himself forward, sword out for a killing blow. His Grace exploded outward, crashing against the boundaries of the spell and weakening it.

Gabriel slammed into Metatron. And as expected, Metatron used the spell to temper the killing blow. “Judgment has been passed. You are Cast out, Metatron, from Heaven and the Host!”

The words, ringing with the power of Grace and the ancient spell that had only been evoked once before during the Fall eons before, did what Gabriel’s Grace could not. They shattered the barrier of the spell Metatron had drawn about him to shield himself from Gabriel’s sword.

The repercussions of Metatron’s spell breaking and Gabriel casting Metatron out were violent, and it
was with a painful wrench that both of them were thrown out of Heaven and sent hurtling through the atmosphere of Earth.

Gabriel tried desperately to wrench himself out of the free fall, but something held him fast in place as they both tumbled down to earth.

Metatron struggled in his grip, his hand coming up to Gabriel’s face and fingers slipping into his mouth. Grimacing, Gabriel bit down sharply, tightening his grip on Metatron and flipping helplessly head over heels.

“Let go!” Metatron snapped, yanking his fingers out of Gabriel’s mouth.

Gabriel didn’t deign to reply, trying to slow their free-fall with a pillow of Grace but failing abysmally as all that did was jerk them slightly to the side. He had enough time to see green, trees, and stones before they hit the ground with a thunderous crash, creating a deep crater.

The impact knocked the wind out of Gabriel’s body, snapping bones and piercing organs, and he coughed, hacking out a glob of red blood. Metatron wasn’t in any better shape, but Gabriel’s Grace was already healing his injuries. Cast out from Heaven and cut off from the Host, Metatron would have no chance at healing.

Pushing himself to his knees, Gabriel reached out for Metatron before he realized with a terrified jolt that the ground was crumbling beneath them.

No, not the ground.

The ground was physically crumbling away beneath their bodies, but it was due to everything supernatural and nothing natural. And power was tugging at both of them, preventing them from flying away. It was suction like nothing Gabriel had ever felt before, but he did know what that feeling was.

He’d felt it millennia ago when Samael had Fallen.

Next to Gabriel, Metatron screamed in terror and anger as the ground disappeared entirely, dropping them both into the abyss.

Gabriel fell, feeling the pulse of Metatron next to him as they hurtled into darkness, hurtled through space and heat and then icy cold.

He hit the metaphorical ground with a thump, shivering as he realized how damn cold it was. Sheer terror pierced through him the moment he acknowledged the presence of two very familiar Graces, one of which had been responsible for his first death.

He had enough time to turn over before something slammed into him, holding him up with the angelic equivalent of a chokehold, freezing his Grace with anger and hate.

Scrabbling at the hold, Gabriel scrambled together everything of his human soul and shoved it down deep inside his Grace. Only then did he meet Lucifer’s penetrating gaze.

“Lucifer,” Gabriel choked out.

Lucifer didn’t have a physical body here in the Cage – none of them did – but his angelic form cocked its head. “Gabriel.” His tone was curious, purely clinical. “Weren’t you dead?”

“Funny thing that,” Gabriel managed, clutching at Lucifer’s hold.
Lucifer narrowed his focus on Metatron, although his grip on Gabriel didn’t loosen. “I know you,” he said.

Metatron didn’t say anything, evidently possessing enough self-preservation to know when not to speak. He’d scrambled back to a corner of the Cage behind Gabriel, tucking in his true form to be as small as possible.

“Metatron,” Michael said from somewhere that Gabriel couldn’t see, his tone detached, “the Scribe of Heaven.”

Evidently unimpressed with the answer, Lucifer focused on Gabriel again, grip tightening. “It’s been such a long time, Gabriel. So long.” He loosened his grip, lightly caressing Gabriel’s face.

“Whose fault was that?” Gabriel asked.

Lucifer’s gaze hardened, and he pushed close to Gabriel, his rage curling cold inside Gabriel’s Grace. “I didn’t want to. But who pushed me?”

“It was your choice,” Gabriel said.

“I didn’t want to!” Lucifer threw Gabriel away from him, and he slammed into a wall of the Cage, sliding down to the ground with a faint gasp.

Gabriel pushed himself upright, looking up warily as Lucifer stalked towards him.

“Lucifer, Lucifer, stop—” Gabriel pressed back against the wall, flinching back before he could stop himself.

“Michael and I wondered just how the Winchesters knew what to do to open the Cage,” Lucifer said in a nonchalant tone. “After all, we were the only four to know. And I know Raphael wouldn’t have sided with them, but you did.”

“You know why,” Gabriel bit out. He caught sight of Michael hovering in the back, his Grace pulsing with a tired anger and faint scars, probably from the fights he and Lucifer had had over the years in the Cage. And in the corner behind Michael came the weak pulse of something he recognized as a human soul, but it was so scarred and deformed he had no idea who it had once been.

Lucifer swooped in, his Grace lashing out in anger. “Oh, I don’t give a damn about that,” he purred lightly, his Grace pressing in menacingly on Gabriel’s, and through the terror Gabriel felt enveloping him, he could feel Michael drifting away from the two of them. “But it’s been so long since I’ve had someone else to play with in here. Well, Gabriel?”

It was probably the last coherent thing Gabriel suspected he’d be able to say, and he’d be damned (even more than he was right now) if he’d go out without any last words. “Fuck you, Samael,” he bit out.

It was perhaps the wrong thing to say, but Gabriel had never been the smartest tool in the box when it came to not angering other people.

An archangel’s wrath was a terrible thing to behold, and the Morning Star exploded with it.

Outside the pain ripping through him, Gabriel felt Metatron’s Grace wink out of existence with an anguished scream.
He hoped – *hoped* – that it hadn’t been in vain.

Chapter End Notes

So...remember what I said about those cliffies? How about ’em, eh?  
*slips into bunker*
Dean would never actually admit it, but he was worried for Gabriel. He’d always kind of liked the guy, even with the stuff he’d put them through. When it came down to it, Gabriel had pulled through, and Dean respected that. It wasn’t something a lot of supernatural beings had done, and Gabriel joined the very small list of those who had, coming up right behind Castiel.

It was also kind of nice being able to sit back and let someone else take care of the mess for once. Dean had no doubt they could’ve eventually opened Heaven’s gates, but it would probably have been a lot more painful and tiring than Gabriel doing the work.

Still, he didn’t know if it was worse sitting around and waiting for the die to fall. They had no idea when the gates would open and what the consequences would be. Gadreel was the only angel with a connection to the Host, and he was currently vibrating with tension in front of Sam’s computer, eyes fixed on the screen.

Castiel couldn’t stop fidgeting next to Dean, and he had to twine their fingers together to relieve some of the tension in the other’s frame. Castiel clenched back tightly, his grip thankfully not supernaturally strong.

Dean had no idea what was going on with Steve – he’d been weird since leaving his room – but he looked rather sick with nerves. Even Jarvis brushing shoulders with him didn’t seem to help. Loki – the creepy pagan god that Dean hadn’t gotten used to at all – had a blank expression on his face and stood next to Gadreel, his eyes also on the screen.

Raphael was sitting, her hands together in a prayer and her head bowed. Dean had no idea who she was praying to; God wasn’t likely to be listening.

Kevin and Sam were both standing together, and it pained Dean that Sam wasn’t standing right next to him. But he deserved nothing less, especially after the stunt he’d pulled.

Shifting his weight from leg to leg anxiously, Dean wet his lips, thumb rubbing over Castiel’s knuckles in an effort at soothing both himself and Castiel. The tension was so thick he could’ve cut it with a knife, and he just wanted to do something—

The chat screen Gabriel had been using to communicate with Ash blinked to life, a new line appearing on it.

“What does it say?” Dean demanded seconds later, unable to stand not knowing.

It was Loki who answered, his tone clinically detached. “‘You want to play with the big boys, Metatron? Then let’s play.’”

Steve hitched out a helpless laugh that verged on the edge of hysteria. “Idiot.”
“He knows what he is doing,” Jarvis said quietly, rubbing a hand up Steve’s arm in what was clearly an effort at comforting the other man.

When the next line popped up, Loki read it out without any prompting. “‘Too shy to play?’”

“He is trying to anger Metatron,” Gadreel murmured, brow furrowed.

“Is it working?” Kevin asked sardonically.

“I do not know,” Gadreel answered seriously, not looking at him.

What must have been a minute later, the next lines popping up on the screen had both Loki and Gadreel making small noises of dismay.

“What – what is it?” Steve demanded before Dean could, entire body coiled with tension.

“Heaven is barred entirely to angels,” Gadreel said, shoulders tight. “He cannot—”

“He says he can,” Loki disagreed, gaze intent on the screen. “He has a—”


“He’s had one since he’s been Tony,” Steve said, wrapping his arms around himself. “He told me that. Something God did.”

“In preparation for this?” Raphael’s tone was dark.

Gadreel stiffened. “He is in.”

Dean had no idea how much time passed before Castiel inhaled sharply, his grip tightening painfully. Raphael also reacted, head jerking up from its bowed position.

“He has passed judgment,” Gadreel said in a blank tone, looking straight ahead.

When the gates to Heaven had closed, Dean had felt something subtle in the universe shift. Even if there’d been no light show, he would’ve known something was wrong just from that shift. What happened next was like that, except now Dean felt a shudder of…something old and unimaginably powerful pass through him.

“He didn’t,” Castiel said a split-second later, gaze snapping to Raphael. “Tell me that’s not what happened—”

“When Lucifer Fell.” Raphael was standing. “It did. You remember, Castiel. It’s the same.”


“He Cast Metatron out,” Raphael said, looking at Sam. “As Michael did once to Lucifer, Gabriel has done to Metatron, passing judgment for his crimes.”

Gadreel inhaled sharply, spine arching as his entire body flared briefly white in a blinding white. Dean flinched reflexively, all too aware of what looking into that light could do, but nothing happened. The light was gone as quickly as it came, and then Gadreel just stood there, stunned, looking down at his hands.

“Heaven,” Gadreel breathed reverently, “it’s open.” He looked up at them, eyes glowing with that unearthly Grace-light for several seconds before they faded back to their normal hue. “He did it.”
Dean heaved out a relieved breath, the sudden shift from anxiety to relief almost making his knees give way. “Thank God.”

“Thank Gabriel,” Castiel murmured, a wry smile pulling at his lips.

Gadreel didn’t seem to find this amusing. Dean wasn’t quite sure what expression was on his face, but it definitely wasn’t relieved. No, it looked like a mixture of horror and terror before it vanished and he stood there, blinking.

“Gadreel.” Raphael’s voice was as sharp as a whip. “What’s happened?”

“He’s – he’s gone.” Gadreel looked at her in barely disguised horror. “I cannot… I cannot feel him.”

“What does that mean?” Loki demanded sharply, head snapping to Gadreel.

“Where was he last?” Raphael asked, ignoring Loki’s glare. “Do you know?”

“Y-yes.” Gadreel blinked, gaze going elsewhere in that eerie way that still creeped Dean out.

“Can you take us there?” Steve urged, absolutely no panic in his tone. In fact, he looked absolutely placid, his posture military perfect and his chin held high.

It was a sign of internal panic, and one Dean knew well. He’d seen it in the mirror more than enough to recognize it.

Gadreel’s tone was more assured as he said, “Yes. I can.” His head tilted to the side in that familiarly angelic way, eyes glowing briefly. Then suddenly they were in a very familiar graveyard, and Dean staggered back, a noise like he’d been punched in the gut escaping him.

“Dean.” Castiel’s grip on his hand was reassuringly tight. “It’s all right.” But his eyes were tight in remembrance.

“Stull Cemetery?” Sam’s voice was distressed. “Here?”

“This is the place I sensed him last,” Gadreel insisted, not seeming to understand their distress.

They hadn’t come close to this place since the apocalypse-that-wasn’t, and Dean could’ve done without ever seeing this damn cemetery again in his life. Of course, his luck just wasn’t that good. Fucking perfect.

“Tony?” Steve called, moving through the graveyard with a single-minded purpose. “Tony?”

Jarvis set off on his own search, and Dean wasn’t sure what Raphael and Loki were doing aside from staring hard at Gadreel, who had started walking.

He and Castiel shared a look before following. There was literally nothing else they could do, and Gadreel was the angel here. Years of habit had Sam following him, and Dean heard Kevin follow suit.

His throat went dry upon reaching the clearing where it had happened. Debris was scattered around it, rocks, dirt, and clumps of dirt/grass strewn about it like a bomb had gone off, although there was no sign of any other destruction. Gadreel stopped in the middle, staring at the grass intently, frowning.

“Please tell me he didn’t land here,” Dean said, throat dry.
“He didn’t land here,” Gadreel obliged him tonelessly, still staring at the grass. He crouched, hand brushing the grass and coming away red. He stood, studying the blood – because there was nothing else it could be – intently, fingers rubbing it. “This is Gabriel’s.”

“This isn’t good,” Raphael muttered, brushing by Dean to stand by Gadreel.

“Why not, sister?” Gadreel glanced at her.

“Do you know what was foretold to happen here?” Raphael’s voice was blank. “The final fight between Michael and Lucifer and the beginning of Paradise. But it never did, and instead the two were cast into the Cage.” She looked at the grass beneath their feet. “Right here.”

“What does that mean?” Steve sounded like a man clinging to the last strands of his hope but knowing it was futile in the end.

“He fell into the Cage,” a familiar and unexpected voice said from behind them.

Dean whirled, instinctively pushing Castiel behind him. He started upon seeing Naomi standing there, very clearly alive. “How the hell are you alive?”

Naomi’s lips twitched. “It’s very difficult to kill an angel in Heaven, and Metatron didn’t finish the job. I hid. Gabriel wouldn’t have made it in without my help.”

Castiel brushed Dean’s back reassuringly. “You said he fell into the Cage?”

Naomi nodded, looking almost dangerously like she was going to burst into tears. “Yes.”

“How is that even possible?” Sam demanded, looking incredulous. “It took sixty-six seals to break it open, and then the Horsemen’s rings to open it last time! And he just fell in?”

“Gabriel Cast Metatron out of Heaven,” Raphael said, the wind whipping her hair into her face. She pushed it back, tucking it behind her ear. “It’s a spell that hasn’t been evoked since the original Fall, when Lucifer first rebelled. That kind of magic…it has power.”

“Coupled with the spell breaking and landing here…” Naomi looked down at the clearing.

“What is this Cage?” Loki’s voice was carefully even in a manner that promised pain to anyone who didn’t answer his questions.

“It’s where Lucifer and Michael are locked up,” Sam explained shortly. “A prison for angels in the depths of Hell.”

“And Gabriel is in there?”

“Yes.” Naomi’s answer was soft.

“Can we get him out?” Jarvis asked, face tight.

Castiel stiffened behind Dean, obviously reminded of his failed attempt at getting Sam’s soul out. It wasn’t something Dean liked to remember either, honestly.

It was Raphael who answered. “No. Not without releasing Lucifer.”

Dean noted rather detachedly that she didn’t mention Michael.

Naomi was studying Jarvis curiously. “What are you?”
There was no missing the way Gadreel positioned himself in front of Jarvis protectively, eyes narrowing at Naomi. “You will leave him alone, Naomi.”

Naomi’s attention shifted to him, eyebrows lifting. “Gadreel. What are you doing down here?”

“That’s enough, Naomi,” Raphael said sharply. “Gadreel has been forgiven, and he will no longer be relegated to Heaven’s prison. There will be no one hunting him down either. Have I made myself clear?”

Naomi’s eyes widened. “Raphael? You’re—”

“Human. But still your superior.” Raphael squared her shoulders, staring her down. It was kind of terrifyingly hot. “Have I made myself clear on Gadreel?” she repeated.

It was rather satisfying to see Naomi brought to heel so quickly. “Yes, of course. I’ll spread the word.”

“And one more thing.” Raphael’s lips twisted slightly, her eyes briefly flickering down to her feet before meeting Naomi’s. “You and I will have a little chat about certain activities that you’ve been in charge of.”

Naomi stiffened slightly. “I understand. Is that all?”

“The angels are to return to Heaven,” Raphael continued. “Make sure that the balance has been appropriately restored and that souls are going where they need to. There will be no more interfering on Earth when it comes to the humans and their choices.”

“That may be slightly more difficult to do,” Naomi said.

“I know.” Raphael’s smile was flat. “But do it nonetheless.”

“Wait.” Castiel stepped out next to Dean, placing a calming hand at the small of his back that quieted any concerns Dean would have voiced.

Raphael raised her eyebrows, evidently surprised. “What is it, Castiel?”

“If they want to stay on Earth, let them,” Castiel insisted. “There are things they can see down here, things they can experience they won’t be able to in Heaven. So if they want to stay, don’t force them to return.”

Naomi didn’t look convinced, her eyes returning to Raphael, who actually seemed to be considering his words.

“Let them,” Raphael decided finally, nodding. “Let those stay who want to stay, but watch them to be sure they don’t do anything dangerous like deal with a crossroads demon.” She looked pointedly at Castiel.

“Very well.” Naomi inclined her head, eyes sweeping over them. They lingered on Dean and Castiel. “For what it’s worth,” she said softly, “I am sorry.” Then she was gone.

None of them spoke, all of them uncomfortably aware of what had just happened.

Swallowing thickly, Dean stared down at the spot where he remembered a dark hole opening up and two bodies falling into. And now Gabriel had fallen into that hole as well.

“R-Raphael—” Steve’s voice was choked.
Raphael didn’t meet his eyes, her hair hiding her face. “Take us back, Gadreel.” Her voice was weary. “There’s nothing more we can do here.”

There was no warning this time before they were all abruptly in the bunker, and Dean’s stomach roiled unpleasantly at the sudden transportation.

“Mind giving a little warning next time?” Kevin groaned, looking vaguely queasy. “I think you just constipated me.”

“My apologies.” Gadreel did look apologetic, which was more than what Dean could ever say for Castiel, who had merely seemed extremely unimpressed the first few times Dean had complained.

Clearly not perturbed with Gadreel’s method of transportation, Loki rounded on Raphael, hissing, “What do you mean ‘no’? Are you suggesting that we cannot retrieve Gabriel from this Cage?”

“It’s not a suggestion, Loki,” Raphael answered, seeming unimpressed with Loki’s anger. “We can’t.”

“Forgive me my seeming ineptitude, but this is a prison, is it not? And prisons can be broken into. What makes this prison so different from any other?”

Almost unconsciously, Sam glanced at Castiel, brow furrowed. Out of habit, Dean did as well, regretting it seconds later when Loki caught the movement and also looked at Castiel, eyes narrowed.

“You know something,” Loki accused Castiel.

Castiel wet his lips, eyes dropping. “I can’t help,” he said helplessly. “I have no Grace.”

“He does.” Loki jerked his head towards Gadreel. “What do you know?” he pressed.

Pressing in close to Dean, Castiel grabbed hold of the back of Dean’s shirt. “When the Cage was opened last,” he started slowly, “it wasn’t just Michael and Lucifer who were locked in. Sam was as well. I went and attempted to retrieve him.” He snorted, shaking his head. “I failed.”

“How do you mean?” Loki demanded, eyes skimming to Sam. “He is standing right there.”

“I managed to pull Sam’s physical body out,” Castiel explained frankly, “not his soul. By the time I realized my mistake, it was too late to attempt it a second time.”

Loki looked skeptically at Sam. “He appears to have a soul to me.”

“Because Death got him out,” Dean said. “He was the only one who could manage it, and it almost didn’t happen because I fucked up.”

“Do you think he’d help this time?” Steve asked hoarsely, pale. “He showed up in our universe some time ago, left us a message…”

“It’s doubtful,” Raphael said. “Death is very selective with whom he chooses to converse with, and how he chooses to interfere.” She tilted her head to the side. “What was the message?”

“Free will is a choice, one that not everyone will take,” Steve recited from memory. “‘It’s what one does with the choice that decides the war.’”

“Curious.” Raphael said nothing more, frowning in thought.
“Is there a way of contacting Death?” Loki asked evenly.

“You can summon him,” Dean said hesitantly, “but it’s not really something I’d recommend. He gets kind of pissed when you do.” Not to mention last time they’d tried, Death had threatened to kill them if they did it again. Despite popular notion, Dean was kind of attached to his life, particularly if there was nothing breathing down his neck and threatening to eviscerate him.

“I will take my chances with him,” Loki said dismissively. “What are the required materials for doing so?”

“This is a really bad idea,” Sam groaned, closing his eyes as if in pain. “So bad.”

“You’re the Winchesters,” Raphael pointed out. “Aren’t you known for your bad ideas?”

“I know it might seem hard to believe,” Sam said dryly, “but we don’t actively try to poke things that might kill us, especially if they’re a hell of a lot more powerful. And last time we summoned Death, he told us not to do it again, otherwise he’d kill us.”

“You are not the ones who will be summoning him,” Loki said. “If you think it best for your health, then you can leave while we do so. That way there will be no confusion as to whom has done the summoning.”

“Like hell,” Dean protested indignantly, his protective instincts bristling at the thought. “If you think we’ll just let you do it alone you’ve got another thing coming. We’ll take our chances,” he asserted.

“Spoken like a Winchester,” Raphael said dryly. She looked askance at Loki. “If you truly insist on summoning Death, then I’ll help you. I’ve no wish to see Gabriel in the Cage either.”

Loki made a skeptical noise. “You certainly did not seem to care,” he noted sardonically.

Raphael’s eyes narrowed. “I care,” she said sharply. “But sometimes sacrifices have to be made, and Gabriel knew that. He wouldn’t us to risk everything just because we can’t stomach the fact that he’s in the Cage.”

“I’m not willing to leave him in there,” Steve said quietly. “If Death’s the one who can get into the Cage and get him out, then I want to ask him for help.”

Inhaling sharply through her nose, Raphael’s lips thinned. Closing her eyes, she pinched her nose.

“Whether or not you agree will have no effect on our decision,” Loki said bluntly.

“I’m aware,” Raphael snapped, dropping her hand to her side. “I think this is a terrible idea, but those seem to do best in this world.” The corner of her mouth ticked up in a smile. “Let’s do it.”

Kevin hugged himself, staring at the floor. “This is such a bad idea,” he muttered. “We’re all gonna die.”

Gadreel frowned down at him. “I would hope not.”

Dean buried his face in his hands, desperately needing to do something else other than laugh hysterically, which was the next option. Summoning Death could not end well for anyone.

But when had that ever stopped them from doing the hard thing?

The bunker of the Men of Letters didn’t really have all the materials required for summoning Death,
which wasn’t really all that surprising considering that the group had probably never even considered summoning the Horseman. But luckily for them, they had an angel in their pocket who could flit off to the other side of the world and get something that would otherwise be a pain in the ass to obtain.

Even then, gathering the stuff took time, and they decided not to do the ritual that day, as Raphael insisted on going over the plan of what to do once Death was actually there. She’d told them all that she had no intention of being snuffed out like a candle because one of them “acted like an idiot and pissed him off.” She’d glared at Dean while saying this, even though Dean wasn’t even the one she should be concerned about.

It was probably Loki.

They all rose early the next morning, although Dean stayed clear of the library, because he had no desire to be in the middle of another spat between Loki and Raphael when it came to how they should confront Death. He’d only interacted with the Horseman three times, and the third time hadn’t really ended well considering that death threat and all…

So Dean was down in storage and going through boxes that they hadn’t cleared out, doing something to keep himself busy while everyone else got ready. Castiel was helping, mainly by shooing Dean away from suspicious items and putting those items somewhere else where no one could trip over them and possibly blow the bunker up.

Or summon a demon.

Needless to say, Dean definitely didn’t expect the terrified scream of “DEAN!” from Kevin.

Dropping the contents of the box he’d been perusing, Dean bolted in the direction of the sound, skidding into the kitchen a minute later with his gun in hand. The others in the library had beaten him to it, having had less distance to cover. He froze upon taking in the sight of shattered ceramic and brown liquid at Kevin’s feet, and Kevin staring at the gaunt-faced man clad in black who was sitting calmly at the table as if he hadn’t just sauntered into the bunker and scared the shit out of their prophet.

Death didn’t look at all perturbed at the entourage barreling into the kitchen. Even when Gadreel popped into the space next to him, all Death did was flick his eyes up dismissively before turning his focus to Kevin and say disapprovingly, “There was no need to scream.”

Kevin’s mouth was open, but no sound escaped him; he was too busy staring in fear at Death.

Dean dropped the gun, clicking the safety on. “You’re here. In our kitchen,” he added inanely.

“How are you here?” Steve asked, his stance relaxing slightly. “We didn’t finish.”

“Mm, yes.” Death tapped his fingers against the tabletop, looking at Steve. “Do you know what it’s like to be summoned? Imagine someone grabbing hold of your arm and dragging you someplace you’d rather not be. It’s extremely unpleasant.” He stood, sweeping back his black coat, taking his cane in hand. “So I took the initiative.”

Loki stepped forward, face impassive. “You are the being known as Death?”

Death raised an eyebrow. “I am. And you are Loki of Asgard. Bit far from your home, aren’t you?”

“You know why,” Loki said evenly.

“Do I?” Death straightened, setting his cane on the ground in front of him.
Loki didn’t answer, simply lifting his chin higher.

Death eyed him, face set in that carefully blank mask that revealed nothing.

It was Steve who broke first, asking anxiously, “Can you help?”

“Help with Gabriel, Captain?” Death looked at him. “He made his choice. It’s not my responsibility to absolve him of the consequences.”

“He didn’t expect this,” Steve said, his face earnest in a way that only Captain America could be.  
“He didn’t…” His voice cracked on the word, and he took a breath, shoulders slumping. “Please,” he whispered. “You can go into the Cage and pull him out, can’t you?”

Death’s hands moved on his cane. “I could…but why should I?”

Steve blinked, face stricken.

“Death—” Raphael started, only to stop short when Death fixed his eyes on her.

“Raphael.” Death’s smile was flat. “How nice to see you.”

Raphael’s throat worked, but she said nothing else, eyes dropping.

“If you won’t help my father,” Jarvis said, his quiet tone carrying through the tense atmosphere of the room, “will you at least tell us why?”

Death’s eyes flickered to Jarvis. “Gabriel made his choice,” he said bluntly. “It’s not my job to step in every time something doesn’t go the way you expect it to.” His head drew back. “I won’t interfere. Should you try to force me, you won’t like the consequences.” Those ancient eyes landed on Dean.

“So we are expected to leave him in there?” Loki demanded, evidently having a death wish. “With the Devil himself?”

“I won’t help,” Death repeated icily. “What you choose to do next is up to you. Remember,” he continued, looking straight at Steve, “you all have choices. Choose wisely.”

Within one blink to the next, he was gone, leaving no sign of his presence.

Kevin inhaled shakily, his frightened eyes meeting Dean. “Oh shit,” he breathed, dropping his gaze to the shattered cup at his feet. “Let’s not make that a habit.”

Dean huffed in agreement. “No kidding.” He shoved his gun into his waistband, stepping forward to help Kevin step clear of the mess. “He just show up?”

“I turn around, and the guy’s staring at me,” Kevin said miserably.

“How kind of him.” Loki’s voice was distinctly frosty, and he was scowling blackly. “Well, he was no help at all.”

“That settles it then,” Raphael said quietly, still looking at the spot Death had been standing in. It took a moment before she seemed to shake herself and turn, leaving the kitchen.

Loki’s lips twisted, and he spun on his heel, also taking his leave.

Steve didn’t. He was staring at his feet, hands clutching at his hair. “We’re supposed to leave him in
“There?” he whispered, agonized.

Jarvis stepped in close to him, wrapping an arm around his shoulders. “We’ll figure something out,” he said dully, though his expression belied his words.

Sam shifted uncomfortably behind them. “I’m sorry,” he offered hesitantly after a moment. Then, his eyes skimming over Dean quickly, he left.

Dean took a breath, shaking his head and focusing on mopping up the coffee.

“Gabriel knew what he was doing,” he heard Castiel tell Steve and Jarvis quietly. “He wouldn’t want you to worry over something that can’t be helped.”

“I know,” Steve said roughly, sounding close to tears. “I know he wouldn’t, but that doesn’t change things. I hate that he’s locked up in there with someone who killed him before. It wasn’t supposed to be this way.”

“Sometimes the best of intentions lead to the worst of outcomes,” Castiel said wearily. “I saw the Cage only briefly when I attempted to retrieve Sam’s soul, but I wouldn’t wish that on my worst enemy.” He paused for a moment, and Dean could clearly picture that wry smile on his face.

“Actually, I would wish it on Metatron.”

“Is he also not in the Cage?” Jarvis asked.

“His presence vanished from the Host when Gabriel threw him out,” Gadreel answered, his tone subdued. “I have not sensed him since, but there have been no sightings of him either. Regardless, there is little he can do – cut off from Heaven and the Host as he is.”

Dean finished wiping up the last of the coffee, standing to throw the sodden paper towels into the garbage when he heard Steve say miserably, “I wish we could help.”

Turning around, Dean saw Castiel rest a comforting hand on Steve’s shoulder, saying nothing. Castiel met Dean’s eyes a moment later, smiling sadly.

Dean swallowed, leaning back against the sink, bracing his hands on the counter.

Gabriel was a dick, but he was the dick who had saved their hides several times over. And Dean hated the thought of leaving him in the Cage with Lucifer.

But there was nothing that could be done about it. Not with their only shot at getting him out safely gone.

An hour later, most of them could be found in the library. Sam had cleared away his computer, getting Gadreel to mostly undo whatever mojo Gabriel had worked on it. As it turned out, the computer wouldn’t need charging ever again in its lifetime, it worked insanely fast, and it could apparently get Internet anywhere, but those were actually good things that had Sam beaming like a kid at Christmas.

Steve had isolated himself to a corner of the library, staring blankly at the giant bag that held his shield. Jarvis wasn’t much better, staring at the silent Iron Man suit standing creepily in the corner. Dean had given himself a fright several times nearly running into the thing.

Raphael had cleared away the materials they’d been intending on using for the summoning, frowning all the meanwhile. Kevin had pulled out some kind of fiction book and hadn’t looked up once. Dean
had used the time to go over his weapons and make sure they were in working order, Castiel helping him out like he usually did.

Loki was nowhere to be seen, and Dean was kind of scared about what that meant.

Fifteen minutes later, Dean had his answer.

Loki swept into the library, appearing from virtually nowhere and stopping in front of Castiel. “How did you get into the Cage?” he demanded.

Castiel faltered in his cleaning motions, looking up at Loki. “Why do you want to know?” he asked cautiously.

Loki’s lips curled. “Why else? I am going to get him out myself.”

Raphael’s head snapped up, alarm clearly written on her face. “Are you a fool? You can’t do that!”

“Watch me,” Loki snapped back, not bothering to look at her.

Raphael stood, coming to a stop several feet away from Loki. “You would risk Lucifer breaking free simply because you can’t let it go?” she hissed angrily. “It’s a fool’s errand, Loki, and you would be wise not to take it!”

“I would be a fool to leave Gabriel in there.” Loki looked coldly at her. “I would have thought that as his sister you would care.”

“I care,” Raphael said sharply. “But I care more for this world, and I know what Gabriel would want. He wouldn’t want Lucifer free. And that’s what would happen if you do this.”

“I want him out as much as you do, Loki,” Steve said softly, looking up, face pale. “But she’s right. We can’t risk that happening, and Tony wouldn’t want that.”

Loki inhaled audibly, hands curling into fists at his sides. “Let me ask again, Castiel,” he started evenly, those green eyes meeting Castiel’s blue ones. “How did you attempt to retrieve Samuel Winchester’s soul from the Cage?”

“I won’t risk freeing Lucifer,” Castiel said quietly. “Attempting to retrieve a human soul is one thing, but an angel? The risk is too high, and we lost too much in locking up Lucifer last time. It’s not something I’m willing to do again.”

“If you refuse to tell me, I shall simply go and attempt it myself,” Loki said quietly, eyes dark.

“Loki, please,” Steve protested, standing now as well. “Be reasonable.”

“I am being reasonable, Steven,” Loki snapped. “I am being very reasonable.” He laughed shortly, teeth flashing. “You have no idea how angry I am at the moment. That Gabriel is lost now, after he just returned…it is unacceptable.”

“You think I’m not upset either?” Raphael demanded. “He’s my brother, Loki. My younger brother, one I failed once before. I hate that it’s come to this – I hate it – but there’s no other choice. I’m not willing to free Lucifer.”

“Big change from last time,” Sam remarked dryly.

“So I’ve changed,” Raphael said snippily. “I’m human now, and I like humanity. I understand what I didn’t before. And I know that if Lucifer gets free now, after having been denied last time…” She let
out a short laugh. “The consequences are unimaginable. You think it was bad last time? He’ll scorch the Earth.”

“Gabriel told me he was forgiven,” Gadreel protested, standing uncertainly behind Sam. “Perhaps he will listen.”

“Knowing and accepting forgiveness are two different things,” Raphael said. “Just because he’s been forgiven now doesn’t mean it’s a good idea to let him out.”

“I am out.”

“Did you attempt to raze all of humanity to the ground?”

“I attempted to unleash an alien army on Earth,” Loki said, eyes on Gadreel. “Gabriel extended forgiveness to me and offered me another chance. You would deny your brother the same?”

Raphael’s look was scornful. “Aliens aren’t even in the same class as an archangel, particularly not the Morning Star.”

Loki ignored her, focusing on Gadreel. “Would you help me?”

Gadreel hesitated. “I regret what happened,” he started slowly, “but my first duty is protecting humanity. Risking freeing Lucifer is…” He shook his head.

“Leave it alone, Loki,” Steve said, expression desperate. “He wouldn’t want this, and it’s too dangerous.”

“You want him out as well, do you not, Steven?”

“I do, believe me, I do. But not like this.” Steve swallowed, shuddering. “Leave it, Loki.”

Loki’s eyes glittered, and he took a step back from Castiel, squaring his shoulders. “I am not one of your Avengers, Captain,” he said softly, something dangerous curling in his voice. “I owe no allegiance to you. There are only two to whom I am loyal, and one of them is currently locked inside a cage.” His eyes flicked to Raphael. “I owe Gabriel everything, and there is nothing I would not do to help him now. Do you think I care for your world?” He chuckled, grinning madly. “If Lucifer doesn’t do it, I would burn it to the ground myself to retrieve Gabriel.”

“You’re mad,” Raphael breathed. “What the hell is in it for you, Loki?”

“Gabriel’s life and his safety,” Loki answered sharply. “And I am quite sane, my dear. Thank Gabriel for my sanity and health.”

Gadreel stepped forward, shoulders bracing in a familiar way that Dean recognized as threatening. “I won’t let you sacrifice everything Gabriel has fought for,” he said quietly.

“You speak as if you have a choice.” Loki grinned, the edges of it razor sharp. In a flash, something green sparked out from his hands, and Gadreel grunted, knees hitting the floor. A glowing green chain composed of nothing but Enochian sigils hovered in the air, connecting Loki’s hands to Gadreel. “I could chain you here.”

Gadreel’s eyes were wide, his breath hitching in what Dean recognized as panic.

“Let him go!” Dean ordered, lurching forward to grab hold of Loki’s elbow. It was solid steel under his hand, and Loki turned towards him slowly, a thin eyebrow raised.
“You are human,” Loki said softly, his tone promising destruction if Dean didn’t unhand him immediately. “Would you like to see how easily your bones break?”

Dean swallowed bile, all too clearly aware of how fragile the human body was and how much pain it could take. He slowly let go of Loki’s arm. “Let him go,” he repeated, staring Loki down. “Or I swear to God, you won’t like what’s going to happen.”

“I am not one of the monsters you hunt, Winchester. You will not find me as easily killed as them.”

Gadreel’s eyes had closed, and he was as still as a statue, motionless in the green Enochian chains.

“We’ve taken down bigger and badder things than you,” Dean said, meeting Loki’s gaze unflinchingly. “Think a little posturing is gonna scare me, Loki? Now, you’re going to let Gadreel go, and we’re going to talk about this like humans.” There was a quiet snort from Castiel, and Dean added reluctantly, “Which I know you aren’t. But damn it, we’re going to be rational about this. I don’t like it anymore than you that Gabriel’s locked in the Cage, but throwing around threats and locking up the one fully powered angel we’ve got on our side isn’t winning you any points.” He tilted his head. “Your call, Loki.”

Loki held Dean’s eyes for a breathless minute. Then, slowly, he looked back at Gadreel, mouth twisting. He let his hands drop, the chain dissipating into mist.

Gadreel instantly slumped over, one large shudder wracking his frame before he stilled.

“Talk.” Loki’s tone made it clear it wasn’t a suggestion.

Castiel spoke, voice quiet. “You won’t be able to get to the Cage, not where it’s at. Only angels and demons can survive down there.”

“Then luckily for us, we have an angel,” Loki said softly, eyes going to Gadreel.

Gadreel looked up at Loki, face steely. “You don’t know what it is you are asking.”

“I am asking for Gabriel’s freedom,” Loki said. “Nothing more. Would you leave him to rot, after all he has done for you?”

Gadreel moved to stand, eyes down. When he did answer, his tone was subdued. “No.” His eyes sought out Castiel. “What was the path, brother?”

“Gadreel.” Raphael sounded appalled.

“I owe him this, sister,” Gadreel said. “For what he has done, for what he has offered me… This is the least of what I can do to repay him.”

“There’s something Death said,” Sam said, drawing everyone’s attention. “He said we all have choices, but we have to choose wisely.” He looked up at them. “I think this is it. We have a choice here.”

“But is it the right one?” Steve glanced at his bag with the shield, swallowing. “I… I want him back,” he confessed. “It’s dangerous, I know, but…” He looked at Gadreel. “If you can do it… please…”

Gadreel’s face was sympathetic. “I will try.”

“It isn’t something to be done lightly,” Castiel warned him. “No ordinary angel can do it.”

Gadreel chuckled once, the smile strange on his face. “Do you think Father stationed any ordinary
angel at Eden’s doors?” A heavy weight settled in the air. “I am no archangel, but…” He tilted his head, eyes briefly flaring with unearthly Grace-light. “This is something I can do.”

There was a weight of power settled on Gadreel’s shoulders that Dean hadn’t sensed before. True, Gadreel had been injured in the Fall, but even then he hadn’t seemed anything more than another angel, albeit one who had wanted to help. But now…there was a weight and breadth to his presence that he hadn’t sensed from any other angel aside from the archangels and Castiel when he was angry.

Dean had no doubt that Gadreel was one of the more powerful angels in Heaven, and the very fact that this being had chosen to help him while Fallen was stymieing. Admittedly, he had used Dean for his own purposes, but he had also helped.

“It won’t be easy,” Castiel said, his gaze resting on Sam for a few seconds before returning to Gadreel. “It took me approximately a week in Earth time to make my way through Hell and to the Cage, and several days more before I could attempt to pull Sam out.”

Gadreel didn’t react. “I see.”

“Christ,” Sam breathed, horror on his face, his hands curling into fists. “How long is that…in the Cage?”

“Time doesn’t run the same way?” Jarvis asked sharply.

“Try faster,” Dean said, forcing himself to look away from Sam, reminding himself that he was fine, Castiel had healed him. “A hell of a lot faster. Ten years for every month on Earth.”

“A week is two-point-three years then,” Jarvis said quietly, not even pausing to do the calculations. “A day is the equivalent of almost one hundred and twenty days.” He looked at Gadreel. “How long do you think it will take you?”

Gadreel’s jaw tightened. “I cannot say. Not at this point.” His eyes met Castiel’s. “Tell me everything you can.”

Castiel did.

That night, once Gadreel had left on his mission with all the information Castiel and Raphael could give him on the Cage and the defenses surrounding it, Dean and Castiel lay curled up under the covers of their bed, Dean spooning Castiel from behind, his nose buried in the nape of Castiel’s neck.

Dean couldn’t sleep, though it had been hours since they’d lain down. Worry gnawed at his mind, and he couldn’t get the stricken expressions on Steve’s and Jarvis’s faces off his mind. Loki’s behavior also concerned him, if only because they had a volatile and highly dangerous god in their bunker who knew enough Enochian to literally bring an angel to his knees.

Castiel eventually stirred in Dean’s arms, bringing a hand up to touch Dean’s forearm across his chest. “Can’t sleep?” he asked muzzily.

Dean pressed his lips to Castiel’s sleep-warm skin in answer, his socked foot stroking up Castiel’s ankle.

After several calm breaths, Castiel spoke again. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Though his kneejerk response was to say no, Dean was learning, and Castiel was patient, waiting for
him to gather his thoughts. “Do you think he’ll make it?” he asked finally.

Castiel needed no elaboration as to whom Dean was referring to. “Father put him in charge of protecting the Garden of Eden. He only failed because Lucifer tricked him. In terms of power, Gadreel ranks short of the archangels. So, yes, I do think he can do this.”

Although Dean had suspected it, it still shocked him to hear how powerful Gadreel was. “How long do you think it’ll take him?”

“It took me over a week to make it there and return with Sam’s body,” Castiel said quietly, faint traces of shame in his voice. “And that was with Lucifer and Michael fighting each other. They didn’t notice me. I doubt that they’ll be so lenient with Gabriel. When Gadreel reaches the Cage… he’ll have to wait for the right moment to take him out.”

“And there’s no way of telling when that’ll be,” Dean guessed, his heart sinking.

“No.” Castiel’s thumb stroked Dean’s skin. “It could be a week, it could be a month, it could be a year… It’s impossible to say.”

Dean laughed weakly, pressing his mouth against Castiel’s neck. “Hopefully not a year. I don’t think Loki’d like that.”

“There is little he can do about it,” Castiel said matter-of-factly.

“That’s what worries me,” Dean admitted, remembering all too clearly how Loki had taken down Gadreel that afternoon without breaking a sweat.

“We’ll deal with it,” Castiel told him quietly. “Like we always do.”

“Yeah…” Dean buried his nose in the dark strands of Castiel’s hair, inhaling deeply. “You haven’t said anything about getting your Grace back,” he said eventually.

Castiel didn’t move, the only sign of his having heard Dean his changed breathing pattern. “There are other concerns,” was his eventual answer. “Besides…had the angel trials been completed the way I’d intended originally, I likely would have lost my Grace either way. I hate that it happened this way, but…if it means being here with you, aging with you…I can’t regret not having it.

“I miss it,” he admitted roughly. “I miss not being able to feel the pull of the Earth beneath my feet; I miss being able to see and feel your soul. But I don’t regret this. I don’t regret being here with you. Whether I never get my Grace back or I get it back once Gabriel is out, it doesn’t matter.”

“I thought you hated it – being human.”

“I once did.” Dean could hear the smile in Castiel’s voice. “But I don’t anymore. It’s…hard in some ways. I feel more than what I did before, but that’s not a bad thing. In so many ways…it just shows me what I’ve been fighting for all these years.”

Dean’s arms tightened around Castiel. “I’m glad.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, the hazy edges of the night sinking in, granting the entire scene an air of surrealism.

Castiel’s breathing slowed, signaling his gradual descent to sleep, but Dean was still painfully awake, his thoughts whirring. They spun over to Steve, who he still couldn’t believe was real.
“Do you know what’s up with Steve?” Dean asked, breaking the silence, curiosity nagging at him. “He’s been acting weird.”

It took Castiel a moment to respond, and when he did it was just to shift by rolling more into Dean’s arms, looking up at the ceiling. “He’s in love with Gabriel,” he answered, voice whisper soft with the faint traces of sleep at the edges.

Oh. That wasn’t what Dean had expected. “Seriously?”

“Yes.” Castiel’s lips had curled up in a faint smile. “I thought you knew.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Dean snorted, fingers curling into Castiel’s side. “I just thought he was acting funny, not that he was in love with Gabriel.” He breathed in Castiel’s scent for several minutes.

Finally, he couldn’t hold back the nagging thought anymore. “Does Gabriel love him, too?”

Castiel didn’t respond immediately, his hand going for Dean’s and interlacing their fingers. “No,” he whispered. “He doesn’t.”

“Jesus.” Dean’s grip on Castiel’s hand tightened reflexively. “That sucks.”

“It does,” Castiel agreed softly. He turned his face, dark eyes meeting Dean’s with only inches separating their faces. “They’re not us, Dean.”

The warmth of Castiel’s body along Dean’s own and their interlaced hands already spoke worlds. There was more in Castiel’s eyes, no longer hidden like it once was when Castiel didn’t think anything could happen. And it still made Dean’s heart and soul ache when he considered how damn lucky he was that he got to have this. It was terrifying, but it also exhilarated him because it was his.

“I know.” Dean smiled softly at him, pressing in to kiss Castiel gently, lingering on Castiel’s familiar taste, now so much more human than what he’d been accustomed to.

“Are you going to sleep now?” Castiel’s lips moved pleasantly under Dean’s. “Or let me?”

Dean hummed, dipping in for one last kiss before tucking his nose under Castiel’s face. “I’ll let you,” he whispered.

Castiel’s amused laugh was a pleasant rumble under Dean’s arm, but it quickly faded as he let sleep tug him under, his body relaxing in Dean’s hold.

Looking at Castiel’s relaxed face, Dean closed his eyes and prayed to another angel for the first time since Gadreel had entered their lives. Gadreel, hope you got your ears on for this…

Chapter End Notes

So, I suppose it was kinda expected that someone was going to go down into Hell to get to the Cage. And the next chapter isn’t going to be a light one by any means, I’m sorry to say.

As for Loki, he's never been good. At best, he's gray. He's so very gray, and his loyalty is key as to what he decides to do. He respects, trusts, and likes Gabriel/Tony, and he
makes a lot of decisions based on that respect and trust. Some have complained that Loki's too "good," but with respect, we only got to see him through Gabriel/Tony's eyes.

In any case, here we are with Chapter 16. 17 will be up Monday.
Chapter Notes

As a warning, this is where the tag "aftermath of torture" really comes into play. Not sorry in advance for any pain.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gadreel had never once been inside Hell. He had only heard of it peripherally through Thaddeus, as he had already been in Heaven’s prison by the time Hell had been created. So he had never once heard of the atrocities committed in Hell until he had Fallen to Earth thanks to the mechanisms of Metatron.

And Hell was as different from Earth as night was from day. It was nothing compared to the warmth of Heaven. It was blazing heat compared to the soft warmth of his home; it was scorching pain compared to the normality of Earth.

He could not help but wonder what purpose Hell served, and why his Father would even allow such a travesty to continue to exist. Why would He allow souls to be tortured until they turned into demons? How had such a thing even been allowed to form?

Gadreel did not know the answers, and it troubled him. Now that he was in the thick of Hell, his doubts and questions about his Father and what His plans were came to the forefront of his mind. His connection to Heaven was dim down here, only brief flickers of warmth reminding him of where he came from. It was so very lonely down here, but Gadreel was well used to loneliness by now.

Occasionally there was a prayer that reached his ears. The first one had startled him, as he had not expected anything. So when Dean’s erstwhile voice reached his ears, it took Gadreel a moment to recover his balance and continue onward, Dean’s prayer ringing through him and granting him strength with the knowledge that he was not alone.

Gadreel, hope you got your ears on… I don’t know where you’re at now, but you better be doing fine…

In any case, physically there were demons all around him. Some were frightened of the sight of his burning Grace and fled as he tore through the realm. Others were braver and foolhardier, actually daring to confront Gadreel before he burned them out of existence. They tapered off after the first year of traveling through Hell, other demons understandably warier now that he had smote several of their kind without hesitating.

Gadreel, it’s been three days; hope you’re still doing fine down there. We’re rooting for you.

Castiel had told him of the paths they had burned through Hell in their attempts to raise the Righteous Man, and demons evidently remembered this, no matter how long ago it may have been in Hell-time. Gadreel was only one angel compared to the numerous garrisons that had been sent before, but he also possessed a wealth of power that the foot soldiers had not.

It really shouldn’t be funny, but Loki’s looking kind of pissed and Raphael’s at her wits’ end keeping him in line…
Hell became fierier and infinitely more gruesome and terrible the deeper Gadreel pressed into, forging his own path through the ranks. The path Castiel had taken after the failed apocalypse had only served to let him enter Hell without announcing his presence, but Hell had gone through several different regime changes since then and changed too much for Castiel’s memories to help him.

_Gadreel, this is Steve… Ah, Dean and Castiel told me that prayers usually reach you, no matter where you are. I hope this doesn’t bother you. I hope you’re doing okay…_

The only thing Gadreel could rely on was the fact that Lucifer’s Cage was in the deepest part of Hell, surrounded by numerous defenses and a labyrinth of sorts to hinder any demons from finding it. To even have a hope of finding it, he had to head down, down, and down.

_I have never prayed before, as I am a being of logic and coding. But I will pray for this, Gadreel._

It had been so long since he had worked like this. It was effort expended in a continuous blaze that Gadreel had never done before. He rested in spurts, drawing in his Grace to get a breather when he most needed it and before breaching the next level. But once he reached the outskirts of the first defenses surrounding Lucifer’s Cage, he was all too aware of how few opportunities he would have to rest now.

_If you die down there, rest assured that I will come down there myself and haul your corpse out to kill you myself before finishing the job you failed to complete._

The demons were vicious down here, far more powerful than anything he had to face earlier. But they were no Knights of Hell as Abbadon had been, and many of the most powerful demons had been killed during the apocalypse and the intervening years. These were paltry in comparison, and Gadreel either smote them or slipped past them.

It was two years before Gadreel breached the first defenses of the Cage, his passage through Hell slowed because of the turmoil from Abbadon’s death and the resulting fighting over who would claim the throne next. Still, he did not hurry, needing to conserve his strength for when it would be most important.

_It’s been a week, Gadreel, I’m praying for you._

The labyrinth surrounding the Cage was perplexing, but Gadreel had the advantage of being an angel. It was easy to pinpoint the faint traces of Grace he could sense and follow them. There were no demons down here, none having been able to breach the first defenses that Gadreel could. It made it easier for Gadreel to travel without having to worry about hiding his Grace from demonic senses.

As he drew closer to the Cage, Gadreel incorporated the first of several wards and sigils into his Grace that would hide him from the occupants’ senses. They would also dampen his own power, but it was an acceptable price to pay for being able to inspect the Cage and figure out how he would go about extracting Gabriel.

It was another year before Gadreel reached the actual Cage, and he had to stop before it to take it in, stunned surprise and horror roiling through him as he finally saw Lucifer’s prison. It was enormous; it had to be to contain the might of one of Heaven’s most powerful angels. And this was where Michael and Lucifer had both been contained since the failed apocalypse, and where Gabriel had also fallen into.

It was different here, and Gadreel had noticed the subtle differences in the atmosphere of Hell since pressing through the labyrinth and bypassing the defenses surrounding the Cage. The heat that filled the rest of Hell was gone. It was cold here, so cold that it threatened to freeze Gadreel’s Grace.
The Cage is cold, Gadreel; I hope you’re keeping warm.

The cold mirrored one of the Graces inside the Cage, the one that Gadreel recognized as Lucifer’s, even though it was entirely different from the last time he had seen his Fallen brother. It was startling seeing the differences, taking in the utter cold and frost that radiated from Lucifer’s Grace. He had once been warm, just like Heaven, but now he was wintery frost.

Michael’s own Grace was still radiating that warmth, but even from here Gadreel could sense the apathy and tired anger in it.

Carefully rounding the edges of the Cage, Gadreel took in the Cage’s structure and any weaknesses he could exploit. The Cage had been built to hold an archangel, not a human soul. So the path Castiel had taken to sneak in and extract Sam’s human body was not one Gadreel could take. He would have to do something else.

And that was only when Lucifer stopped paying attention to Gabriel.

Gadreel could hear the screaming and feel the writhing terror and agony streaking through Gabriel’s Grace, and he was not even in the Cage. It struck horror in his heart, and he wondered desperately why Michael stood there and did nothing.

He had not expected this when finally reaching his goal. He had not expected to find Lucifer tearing into Gabriel.

Despair streaked through him, and Gadreel wondered if it was even possible to haul Gabriel out without giving his presence away to Lucifer. It would be impossible at the moment with how focused Lucifer was on Gabriel. Gadreel would be sucked into the Cage before he could even touch him, Lucifer pinning him in place.

Forcefully turning his attention away from the sight of Gabriel’s Grace, scarred, torn into pieces, and terrified, Gadreel rounded the Cage again, fretting anxiously. He could not leave Gabriel down here; he could not.

Gabriel had promised him safety and love and comfort that Gadreel had not experienced in eons. What kind of angel would he be if he left Gabriel to this torture?

Retreating a small distance away from the Cage, Gadreel rested, keeping his Grace burning warm to battle the cold that nipped at him. He studied the Cage, taking in every facet of it and studiously ignoring the pain radiating from it. Succumbing to horror and grief would not help him here, and he needed all his wits about him for what he would need to do.

Gadreel, hope you got your ears on, we’re all rooting for you. The bunker’s been kind of quiet without Gabriel, but don’t tell him that—

Gadreel did not know how long he stayed there, only that time passed. He marked the passing of it with the prayers that Gabriel’s friends sent him. One time he noted rather abstractly that it had been five years in Hell since he had started.

And Lucifer had not once stopped.

As much as it hurt him to admit, Gadreel had become rather desensitized to the screaming. Perhaps that was why Michael did not interfere, as Gadreel had not once seen him move to stop Lucifer from torturing Gabriel. After all, what was the use of it when you were going to spend an eternity locked up?
Gadreel could understand only somewhat, but the larger part of him was simmering with a slowly growing fury that Michael would allow this to happen. What had become of the leader of the Host, the Commander? The one who had been tasked with dispensing judgment?

This was not judgment. This was torture. This was cruelty.

And even as desensitized as he was now to the sounds of screaming, Gadreel could no longer stand it. He would have to find some way of breaking Gabriel out and do it soon.

Taking flight from his perch, Gadreel once again rounded the Cage. He noticed with vaguely growing alarm that there were cracks beginning to form in its structure. One crack glowed red hot with heat as one of Gabriel’s wings bashed against it, then it was abruptly retracted as Lucifer ripped into him.

Gadreel hunched his own wings around him, and he continued his efforts. There was one point where he had sensed Castiel’s Grace, and he guessed that this was where Castiel had entered so long ago. It was faint, but the evidence was still there. He pressed against it, considering.

He could use this as his entry point instead of making another.

The screaming cut off, and Gadreel looked into the Cage to see Lucifer muffling Gabriel. His Grace shuddered in revulsion, and Gadreel refocused.

This was new; Lucifer had never quieted Gabriel before, and the silence was disconcerting. Gadreel kept his own motions quiet and his Grace warded against detection.

It was fast looking more and more like he would have to do something risky to pull this off.

Retreating once again, Gadreel returned to his perch, settling in to bide his strength and hammer out the best plan he could. There were vague patterns to Lucifer’s methods, moments he lessened the amount of torture he inflicted. Gadreel could use those moments to do what he needed, but it would have to be quick.

In any case, he owed the Morning Star for his own trickery so long ago. And if Gadreel could pull this off, then he really would have his own back.

Gabriel’s silence stretched out permanently as Lucifer did something to his voice, something that had Gadreel shivering in horror and fear. He was guiltily glad that he was not in the Cage to fully see what was happening, but this was in some ways worse. He was so close to helping Gabriel, but not close enough.

Then, thirteen years since Gadreel had first entered Hell, the moment arrived. His plan was ironed out, and he had prepared himself as best as he could for what he needed to do.

He had mapped out Lucifer’s patterns to the point where he knew exactly when to start, and he’d been slowly and patiently pushing against the point where Castiel had made his entrance so long ago. By lucky happenstance, Gabriel was closest to this point as well.

When the moment arrived, Gadreel dropped all of his wards and sigils, letting his Grace blaze forth and penetrate the confines of the Cage.

Lucifer and Michael both froze in surprise at this.

And Gadreel surged forward, pressing through the opening he had made and streaking through to wrap around Gabriel and pull him out.
It was Michael who recognized him, his voice halting Lucifer for the critical moments Gadreel needed. “Gadreel?”

But Gadreel had already retreated, dragging Gabriel out with him. His elder brother was terrifyingly limp in his hold, on the verge of catatonic. His Grace fluttered weakly in recognition of Gadreel’s, but there was no resistance beyond a low level thrum of panic and agony that had Gadreel’s Grace aching in sympathy.

The moment he was out, Gadreel sealed the cracks he’d noticed in the Cage as well as he possibly could, his Grace blazing with the power he exerted. But the damage he’d wrought in his entrance and extracting of Gabriel was significant enough that Gadreel felt a brief surge of panic at the implications. He welded the last crack shut, gripped Gabriel tightly, and blasted upwards, his Grace a white streak behind him.

There was no subterfuge required this time; Gadreel wanted out as quickly as he could make it, and his Grace struck out violently every time a demon attempted to attack him on the way.

Gabriel was a dead weight in his hold, and Gadreel prayed to Father that he would make it, that he had not failed the only brother who had offered him forgiveness and love after his egregious mistake.

Gadreel burst out of Hell, shattering stone and concrete and bringing an entire building down on his head. Bewildered and suddenly utterly exhausted, Gadreel could do nothing more than lie there in the debris, breathing in dust and mold and air. It was so clean and pure in comparison to Hell, and he felt something that was probably akin to seeking Revelation.

Grunting softly, Gadreel threw off the large blocks burying him, digging his way out. He had lost his grip on Gabriel with his exit, but he could sense his brother’s Grace under the building he had brought down. It took him a few more minutes of digging and throwing blocks of stone aside before he found Gabriel’s body, and he stood there, Grace roiling in distress.

Gabriel’s Grace was one thing to look at, but his body was another. Severe burn marks could be seen on his visible skin, black at the edges. It took Gadreel a moment to realize that this was what the humans termed frostbite, and another moment to realize that Gabriel wasn’t healing.

“Gabriel…” Gadreel spoke for the first time in thirteen years, voice hoarse. “I am sorry, brother.” He dropped to his knees, curling his fingers in Gabriel’s dark hair and sending a healing touch of Grace through his brother’s broken body and torn Grace. He could do nothing for the scars and injuries Lucifer had inflicted on him, but he could lessen the pain, soothe him.

Absorbed as he was in the task, Gadreel almost missed the arrival of several other angels. His head snapped up, and he met the stunned and horrified eyes of Naomi. She was surrounded by several other angels, all of whom who seemed to be in similar straits.

“What have you done, Gadreel?” Naomi sounded horrified.

Gadreel moved to pull Gabriel into his arms, standing smoothly, his eyes never leaving Naomi’s. “What was right, sister.” He left as quickly as he could, tired wings carrying him as surreptitiously as possible to the bunker and safety.

He staggered upon landing in the room below the entrance, barely registering the surprised cries and exclamations of its occupants.

“Enough,” Gadreel said, quieting everyone. He pulled Gabriel closer to his chest, worried when the other didn’t stir with the motion. There was no sign of life in his Grace beyond its existence.
“God,” Steve choked out upon seeing Gabriel, “is that—”

“Frostbite,” Jarvis finished grimly, worry on his face.

“Is he sleeping?” Dean demanded, eyes on Gabriel’s unconscious face.

Gadreel did not bother to point out that it was impossible for angels to sleep. “Something of the sort,” he said instead. “Is there a bedroom he can rest in?”

Dean led him to an empty bedroom, the others tagging along behind Gadreel and all of them radiating anxiety and fear. Gadreel stopped them from entering the room with him with a hard stare. Once he was sure that they would remain outside, he moved in and gently laid Gabriel down on the bed, brushing a gentle hand through Gabriel’s hair and sending another soothing pulse of Grace through his ravaged one.

The frostbite burns didn’t look quite so bad now. Gadreel let healing energy focus in his palm, the light glowing from his skin as he pressed it to the worst of the burns and tried to speed the healing up, gently prodding Gabriel’s Grace into action. The burns slowly faded under his watchful eye, leaving behind healthy, pink skin in their wake.

Gadreel withdrew his hand after running it over Gabriel’s forehead, sending one last touch of calm energy through Gabriel’s Grace. He turned the lights off as he left, leaving Gabriel in the quiet room. The door closed behind him, and he slowly turned to face the others waiting anxiously.

“He is resting,” Gadreel said quietly.

“You were gone a month,” Loki said, his tone just short of accusing.

“It took me time,” Gadreel said, not wanting to explain just why he’d taken so long. “Do you think it was easy to get an archangel out from a Cage designed to hold them?”

“What’s wrong with him?” Steve asked worriedly.

Gadreel met his eyes briefly, his smile painful. “Do you really want to know?”

“Damn it, yes!” Steve snapped, shoulders bunching. “What happened down there?”

“Lucifer.” The word was clipped, and it was all that was needed for Sam to recoil, horror and half-remembered pain surging through his soul.

“His brother did this to him?” Loki asked dangerously quiet.

“Why do you think it took me so long?” Gadreel rested his palm on the door, feeling the torn edges of Gabriel’s Grace in the room, so small compared to what it had been before. “It was impossible for me to get him out from Lucifer’s attention. I had to wait.”

“What does he look like?” Raphael asked quietly, eyes dark with worry.

Gadreel rested his weight against the closed door, lips pressed tightly together. All he could do was hold Raphael’s eyes, letting the full weight of his horror be conveyed that way.

Raphael’s inhalation was sharp. “Is he responsive?”

“Briefly.” Gadreel resisted reaching out to brush his Grace against Gabriel’s, knowing it would not be well received at this point. “But not at the moment.”
“Can we see him?” Steve was staring at the door over Gadreel’s shoulder.

“It would not be wise,” Gadreel disagreed. “An injured angel is a dangerous one, particularly one in possession of his powers. It is best to leave him alone for now.”

“How long is it going to take him to recover?” Dean asked frankly.

“It is uncertain.” Gadreel’s hand rested on the doorknob for one more second before he stepped back, walking away from the room and the archangel lying within. “But it will take time.”

“But he’ll be all right?” Steve persisted, several feet behind Gadreel.

Gadreel didn’t respond until he was in the library, and only then did he allow himself to relax, letting the weariness he felt down into the core of his Grace show in his vessel. “Pray he will, Steve.” He did not dare meet Steve’s eyes, fearful of what he would find there. “It is all any of us can do now.”

Sinking down in a chair, Gadreel rested his head against the backrest, looking up at the ceiling.

At the edges of his senses, in a place that he was now uncomfortably intimately familiar with through necessity, something dangerous and powerful trembled, cracking.

“What have you done, Gadreel?”

Only what was right, but what was the price?

There was pain, but he didn’t know why it was tearing him apart from the inside out and oh Father whywhywhywhywhywhat was happening LucifernoSamaelSTOP

“MICHAEL!” But there was no help What had he done ohgodthepainandscreaming

Please stop just Stopstop

STOP

\[ p \]
Why are you doing this?

Icy cold burning him alive from the inside out

“Feel what you’ve put us through for all these centuries, sibling.”

It wasn’t right, it wasn’t right, it wasn’t

twa

ht

Sharp pain agony burning piercing

whywasnoonehearinghisscreams

Agony tore out his voice, muffling his screams

but there was no one to listen

he was alone

so cold

Bright burning pain

...suddenly

warmth

Curling through him,

wrapping around raw edges and soothing the hurts

He couldn’t beg

couldn’t cry, couldn’t

scream, couldn’t whisper
No one heard him anyway

No one cared

But the endless pain was gone

And he breathed, sinking into darkness.

Gadreel was weary, and he had no desire to answer the pressing questions of the others. What was more, he could not answer them, not adequately. There were no words to describe what had transpired in Lucifer’s Cage, and Gadreel did not want to describe them. They should not be described.

Not by him.

Eventually, wishing to escape the worry, anxiety, and fear hanging around everyone else, Gadreel retreated to an isolated corner of the bunker, shielding himself from intruding eyes. That it was closer to Gabriel’s room was a mere coincidence.

Gadreel needed to remain close, just to keep an eye on his brother and make sure he would be fine.

There was still no awareness in Gabriel’s Grace, and that worried Gadreel more than he wanted to admit. He had no experience with this, and it terrified him that he was so helpless. All he could do was repeatedly check in on Gabriel from a distance and retreat when he noticed no change.

He curled up in a ball in his chosen corner, wrapping his arms around the knees of his vessel. His vessel’s soul was thankfully unconscious inside him, having been blissfully unaware of the turmoil and horror of the last ten years. It was not a sight Gadreel would wish on anyone, and he wished futilely that it had never happened.

But all he could do now was sit here helplessly, hope that Gabriel would come back to his senses eventually, and then deal with the repercussions of what he had done.

So he was only peripherally aware of the passing of time, the concerned murmurings of the people in the bunker, Steve and Jarvis passing by him to stop briefly in front of Gabriel’s room, Loki doing the same and almost going inside but deciding against it, and always that growing dread at the edges of his awareness. The Host was in a state of mild chaos, having felt what had happened when Gadreel had pulled Gabriel out of the Cage and into the living world.

Gadreel hid from the other angels, shrouding his presence as best as he could. He could still hear them, but they could hopefully not sense him.

Twelve hours after Gadreel had pulled Gabriel out of the Cage, it shattered into pieces.

He felt the shockwaves sweep through Hell and into Earth, spilling out into Heaven. Two Graces that had become intimately familiar with during his ten years in Hell soared into his awareness, and Gadreel’s fingers dug into his legs painfully as he rode through the tremors that shook the Host as Michael and Lucifer joined their ranks and left Hell, entering the living realm.

Then they were gone, blinking out of the radar of his senses like they had never been there.

Gadreel had no time to reflect on what this meant before an agonized scream rang through the
bunker, and a wash of uncontrolled, terrified power swept through the place, shattering light bulbs and other delicate electronics and throwing the entire bunker into darkness.

Jumping to his feet, Gadreel paid no attention to the utter blackness that impeded the others in the bunker. He could hear Dean’s voice demanding flashlights, along with a loud curse as he demanded that Jarvis not do that, it was creepy!

But Gadreel had no time for that. He stepped towards the room, fully intending on going inside to soothe Gabriel, when the door flew open, and a surge of uncontrolled Grace slammed into him, throwing him across the hall and against the floor, skidding across it to slam into someone’s legs, knocking them over.

A flashlight clattered to the floor, rolling away and illuminating the hallway in a cylindrical beam of light. It spun briefly and rested on a pair of legs that stood in the doorway.

Eerie green lights lit up the hallway, sparking like faerie light and casting everything in a sickly glow, including Gabriel’s distraught face, his eyes open and unseeing and glowing inhumanly with the power of his uncontrolled Grace.

Gadreel quieted Dean, who he was half lying on, and stood, keeping his bearing as unthreatening as possible. “Brother, calm yourself. You are safe.”

No sound escaped from Gabriel save that of a strangled whimper, his vocal chords working desperately. Gadreel looked inward, horror washing through him when he saw that Gabriel couldn’t speak, his voice damaged as it was. And right now he was operating on pure instinct, unable to think beyond the sheer instinct to defend.

“It is I, Gadreel,” Gadreel continued, keeping his voice calm. He took several, slow steps toward Gabriel, focusing on emanating calm with his Grace. “You are safe, Gabriel. You are no longer inside the Cage.”

There was no comprehension from Gabriel’s thrashing Grace, which struck out at Gadreel, burning his skin.

Gadreel restrained an instinctive flinch and the memories that threatened to come forth, forcing himself to focus on his distressed brother.

“Gabriel,” Gadreel repeated, taking another step towards him. “Focus on my voice. Focus on me.”

Gabriel stayed motionless, his distressed breathing loud in the utter silence of the hallway. But his Grace was screaming so loudly that Gadreel was surprised no one else could hear it.

“Gabriel.” Gadreel’s voice was quiet, and he was now standing directly in front of Gabriel, his Grace buffering itself to protect himself from the terrified and destructive power that Gabriel was emitting. “Do you hear me?” He cautiously reached out with his hand, intending on physically soothing Gabriel.

Gabriel reacted so quickly Gadreel had no time to breathe. In an instant he was pinned to the wall opposite of the room, Gabriel’s burning hand wrapped tightly around his throat and his sword poking him threateningly in the chest.

But he hadn’t finished the job. He hadn’t driven it home.

The others let out alarmed cries, and Gadreel saw Loki move forward, hands glowing green with Enochian sigils dancing around the edges of that glow.
Gadreel gestured sharply at Loki, begging him silently to stay back and pushing it into Loki’s mind as well. *Stay back!*

Loki reeled back, the glow thankfully disappearing from his hands.

Focus returning to Gabriel, Gadreel tried not to breathe beyond pulling in shallow breaths. “You know me, do you not, brother?” he whispered around the chokehold Gabriel had on him. His skin was sizzling under the heat of Gabriel’s hand, and Gadreel mindlessly detached the pain receptors.

Gabriel breathed out, the sound nothing but distress and panic, his fingers flexing around Gadreel’s throat. There was no recognition in those glowing eyes, and his skin was beginning to take on a glowing tinge as well.

“Gabriel.” Gadreel kept his tone as calm as possible. “You are no longer in the Cage. Lucifer has no hold on you anymore.”

Some of the heat in Gabriel’s hand subsided, and the sharp point digging into Gadreel’s chest drew back slightly, just enough for Gadreel to pull in deeper breaths.

“That’s it, brother.” Gadreel kept his eyes on Gabriel’s, kept his tone soothing and his Grace similarly so. “Feel me. Feel your friends. You are no longer there. Lucifer is not here.”

There was a desperate tinge to Gabriel’s Grace, and it skimmed past the very outer edges of Gadreel’s, and he heard the unspoken question that Gabriel was unable to voice at the moment, one borne of years of pain and torture. *No one heard me.*

Pain washed through Gadreel at the words. “I heard you, brother. And I am sorry I was unable to answer your call earlier.”

Hesitantly, he reached out his Grace in the equivalent of offering a hug, and not one he was certain Gabriel would take, his Grace skittish as it was.

Suspicion flashed through Gabriel even as his grip on Gadreel’s throat slackened more, and his sword pulled away entirely. A whine escaped his lips, not one that held any meaning beyond an unvoiced question filled with fear.

“You are safe,” Gadreel reassured him quietly, keeping his vessel still so as not to antagonize him. “I promise you. Lucifer will not harm you again.”

The light in Gabriel’s eyes faded slowly, gradually receding to the warm browns of his vessel. At the same time, the roiling pressure of his Grace, so interminable and heavy, retreated inward, pulling in until it just surrounded the two of them.

Even scarred, bleeding, and trembling, it was beautiful. And it hesitantly reached forward into Gadreel’s patiently waiting Grace, tracing along his form and feeling for his intentions.

Gadreel remained motionless, letting Gabriel take his time. He let nothing but love and reassurance pour from him, and eventually Gabriel determined that there was nothing lying in wait.

Gabriel’s sword clattered loudly to the floor as his physical body slumped into Gadreel’s, and his Grace sunk into Gadreel’s waiting hold. Curling his form gently around Gabriel’s trembling one, both spiritually and physically, Gadreel wrapped his arms around Gabriel’s back, sliding down the wall until he was sitting on the floor, Gabriel practically in his lap, his head resting in the crook of Gadreel’s neck and shoulder.
Resting his head against the wall, Gadreel closed his eyes, exhaling in relief. His arms tightened around the violently trembling body he was holding, and he said nothing as Gabriel let out high-pitched, distressed sobs, his tears soaking Gadreel’s jacket.

There was nothing to be said. Only comfort to be given and accepted.

And Gadreel was so grateful that Gabriel could accept it.

The last month had arguably been one of Steve’s worst, ranking right up there with the days after Bucky’s “death” and waking up in the twenty-first century. But it was worse, almost, because he knew Tony was alive and couldn’t do anything to help him. It made it so much harder to sit around the bunker.

He’d accompanied Dean and Sam on one of their hunts, only for them to ban him from all subsequent hunts when what should have been a simple salt-and-burn went horribly awry when Loki became too bored and started bugging them. Steve had then been stuck in the bunker, keeping Loki busy because Raphael certainly wasn’t going to.

Then there had been the witch that had somehow been stuck in the old computer in the main room. Everyone had run for cover when Loki and she had it out, and it had taken ages for them to clean it up, but thankfully the witch wouldn’t be coming back. She had seemed pretty dead when Loki had been done with her.

The young woman who had accompanied the witch was not as quickly taken care of, but after a few days of adjusting, she went off into the world, meeting up with a hacker friend of Dean and Sam’s. Compared to that, the rest of the month had been agonizingly dull, with only Steve’s worries and stress keeping him occupied. The only thing he could do was pray to Gadreel, and he did, hoping that they got through.

Now the wait was over, and Tony was back, but he wasn’t the same. It was worse than anything Steve could have expected, and he knew how close to death they’d come when Tony had attacked Gadreel.

That kind of power…it had been difficult to breathe with it bearing down on his shoulders.

There was nothing to be done now, and all Steve could do was stand there helplessly as Gadreel struggled to comfort Tony, who was a shivering, shuddering mess in his arms.

“Is he going to do anything else?” Dean asked Gadreel, his voice quiet. He’d picked up the flashlight that had fallen when Gadreel had crashed into him.

Gadreel opened his eyes, looking over at Dean. “He has calmed down.”

“Thank God.” Dean peered up at the shattered light bulbs, glass crunching under his boots. “That’s gonna be a bitch to repair,” he muttered, irritated.

“He’s responsive now?” Raphael asked Gadreel, urgency in her tone.

Gadreel didn’t respond immediately, one hand coming up to stroke through Tony’s hair. “He knows who I am,” he said eventually, looking down at Tony. “He is…coming back.”

“Is there a reason he has not spoken?” Loki’s voice was soft.
This time Gadreel didn’t reply at all, his shoulders shifting oddly. Tony hadn’t stopped making those horrible sobbing sounds, but they were quieter now, like he was calming down.

It took Gadreel several minutes to coax Tony into standing, and then he slowly shuffled them into the bedroom, giving them all a pointed look that told them clearly to stay out. In the meantime, Dean sent Kevin off to get some more flashlights and anything else they could use for lighting until they fixed the damage.

Jarvis was remotely operating the Iron Man suit, which stood next to him and offered at least some light from the arc reactor and eye slits. Dean had cursed rather impressively when it had turned on seconds after the lights had blown out, as it had been rather creepy to suddenly have a glowing suit of armor standing there in the pitch black.

Inside the dark bedroom that Dean and Sam somewhat illuminated with their flashlights, Gadreel had tucked a thick blanket around Tony, who was sitting on the bed and still shivering violently. But he had stopped making those awful noises, his eyes shut tightly and his fingers white where they were clutching the soft material of the blanket.

When Tony opened his eyes, they were brown and aware, flickering quickly between each of them, cataloguing threats and analyzing them. He heaved in a ragged breath, shoulders hunching, and Gadreel rested a hand between his shoulder blades, face unreadable.

Raphael pushed past Steve to move into the room, ignoring the sharp look Gadreel gave her.

“Raphael,” Gadreel warned lowly.

Raphael brushed him off with a dismissive hand wave, going up to Tony and stopping a foot away from him.

Steve didn’t think he imagined the sudden taste of fire and brimstone that filled the air, though Raphael didn’t seem to care.

“Gabriel”—Raphael’s voice was soft—“I’m glad to see that you’re all right.” She reached a hand to touch him.

The pressure in the room dropped the instant Raphael’s hand made contact, and she was blown backwards into the wall by the door, hitting it with a painful sounding thud.

Instinctively, Steve stepped into the room, feeling Jarvis accompany him. “Tony—” He’d made it no more than two steps before a powerful force lifted him off his feet and into the wall across the room, tumbling into Jarvis.

Something distant shattered in the bunker, and Kevin’s alarmed yelp echoed through the walls.

“Gabriel!” Gadreel’s voice was sharp, breaking through the roaring that was in Steve’s ears.

As abruptly as it had started, it stopped, Tony clutching at Gadreel’s hips and burying his face into the other’s stomach. Steve hitched out a pained breath, accepting Sam’s offered hand when it came.

“Let’s not do that again, yeah?” Sam’s smile was sympathetic, and he helped Jarvis to his feet as well.

“Should I ward the room?” Loki asked Gadreel, his fingertips flaring green.

“No.” Gadreel’s voice was quiet but forceful. “That will only make it worse.” He looked over his
shoulder at them, his arms settled on Tony’s shoulders. “Leave us.”

“Come on, Raphael.” Dean helped her out, eyes on the red burn she had on her hand.

“More the fool me,” Raphael hissed, holding the hand out carefully. “I shouldn’t have done that.”

“You could only try,” Castiel said. “But it would seem that Gadreel is the only one he trusts right now.”

“Captain.” Jarvis’s voice was quiet enough that only Steve’s enhanced hearing picked the word up.

“Yeah?” Steve kept his voice just as quiet.

Jarvis looked strained in the eerie green light. “He is terrified of us,” he said softly, his shoulders bowing. “And I…I cannot help.” His voice broke, and he covered his face with his hands, rubbing furiously. “I don’t know what to do,” he admitted in a whisper.

It hit Steve abruptly that Jarvis had no idea how to deal with grief like a human, no matter how mature or wise he was. The last time this had happened, Tony had come back practically instantly, even if he hadn’t remembered.

“It’s going to be all right,” Steve settled on saying, reaching out hesitantly to touch Jarvis’s arm comfortingly. “It’ll work itself out. He just needs time.”

Jarvis’s shoulders shuddered, and he dropped his hands to look helplessly at Steve. “There is nothing I can do, is there?”

“There is. Be there for him.” Steve swallowed thickly, glancing at the closed door. “That’s all any of us can do right now, and I know that’s all he needs.”

Jarvis pulled in a shaky breath, nodding. The Iron Man suit moved to stand protectively by the door, a silent sentinel. “Then we will do that.”

The others had left now, taking all human sources of lighting with them. And while Loki’s green lights gave them enough light to see by, it was also kind of creepy.

“Come on,” Steve urged gently, taking Jarvis by the elbow. “Let’s join the others.”

They were in the library, surrounded by flashlights and a few gas lamps that Kevin had apparently pulled out from the basement. There were also some Christmas lights, and Dean and Sam had rather constipated looks on their faces as they looked at them.

“Really, Kevin?” Dean asked.

“You asked for lights, I’m giving you lights!” Kevin said defensively, sticking his chin out.

“Christmas lights?”

“The red and green adds a nice tone to the room,” Castiel said evenly, smiling pleasantly.

“I do like green,” Loki agreed, seeming not to care at all.

“I didn’t even know we had Christmas lights,” Sam said wonderingly.

Kevin shrugged. “They were in a box labeled ‘Christmas decorations.’”
“Why are we complaining?” Raphael asked wearily, applying a cream to her burnt hand. “We need light. Who cares what color it is.”

“Where’d you even plug them in?” Dean demanded. “The power’s out.”

“Actually, the generator works just fine.” Kevin gestured vaguely in the direction of the outlets he’d used. “It’s everything else that’s trashed.”

“I don’t think we have enough bulbs to replace what’s been damaged,” Castiel said, shooting Dean a look.

“Maybe Gadreel or Gabriel can mojo it back together.” Dean shot a concerned look in the direction of the room.

As if given a hidden cue, Gadreel entered the room, looking weary.

“How is he?” Jarvis asked him urgently.

Gadreel took a moment to answer, first eyeing the Christmas lights strung up over his head. “Calming down.”

“I gotta ask, Gadreel: is he going to be a danger to us?” Dean asked bluntly. “Because if he is, we’ve gotta ward that room.”

“Warding that room will only make things worse,” Gadreel said sharply, the weariness disappearing in a flash to give way to a coldly furious stance. “Curtailing his power will make him feel as if he is in danger, and he has been in a cage long enough.”

Dean looked slightly taken aback at Gadreel’s sharp tone. “Okay, point taken. Just needed to know.”

As quickly as the anger had come, it faded, and Gadreel slumped. “I understand your concern, but as it stands, I would advise against warding. He needs to heal, and he can’t do that if something is restricting him.”

Steve didn’t want to know, but he felt he needed to ask. “What happened down there? Why – why isn’t he speaking?”

When Gadreel met his eyes, there was nothing but devastation to be seen. “That is not for me to say. If Gabriel chooses to one day tell you, then that will be his choice.” He looked away, obviously choosing to leave it there. “I’ll fix the damage,” he told Dean, “but it will be a few moments.”

“Be my guest.” Dean gestured expansively, the faint lights of the gas lamps throwing his face into odd shadows.

Gadreel tilted his head to the side in a very familiar gesture before disappearing, the sound of wings the only sign of his leaving. It took a minute, and then something seemed to breeze through Steve’s body before the lights flickered on, the sudden brightness almost blinding.

“It has been repaired,” Gadreel said suddenly from behind Steve, startling him. His lips twisted in concern. “I will go check on Gabriel.”

Even though there was virtually nothing Steve could do to help, he followed, needing to at least see that Tony was all right, that he would be all right.

Awareness came and went in fits and spurts, but the one thing he was painfully, clearly aware of was
the state of his Grace. There was no escaping that, not when pain coursed through him with every beat of his heart and every breath he pulled into his lungs. It wasn’t even physical pain; he could turn that off easily by detaching himself from his pain receptors. It was down at the level of his Grace, and there was no avoiding that by detaching pain receptors.

Gadreel had given him a blanket after he’d calmed down, recognizing that part of the reason Gabriel couldn’t stop shivering was the memory of that cold. He clutched at it now, wrapping it around his shuddering shoulders and curling his knees up to his chest.

He was back in his bedroom now, sitting on the bed against the headboard. The lights were off, though Gadreel had repaired the damage he’d accidentally inflicted on the rest of the bunker during his fugue.

No one touched him, not after Raphael had tried to and Gabriel had struck out instinctively, his Grace also striking out reflexively and scalding Raphael’s hand before knocking her into the wall. He’d also attacked Steve and Jarvis, even though both had his sigils inscribed on their ribs.

But everything was raw.

Needless to say, no one tried to approach after that except for Gadreel. His Grace was the one familiar thing in the vicinity, Gabriel’s own Grace recognizing it as the warmth that had pulled him away from the burning cold and offered him safety.

He drew himself into a tighter ball at the memory, unable to stop himself from instinctively looking for a threat that wasn’t there. It wasn’t until Gadreel entered the room that he relaxed slightly, his Grace cautiously stretching out to meet Gadreel’s and sinking into the unselfconscious love and warmth that the other responded with.

“Are you feeling better?” Gadreel asked him quietly, only vocalizing the question for those waiting anxiously just outside the room.

Gabriel hitched out a pained breath, his throat twitching for a brief second. His Grace flared in agony, and he tucked his chin in, managing a small nod.

Gadreel’s face twisted. “I can try to heal you,” he said, eyes flickering to Gabriel’s throat. “I…don’t know what Lucifer did, but…I can try.”

His physical vocal chords were fine. Gabriel should be able to speak – he should – but whenever he tried, his throat locked up tight with the painful memory of Lucifer muffling his screams for the longest time before finally destroying his voice and taking it away altogether. And it still hurt, an agony that pulsed behind his throat.

Gabriel’s Grace should be healing, but it was too injured to do much more than destroy and protect himself. Licking his dry lips, Gabriel nodded, forcing himself to relax when Gadreel approached him, hitching a knee on the mattress to get closer to him.


It took Gabriel several minutes to uncoil his tense body, sliding down until he lay prone on the mattress, breath coming fast as he reminded himself that he was safe here. Nothing was going to hurt him now. Gadreel was helping him—

A hesitant touch of Grace to his own had him startling badly, and something exploded outside the room. There was a faint yell that sounded more surprised than angry, but Gabriel was more focused on Gadreel’s soothing voice.
“Calm, brother.” Gadreel kept his hands in plain view until he put them on Gabriel’s throat, his fingers resting lightly against the skin.

Gadreel’s eyes met Gabriel’s, no pity in them. “Ready?”

Gabriel pulled in a shuddering breath, feeling his throat work under Gadreel’s careful fingers. The wound Lucifer had inflicted pulsed painfully, and he swallowed, nodding before he could overthink it.

Blazoning warmth surged through him and into his wound, curling into the spaces Lucifer had torn out, attempting to soothe but doing nothing more than aggravating the pain.

Someone was screaming.

It took Gabriel a disoriented minute to realize that he was the one screaming, and that Gadreel was carefully rebuilding what Lucifer had utterly destroyed, trying to prod Gabriel’s injured Grace into speeding up the process but failing because Gabriel couldn’t heal. Not right now.

It was over in what seemed to be an eternity, but was only minutes in actuality. When Gadreel finally finished, he’d reformed what Lucifer had ripped out, though there was nothing to be done for the scars.

Gabriel jolted into awareness of his body, aware of his hoarse throat and the way his fingers were tangled tightly in the blankets, the faint smell of burning cloth and singed wood in his nose. There were voices on the periphery, and magic green lights thrown up to illuminate the surroundings.

“A little warning next time, Gadreel?” Dean’s pained voice said.

Carefully moving to a sitting position, Gabriel noted guiltily that Dean and Sam were both bleeding from the ears, and the others were wincing in pain.

“I am sorry.” Gadreel kept his eyes on Gabriel for a moment longer before looking back at the others. His Grace still hovered around Gabriel’s, its warmth soothing compared to the scorching heat of moments earlier. “Is the power…?”

“Knocked out again,” Dean confirmed, wiping away the blood with a towel. He had a flashlight under his arm. “Do you think you could work your mojo on it?” He wiggled his fingers pointedly.

Gabriel reached for the blanket as Gadreel left him to fix what he had again wrecked in his panic and pain. He kept his eyes down, feeling the eyes of Steve, Jarvis, and Loki on him.

There was nothing but worry and fear pouring off them, and he felt so damn guilty for making them feel that way.

Once he was sure that the blanket was wrapped tightly around him, Gabriel gathered his courage and lifted his gaze, managing a weak smile when he met their eyes. He didn’t try to speak, not yet.

“Tony,” Steve choked out, stepping into the room, only to stop short when Gabriel couldn’t stop the flinch, another image superimposing itself over Steve’s frame, one that sent terror streaking through him.

“We will stay here,” Jarvis said softly, one hand on Steve’s elbow. His eyes were pinched in worry, and that was all wrong. Jarvis shouldn’t be worrying about Gabriel; it should be the other way round. “You need not fear us.”
Gabriel’s fingers tightened in the blanket, and he managed to dredge up another weak smile, hoping that they got the message.

“If I ever get my hands on Lucifer,” Loki hissed, fury written over his countenance.

A painless huff that could’ve passed for laughter escaped Gabriel before he could stop it. He sank back against the headboard, some tension leaving his muscles.

Steve smiled tearfully at him, some relief creeping into his face at the realization that Gabriel hadn’t lost his sense of humor.

Gabriel would be dead before he lost that.

With a small crackle of Grace, the power in the bunker hummed back into life, and the lights in the hallway flicked on.

Gadreel came into view a second later, peering in to catch Gabriel’s eyes. “How is it feeling?” he asked.

Gabriel brushed his Grace against Gadreel’s in a silent answer, expressing his gratefulness.

Nodding, Gadreel stood there, stiff. “I am glad. I had my doubts that it would work.”

“Why wouldn’t it have?” Steve asked.

“Wounds inflicted by archangels are potent, particularly more so when inflicted on another’s Grace.” A curdle of anger spiraled through Gadreel’s Grace, unexpected enough that Gabriel flinched violently, a panicked whine escaping him before he could stop it. The lights in the hallway flickered ominously, electricity crackling.

Gadreel pulled his Grace away, shame and horror replacing the anger. “I didn’t think.”

Gabriel shook his head, hating his fearful reactions. He took a breath, then tried speaking. Nothing more than a hoarse cough came out, and he exhaled raggedly, fingers working at his sternum.

“You do not need to speak—” Gadreel started.

Damn it, Gabriel was going to. Lucifer wasn’t going to take this away from him. Pure stubbornness forced out a sound that was nothing but a low laugh, and this was definitely a laugh, not a breathless huff of air or a pained sound.

Gadreel stopped short, surprise flickering through him. Behind him, Jarvis, Steve, and Loki brightened, tentative smiles pulling at their lips.

“I-i-it’s okay,” Gabriel managed, his voice nothing more than a croak but undeniably there. “It’s… not me you’re angry at.” He put on a small smile, finding it easier than the last one. “Just… give me… some time.” He pulled in a ragged breath, his throat aching in vividly remembered pain.

“I can do that,” Gadreel said softly, smiling understandingly. “Would you like me to stay, or should I leave?”

The answer was out before Gabriel could think, even his Grace clinging pathetically to Gadreel’s. “Stay.”

Gadreel’s Grace returned the hold, nothing but sympathy and comfort and love radiating from it, mirroring what Gabriel had offered him what seemed like an eternity ago. “Then I will.”
*coughs* So, uh...who expected that?
Chapter 18

So, funny story, this was originally one chapter with 19, but that was over 10,000 words and I didn't want to post such a ginormous chapter when it covers stuff that isn't part of the same theme, so I sort of halved it. This chapter's shorter than most, but Chapter 19 will be up Monday so it's a shorter wait then waiting from Monday to Friday. 19 is also longer at about 5,600 words.

That means the story's chapter count has been upped to 24 (possibly 25, actually, but I still have to add on to the second-to-last chapter).

But I suppose you're more interested in what's going on now. Happy reading!

Gadreel’s approaching Grace pulled Gabriel out of his healing trance; he came to full alertness in time to feel the bed sink down next to him under Gadreel’s weight. Seconds later, Gadreel’s shoulder pressed against his, a reassuring warmth that pushed through the cold that Gabriel could still feel.

“How are you feeling?” Gadreel asked some minutes later.

Taking a slow and careful stock of his Grace and mental faculties, Gabriel considered the question. He wasn’t in that panicked fugue he’d woken up in, unable to tell friend from foe and absolutely blind with pain. He also wasn’t hunky dory and able to join the big boys, though he could still flatten Gadreel if he wanted (which he didn’t).

The cold still nipped at his Grace, the injuries from Lucifer making their mark known, and Gabriel had no doubt it would take a long time for those to heal. He had access to Heaven’s power here, but he was slow to pull on it, his Grace instinctively wary of anything other than something that could hurt him. Rationally he knew Heaven wouldn’t, but instinctively…

Yeah, he wasn’t doing too well.

His throat rippled as he swallowed, and he cringed, almost expecting an onslaught of pain. There was nothing, of course; Gadreel had healed him.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Gadreel admitted shamefully, shifting next to Gabriel to allow him to more easily lean into him. “If I am helping or hurting you…”

Gabriel curled his Grace into Gadreel’s in protestation. “You’re doing fine,” he whispered, unwilling to speak any louder. His throat ached in memory of shattering screams that did nothing but spur Lucifer onward. “Exactly what I need,” he added, pulling the blanket closer around his shoulders.

“You will tell me if I do something wrong?”

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” Gadreel admitted shamefully, shifting next to Gabriel to allow him to more easily lean into him. “If I am helping or hurting you…”

Gabriel curled his Grace into Gadreel’s in protestation. “You’re doing fine,” he whispered, unwilling to speak any louder. His throat ached in memory of shattering screams that did nothing but spur Lucifer onward. “Exactly what I need,” he added, pulling the blanket closer around his shoulders.

“You will tell me if I do something wrong?”

“I think you’ll know it before I do, buddy.” A shiver wracked his frame, a pained wheeze escaping him as his Grace throbbed. His eyes clenched shut as he grit his teeth, riding out the wave of pain that washed through him. Gadreel’s Grace wrapped around him, offering him something to turn into and draw warmth from, though it wasn’t enough to chase away the ice.
“You’re cold.” Gadreel’s voice held no judgment, just simple fact.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Huddling down in his blanket did nothing, but a surge of warmth from Gadreel was enough to melt a little bit of the ice.

“I could take you to Heaven.” The words where you could heal remained unspoken but clearly understood.

Gabriel’s Grace twisted in reflexive fear; the table next to him cracking into two. “Not…a good idea.”

Gadreel said nothing, but his shoulder pressed more firmly into Gabriel’s, and he shifted more, allowing Gabriel to curl into his chest, his arm going around Gabriel to pull him in tightly.

What a sorry pair they made. Gabriel pushed his nose into the warmth of the blanket, curling his knees in tighter to his chest.

When a soft knock sounded on the door, Gabriel didn’t startle too badly, Gadreel’s warmth enough to stave off the fear. So when Jarvis and Steve brought their heads into view, he was actually able to offer them a weak smile with absolutely no pain.

Steve’s answering smile was incandescent in comparison. “You feeling better?”

“Peachy.” Gabriel’s smile wavered when he saw how hesitant Jarvis looked. “You okay there, J?”

Jarvis fidgeted, something his youngest never did. “I am worried,” he said eventually, shoulders inching up to his ears. “About you.”

Gabriel’s fingers tightened in the blanket, guilt and sadness worming their way through his Grace. That was his job, not Jarvis’s. “Don’t…” His voice locked up, and he inhaled in frustration, ducking his chin.

“Do you remember what I told you at the start?” Jarvis asked quietly, his fingers interlaced in front of him. “Before you gave me physical form?”

“I failed to protect you, sir. I am aware that as an archangel, you have no need of such protection anymore, but that has always been my primary function above all else. That I failed to do so greatly distresses me.”

Not willing to risk his voice giving out on him, Gabriel settled for a nod.

Jarvis’s mouth twisted unhappily, distress evident in his eyes. “I was unable to help you now. Even now, all I can do is wait for you to heal. There is nothing more I would rather do than help you, but in this, I am still powerless.” His hands curled into fists. “I am as helpless as I was when you went to face the Leviathan on your own.”

Gabriel tried to protest, tried to say something, but nothing escaped other than a strangled cough, his voice refusing to cooperate. Cringing, he hunched over, pressing his hand to his throat, pulling in a ragged gasp and telling himself that there was no pain.

Gadreel’s palm pressed comfortingly between his shoulder blades, warmth radiating from his hand that circulated through Gabriel’s body and relaxed his muscles.

Impatient, Gabriel snapped up a phone, its appearance accompanied by a rather violent backwash of Grace that burnt the wooden posts of the bed. He typed out what he’d wanted to say as quickly as he
Do you remember what I told you then? It’s not your responsibility to protect me, and I know you don’t agree with that, but it’s true. It’s my job to protect you, and I don’t regret anything I’ve done when it comes to that. I’d sacrifice myself a thousand times over if it means keeping you safe. So stay safe, and you’ll be giving me peace of mind.

Gabriel let his lips curl into a small smile, still typing on the phone. I’ll heal eventually; it’s just going to take some time. And you’re helping already, just being around.

Jarvis frowned. “It isn’t enough,” he admitted reluctantly, clearly having followed the words as fast as Gabriel put them down.

Shrugging, Gabriel wrote one last line and threw the phone at Jarvis, letting him catch it. Maybe not, but it’s what I need.

Steve read what he’d written over Jarvis’s shoulder. “He’s right, you know,” he said when he was done, looking up at Gabriel. “I know there’s not much we can do to help, but we’d feel a lot better if we could do something.”

Raising his eyebrows, Gabriel tucked himself back in under his blankets.

A small, fond grin stole across Steve’s face. “Yeah, I know. Is there something we can get you, though? Like, uh…soup?” His eyes skimmed up Gabriel’s bundled form.

Probably not the best idea, considering how likely it was that Gabriel would incinerate anything he got in touch with. He wrote it into the phone with a thought, letting it buzz in Jarvis’s hand to alert them.

But then Steve’s rather dejected look had Gabriel guiltily adding something else, careful not to fry the phone’s electronics. You can stay, if you want. Just be careful not to touch me. There’s a high likelihood of me smiting things at the moment.

Both their souls brightened in eagerness and happiness, and Gabriel found himself smiling despite himself, letting their giddiness infect him. He curled in tighter as they approached and carefully sat on the bed, avoiding the portions where Gabriel had melted through the blankets and mattress when Gadreel had healed him.

It was a few minutes after Steve settled himself on the foot of the bed before he hesitantly asked, his voice quiet, “Do you regret it?”

This answer was easy enough. Shaking his head once, Gabriel gave him a soft grin, the movement feeling strange on his face.

Steve smiled back, eyes bright. “Yeah, see… You were wrong before. You’re no coward, Tony.”

Gabriel could remember saying that somewhat distantly, at a point beyond the memories of cold and ice and pain, but it was hazy thanks to its proximity to the more recent memories of agony. He didn’t try pushing for more, not trusting his control.

Steve’s smile wavered at the lack of response. “Tony?”

Gabriel was spared from answering as he felt several Grace-signatures land outside the bunker, and he shrank reflexively into Gadreel before consciously registering that none of them were Lucifer or Michael. Only one was familiar, but he had trouble grasping hold of the name, the memory lingering
just on the edges of that icy pain.

It was Gadreel who named it. “Naomi.”

Steve and Jarvis jolted into alertness.

“She’s here?” Steve sounded alarmed.

“Yes, along with several others.” Gadreel shot Gabriel a concerned look. “I should see what they need.”

Swallowing, Gabriel nodded, pulling away from Gadreel, waving him off.

He didn’t go, hesitating. “You will be fine?”

Quirking his lips into a small smile, Gabriel nodded. “Contractions, Gadreel,” he said softly, voice slightly raspy. “I’ll be…fine.”

Frowning, Gadreel finally detached himself entirely from Gabriel, leaving him cold without the warmth of his Grace. “I will be back,” he promised, shooting Steve and Jarvis looks. “You should leave.”

“I’ve got…enough control for this,” Gabriel disagreed. “Go.”

Gadreel did, leaving Gabriel alone in the semi-dark room with Steve and Jarvis.

Breath hissing out softly through his teeth, Gabriel closed his eyes, turning some of his focus to the angels just outside. He had no doubt they knew he was here; he hadn’t exactly been quiet with broadcasting his distress through the Host.

The question was what they wanted.

It was probably the Cage. And…he needed to be there.

But he couldn’t do it as he was right now, not broken and scarred and trembling, barely able to be around other people without striking out.

But he wasn’t entirely Grace. And Lucifer hadn’t dug out everything.

Inhaling shakily, Gabriel turned his focus inward, gently rooting through his broken, shattered Grace and slowly pulling out something that had remained wholly intact, sheltered by his Grace as it had been: his human soul. He let it swirl through his Grace, filling in the cracks and scars briefly before he pulled his Grace back, compacting it into a tighter ball and letting it sink down inside his soul.

Tony opened his eyes, looking down at his hands, which weren’t trembling anymore. He flexed his fingers, taking in another breath that wasn’t as marked with pain as the last one had been. His Grace was still pulsing painfully inside him, but it was somewhat distant now, his human soul serving as a buffer.

He could do this.

Gadreel avoided passing through the library to meet Naomi, instead flying there directly, appearing before Naomi and her companions. He failed to recognize them, having been too long out of touch with Heaven to know anyone other than the archangels and the two who had been in prison with him. The two unfamiliar angels were in a male and female vessel respectively, their clothes similar to
“Naomi.” Gadreel kept his voice even and his stance nonthreatening. “What do you want?”

“Just to talk, Gadreel.” Naomi’s voice was just as even as Gadreel’s. “No one’s taking you back if you don’t want it.”

The words were out before Gadreel could stop them. “I don’t.”

“Then you’ll stay,” Naomi answered easily, ignoring the uneasy shifting of the angels behind her. “But I do want to talk.”

“Then talk.”

“How is Gabriel doing?” Naomi asked.

“Better. But that is not why you are here.”

“No, it isn’t.” Naomi straightened, her hands remaining empty by her sides. “What were you thinking, Gadreel?”

Gadreel frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb, Gadreel.” Naomi’s voice was sharp. “Gabriel – retrieving him from the Cage. What were you thinking?”

Gadreel’s frown deepened, his body shifting. “I was doing the right thing, Naomi. Would you have left him in there, at the mercy of Lucifer?”

“Rather than risk freeing him? Yes!” Naomi snapped. “Now you’ve gone and done it, Gadreel. The Cage is broken. You felt them leave. We all did.”

“Then where are they now?” Gadreel asked, stopping her short. “I have not felt them since, and I doubt you have either. Michael has lost his way, sister.”

“Don’t speak of him that way,” one angel behind Naomi snarled.

Naomi’s hand went up, fingers spread. “Quiet, Jehoel.” Her focus returned Gadreel. “There’s been no sign of either of them since the Cage shattered,” she admitted, “but Lucifer won’t rest long. And he will unleash his vengeance on us.”

Gadreel’s lips thinned, remembering all too clearly the vengeance Lucifer had unleashed on Gabriel for ten agonizing years. “And you are telling me this why?”

“So that you may know what you wrought by freeing Gabriel,” Naomi said harshly. “You claim you were doing the ‘right thing,’ but all you have done is unleash the end on us, Gadreel. There is no coming back from this.”

Gadreel took a step back, wings shifting around him. “You said you would not take me back,” he said uncertainly.

“I won’t.” Naomi’s lips were a thin line. “There’s no safe place for you now at any rate, not with Lucifer free.”

“I don’t regret it,” Gadreel said firmly, his thoughts turning to his injured brother in the bunker. “It was the right thing to take him out. Gabriel had done nothing to deserve such imprisonment.”
Naomi’s Grace flared in anger. “He knew the risk! He made the sacrifice! Who are you to decide to take him out and damn us all?”

“Aw, Naomi, my ears are burning,” an easy voice drawled from behind Gadreel. He whirled, surprised to see Gabriel standing there, a small smile on his face as he looked past Gadreel at Naomi.

Naomi was just as surprised. “Gabriel. You…look different.”

He did, actually. Gadreel squinted, trying to determine just what it was. It took a moment, and then he realized incredulously that what he was seeing was a human soul mixed in with angelic Grace.

Gabriel’s smile sharpened, and he moved forward, his bearing entirely casual. “Spending time in the Cage with dear old Lucy will do that to you,” he said softly, eyes far too sharp.

There was more movement from the doors, and Gadreel saw the others exit, rushing to a stop right behind him.

Naomi didn’t seem to believe Gabriel. “You’re looking well,” she said instead.

“Mm…I doubt that.” Gabriel slipped his hands into his pockets, shoulders rolling. “But thanks for the compliment. So let’s get on with the point of this little meeting, since I doubt it’s just a little get-together.”

“How did you find us?” Dean blurted out, bearing tense.

“Gadreel didn’t exactly hide his tracks,” Naomi answered, eyes flicking to Dean before returning to Gabriel. “And Gabriel was broadcasting rather loudly.”

“Apologies,” Gabriel said casually. “But that’s not why you’re here.”

“The Cage, Gabriel,” Naomi said bluntly, folding her arms across her chest. “It’s broken.”

An almost unnoticeable tremble ran through Gabriel’s Grace, but there was no outward reaction. “I noticed.” The words were flat.

Gadreel came up to Gabriel’s shoulder, letting their Graces intermingle with the close contact, hoping it would reassure his brother. “She is concerned about Lucifer.”

“Yeah?” Gabriel’s voice was deceptively soft. “You should be.”

There was something else to how Gabriel was acting, just a bit brasher and more human than usual… It was still Gabriel, but with a distinct undercurrent of something else to it.

“The Cage is broken?” Raphael asked sharply, stepping up to Gabriel’s other side but keeping a safe distance between them.

“Yes. Michael and Lucifer are both free.” Naomi looked curiously at Raphael. “Didn’t you hear it?”

“I was rather more concerned with Gabriel,” Raphael said. “If this happened last night, I assumed that any shouting in the Host was due to Gabriel waking, and not the Cage breaking. Has there been any sign of Michael?”

“None,” Naomi answered, the word clipped. “And nothing from Lucifer either.”

“Big surprise from Mike there.” Gabriel scoffed, pain streaking through his Grace.
“You would doubt Michael?” Jehoel asked incredulously, earning himself a stern warning from his other companion.

“Hey, brother, when you get to be an archangel, come talk to me,” Gabriel said acerbically. “Otherwise, shut the hell up.” Jehoel’s mouth snapped shut with the force of the power behind Gabriel’s words. The cement around Gabriel’s feet was smoking slightly, but there was no other sign of his loss of control.

Gabriel took a slow breath through his nose, his eyes glowing briefly as he visibly calmed himself. “What do you need, Naomi?” he asked quietly, only the slightest crack on Naomi’s name showing how close he was to losing it.

“If Michael appears, will you be there?”

Gabriel let out a low laugh. “If Michael shows his face, I’d be surprised. But, yeah, I’ll be there. I’ve got a bone to pick with him.” A muscle jumped in his jaw.

Naomi nodded crisply. “That’s all I wanted.”

“Aside from browbeating Gadreel?” The words were idle, but there was a cold anger behind them that had Naomi visibly hesitating.

“I wanted him to know the repercussions of his actions,” she said eventually.

“I knew them,” Gadreel said, getting her attention. “I did not undertake my mission without knowing the risks. I deemed them acceptable.”

Naomi’s laugh was derisive. “Of course you did.”

Gabriel’s Grace was nothing but icy anger next to Gadreel. “Is that supposed to mean something, Naomi?”

“Calm, Gabriel.” Gadreel rested a hand on his brother’s shoulder, not wanting him to pursue this any further. He understood Naomi’s anger.

Gabriel was stiff under his hand, but he relented. “If you want.”

“I do.” Gadreel tried smiling at him, unsure of how it looked.

It did seem to do something because Gabriel snorted, humor streaking through him. “Oh hell, you’re as bad as J was.”

Gadreel couldn’t stop his head tilting, not understanding what Gabriel meant.

“We’ll take our leave then,” Naomi said, arms dropping to her sides.


Fear flickered across Naomi’s face, and it took a split-second for Gadreel to understand why. The asphalt at Gabriel’s feet was splintering and cracking with the force of his rising wrath.

“If you know what’s good for you,” Gabriel started in a low tone, “you’re going to leave right now.”

But Jehoel seemed to be both blind and deaf, heedless of the dangerous wrath of the being he was incurring. “It’s nothing Father created,” he continued.
Jehoel disappeared, and Gadreel barely had time to turn to see Jehoel reaching out to a wide-eyed Jarvis when Gabriel was there as well, his hand clamping down on Jehoel’s wrist and wrenching it back behind Jehoel’s back, the sound of bones shattering under his grip sounding through the air. He brought his knee up into Jehoel’s stomach, then pushed him to the asphalt, wrenching his head back by the hair.

“He’s mine,” Gabriel said in that terrifyingly soft tone, his eyes glowing with the uncontrolled power of his Grace. Jehoel’s skin was bubbling under Gabriel’s hand, and his hair smoking. The concrete was warping under Gabriel’s feet. “And if you or anyone else tries to harm him, you’re going to be answering to me. Is that clear?”

Jehoel’s eyes were wide, his Grace terrified. “Y-yes, Gabriel,” he gasped.

A cold smile flashed across Gabriel’s face, and he let go of Jehoel’s hair, touching a thumb to the skin just below his eye. His face was impassive as Jehoel screamed, his eyes and mouth flaring white.

“Close your eyes!” Castiel shouted, pushing at Dean.

Jehoel’s true form coalesced into a large ball in front of Gabriel’s face, and Gabriel gave it a blank-faced stare before letting the vessel go and cupping Jehoel in his hands, his own Grace causing Jehoel’s to writhe in pain.

“Gabriel,” Gadreel said sharply, taking a step forward.

Gabriel blinked, the light in his eyes wavering. He blinked again, and it went out. The unbearable weight and pressure of his Grace lessened, and he let Jehoel go, the other’s true form hovering there uncertainly for several seconds before Gabriel’s lips curled and he bit out a harsh “Go,” in his true voice, the concrete rupturing around his feet with the sound.

Jehoel fled, the light of his true form winking out.

Gabriel turned to Naomi, light clinging to his frame. “If you bring someone like that down here again, I won’t hesitate next time. Is that clear, Naomi?”

Naomi waved the other angel off, face pale. “Yes, Gabriel.” She left immediately after, taking the vessel of Jehoel with her.

“What the hell was that, Gabriel?” Dean shouted, dropping his hands from his ears. “You could’ve killed us!”

Gabriel snorted. “Not likely.”

“You would have taken that chance?” Castiel asked, eyebrows lifting.

“I had it under control,” Gabriel said waspishly, by which meaning he had not. Gadreel could clearly see the way his Grace roiled around him, barely under his control.

“I doubt that,” Raphael said coolly, getting Gabriel’s attention. “What were you thinking?”

Gabriel’s eyes dropped, his shoulders tightening as he took a deep breath. “The last person who tried to harm one of my kids,” he started quietly, “I smote them out of existence. And since you allowed Jarvis here, knowing full well what our family’s like, you better believe I’m going to keep him safe.”

“How could I have known he was yours?” Raphael threw her hands up. “He looks and acts like a
human, albeit one with rather stunted social skills. If I had known, I would’ve insisted he stay back in his own universe, but I didn’t. You never told me you Created, Gabriel!”

“I can take care of myself,” Jarvis argued, looking sharply at Gabriel.

“Not against one of my siblings you can’t, J.” Gabriel’s smile was painful. “And Dad help me, but I won’t let anything happen to you.”

“Then perhaps next time, you could do so in a way that does not put us at risk of imminent death?” Jarvis suggested.

The human soul Gadreel had noticed earlier swirled up into Gabriel’s Grace. “Sure thing, J.”

“Is no one going to bring up the fact that the Cage is broken?” Sam asked loudly, a faint tinge of hysteria coloring his words. “That Lucifer is out, and – I don’t know – planning the apocalypse?”

“You should’ve left me in the Cage,” Gabriel said quietly, his wings drawn close to his form.

“If you think we would have left you in there,” Loki started angrily, “then you are clearly deluding yourself.”

“You should have left me in there,” Gabriel repeated, ignoring Loki and looking up at Gadreel. “Why the hell didn’t you?”

Gadreel met his eyes unhesitatingly. “Because it was the right thing to do.”

“The right thing was leaving me in there and sparing us all the fucking apocalypse!” Gabriel’s voice cracked on the last word, and a tree splintered into pieces. His hand flew up to his throat, and he squeezed his eyes shut, breathing in raggedly.

“At first I would have left you in there,” Gadreel said, getting Gabriel’s attention. “The others were right in saying that you would have wanted Lucifer locked away, and there was too great a risk in breaking the Cage if someone were to pull you out. Loki tried to threaten me”—he heard a disgruntled huff from Loki—“but that was not what made me change my mind.”

Gabriel raised an eyebrow, clearly telling him to go on.

“First I would have left you in there,” Gadreel continued steadily, his eyes holding onto Gabriel’s. “It was the safety and love you offered me, something no other had given me since the Fall. And I swear on our Father, I could not leave you to suffer in that Cage without at least trying. Because I owed you that much. For the mistakes I made, for the help you gave me, I owed you to at least try. And when I saw what was happening…” He exhaled roughly, shaking his head and gesturing helplessly with his arms. “There was no way in Heaven, Hell, or Earth that I could leave you in there, Gabriel.

“So scream at me all you want. Hurt me. But I don’t regret pulling you out, even if the Cage is now broken. You’re safe, and you’re back where you belong,” Gadreel laughed once. “And I cannot bring myself to regret that.” He spread his arms out. “If you still want to scream at me…”

Gabriel’s laugh was soundless, his shoulders shaking. It took only a moment before he was shuddering, silent tears streaming down his face, arms wrapped around himself protectively. He shook his head sharply when Gadreel made to move towards him, clearly not trusting himself.

“I died trying to stop Lucifer last time,” Gabriel rasped out, the sound physically painful to listen to. “And I know it wasn’t easy locking him in the Cage a second time, even with the rings. Now he’s out – he’s out – and there’s no way to lock him up again. And I – I can’t kill him”—his voice broke
—“and Michael’s not going to do anything, bastard he is—” His voice cracked, giving out entirely.

This time Gadreel pushed forward, wrapping his Grace and arms around Gabriel, resisting his efforts at pushing him away. Gabriel wasn’t going to hurt him; he knew that now, and he trusted him even if Gabriel didn’t.

“So you’re giving up?” Dean sounded vaguely incredulous, and Gadreel looked at him to find him staring at Gabriel in blatant shock. “Just like that?”

Gabriel didn’t speak, his breaths hitching. His wings fluttered against Gadreel’s, tattered and torn.

“Well, fuck that,” Dean continued angrily, hands balling into fists. “I’m not giving up. We’re gonna kick Lucifer’s ass from here to kingdom come one way or another. Who cares if we haven’t got a Cage to throw him into?”

“I do,” Sam muttered.

Dean gave his brother a glare. “We’re gonna take care of him one way or another,” he insisted. “This time we’ve got Heaven on our side.”

“I hate to throw rain on your party,” Raphael said dryly, “but Heaven’s no match for Lucifer. Not after recent events. He’ll tear through them all like confetti.”

“So our hope’s on Michael,” Dean said.

Gabriel’s derisive scoff said exactly what he thought of that.

“Michael will not help,” Gadreel said, vocalizing what Gabriel couldn’t. “Not after what I saw in the Cage. I don’t know what happened, but there will be no help from him.”

“Then I don’t know!” Dean threw his hands up, clearly frustrated. “But we’re not going to let this stop us, you hear me, Gabriel? So stop crying; it’s seriously freaking me out.”

“That’s very sensitive of you, Dean,” Castiel said wryly.

“Shut up, Cas.”

Gabriel’s Grace pushed at Gadreel what was clearly amusement and no small amount of gratefulness.

“He says that is very thoughtful of you,” Gadreel said, only to get a displeased shove from Gabriel a moment later. “My apologies. Was that not what you intended to say?”

Gabriel shot him a glare that said he knew full well what Gadreel was trying to pull and it wasn’t working. But the amused twitching at his mouth belied his glare, and Gadreel found himself grinning back, naturally and without thought.

“Yeah,” Gabriel whispered, eyes on Gadreel’s face for a moment longer before sweeping back to the others. “I get you, Dean.” His smile was weak but undeniably there, and he squared his shoulders. “So how do we want to do this?”

Chapter End Notes
So, Gabriel/Tony's a hot mess at the moment. A *smoking* mess to be more exact (I'll stop now, I'm sorry). FYI, Jehoel isn't an angel on SPN to my knowledge. I just snagged a random name off an angel list and used it.

I hope you guys enjoyed this one. Next chapter we're dealing with something big.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Wait, did the last one seem sort of fluffy to you? How about this one?

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

What they ended up doing was a lot of grumbling and sorting through dusty, old books. Tony didn’t quite trust himself not to accidentally fry a book if he was too badly startled or lost his fragile temper, so Steve ended up turning the pages for him while he read.

They had five people who could read every single language in existence, with a sixth capable of reading every language ever catalogued in a database. That meant they could go through all the books Dean and Sam hadn’t been able to read before without the help of a bad translator.

Still, Tony doubted they’d find anything to help. The Men of Letters had known of the existence of angels – that much was evident from their blurbs on the Knights of Hell and the archangels destroying them – but their general knowledge on angels was sorely lacking. They had no comprehensive knowledge on wards or ways to trap or contain an angel, though they had hundreds of such ways for demons, including the ability to cure them. Which was what had almost killed Sam.

“Maybe there’ll be an all-powerful weapon here like Death’s scythe,” Dean muttered from where he was going through the boxes. His brother looked to be snoozing over where he was “reading” his own book, but Tony wasn’t going to be pointing that out.

“Highly doubtful,” Raphael answered evenly, not looking up from her book. “That is one of a kind.”

“A man can hope,” Dean griped, sneezing as a blanket coughed up dust on him.

Tony gestured for Steve to turn the page, mind already half on the next book he’d have to go through. There was nothing in this book it seemed, though it was an absolutely fascinating read on the mating habits of vampire penguins. Maybe. Or not at all. (He’d stopped paying attention on the fifth page.)

Steve seemed to understand, as he shut the book and put it in the very large discarded pile, reaching for the next one. “Maybe this one,” he said hopefully.

Tony dredged up a smile, taking in the title and mentally groaning when he saw it was on the supernatural rituals of the Mayan priests. He’d been over that after the first year of those gods crashing the pagan parties. They’d been way too bloodthirsty.

His smile slipped off his face as he remembered what had happened earlier outside. He’d lost his temper and almost killed another angel for it. He shouldn’t have done that; his brother’s curiosity was understandable considering Jarvis’s unusual soul, and it wasn’t likely that he would have tried something anyway.

Yet Gabriel had lost it, and he’d almost injured the others in his rage. If it hadn’t been for Gadreel…

Lips thinning, Tony pulled himself out of those thoughts and focused on the words of the index. There was absolutely nothing there.
Shaking his head, Tony gestured for Steve to close the book, rubbing a tired hand over his face and wishing for rest.

Sitting next to him, Gadreel rubbed his wings comfortingly over Tony’s, ignoring the reflexive flinch Tony gave at the unexpected contact. His wings soothed the holes and bleeding scars in Tony’s, dulling some of the pain so some of the tension in his shoulders dissipated.

“You should rest,” Gadreel told him quietly, not looking up from his own book. Tony shook his head curtly, unable to voice the objection that he had to try and help, no matter how futile it may be.

“Rest, brother.” Gadreel put a hand over the page Tony was reading, looking up at Tony with worried eyes. “We can handle this for now. You need to regain your strength.”

It was going to take a lot more than one night for Tony to get his strength back.

Then Steve joined in. “He’s right, Tony. We’ll deal with this. You go and lie down.”

Tony reached out for a pen, scrawling down on a blank sheet of paper. You know I don’t sleep, right?

Steve shrugged shamelessly. “Then whatever you need to rest. But not this,” he added, pulling the book away. “You’re not even reading anyway.”

Tony made an indignant huffing sound that was all air, only getting a grin from Steve for his trouble.

“Go, Gabriel,” Castiel said from the other side of the table, surrounded on both sides by books. “We have enough eyes here.”

“Speak for yourself,” Kevin grumbled, bent over the angel tablet that would hopefully give them something. It was a better shot than anything else they had here.

“If you want,” Jarvis said hesitantly, “I could join you. I can access the databases anywhere.”

Tony read the hidden question in Jarvis’s words, the plea and the need to help. Lips curling into a gentle smile, he nodded, standing in one smooth motion. He let his wings slide against Gadreel’s as he left, Jarvis behind him.

They had a lot of work to do, and Tony would only drag them down if he was in this shape.

“You look like you’ve been through the wringer,” Dean said.

They were inside the library, and Sam was looking through a book with words that changed every time he looked down again. Everyone else had left, and Sam wondered only distantly where they’d gone. They still had a lot of work to do.

Sam looked up at Dean, finding him to be the only solid thing in the room. “You’d know why.”

“It’s been a ride, hasn’t it?”

“That’s one way to put it, Dean.” Sam returned to his book, only to frown upon seeing that there was a picture that hadn’t been there before. He focused on the caption, finding it difficult to absorb the words.

“Don’t you get tired?” Dean asked suddenly.
Sam ran a hand down the page, looking sideways at Dean. “All the time.”

“You’ve made a lot of mistakes,” Dean said, looking at him seriously.

“I think you’ve made that pretty clear,” Sam said, irritated. “Not like you’re Mister Perfect over there.”

Dean grinned wryly, looking down at his clasped hands. “Right.” The word was quiet.

Sam reached for a different book, not at all surprised when the first one disappeared.

“Would you like it to stop?” Dean asked.

Couldn’t Dean help him out? “What?” Sam barely kept the annoyance out of his voice.

“All the pain. The confusion. The mistakes,” Dean clarified. “Would you like it to stop?”

“You know life isn’t that easy, Dean. It doesn’t stop just because we want it.”

“No.” Dean sounded amused, chuckling softly. “No, it doesn’t.” He gazed very seriously at Sam. “I could help.”

Sam couldn’t help a short laugh. “Dean, I’m aware of your version of helping. Or have you forgotten what happened the last time?” It had been an utter violation. He’d ignored everything Sam had said and gone ahead and done what he’d thought was the right thing to do.

“No,” Dean answered. “But I could. I could make it stop, Sam. I could take it for you. And you wouldn’t have to worry. Not anymore. Would you like that?”

There was an edge to Dean’s voice – an edge that Sam was all too familiar with. He looked up from the uncooperative book, gaze snapping up to Dean’s. Those were Dean’s green eyes…but not really.

“You’re not Dean,” Sam said, surprised by how even his voice was even with the terror surging through him.

He’s back. Oh God, he’s back.

Dean smiled gently at him, resting a friendly hand on Sam’s shoulder. “It’ll be all right, Sammy.”

Sam’s breath caught as two fingers touched his forehead and—

He woke up with a short gasp, terror pounding through him, although he didn’t know why. And he had the dreadful feeling that it had to do with the dream he’d just had. The dream he couldn’t remember.

“Sam?” Dean’s voice startled him, sending a streak of panic through him. “You okay?”

Sam found himself slumped over a book he’d apparently fallen asleep on, blinking down at the yellowing pages. He should be grateful that he hadn’t drooled on it. “Y-yeah.” He pulled back, rubbing his face with trembling hands, unable to figure out just why he was so shaky. There was a pit of dread in his stomach, and absolutely no reason for it that he could determine. “I’m fine.”

Dean made a skeptical sound, eyes narrowing. “You sure?”

“Yes.” Sam couldn’t stop the irritation from creeping into his voice. “I just…fell asleep.”

“Mm-hmm.” Dean leaned his weight on the table, his hands on the wooden surface, his eyes scrutinizing Sam worriedly. “Dream anything?”
Nothing he could remember. “No.”

“You should be careful,” Gadreel said noncommittally. “There are ways for angels to enter dreams.”

“Think I don’t know that?” Sam ran a hand through his hair, rubbing his face. “There’s nothing.”

“You’re sure,” Dean said skeptically.

“Yes, Dean.” Sam tapped his fingers impatiently against the book. “I’m sure.”

“If you’re that exhausted,” Steve said slowly, “maybe you should go to bed.” Gabriel wasn’t sitting next to him anymore.

“I’m not.” Sam discreetly checked a watch, finding it to be only early evening. “I’m good for a few more hours yet. Where’s Gabriel?”

“He’s resting,” Steve said, eyes flitting to the empty seat between him and Gadreel. “There wasn’t anything in these books anyway.” He gestured at the stack to the side of him.

“Has there been anything?” Sam asked, though he wasn’t really holding out hope for it. Judging from Raphael’s displeased expression and the way Castiel’s flipping through the pages was more bored than interested, the others seemed to share the same opinion.

“Nothing,” Castiel said, nose wrinkling as he evidently came across something he didn’t like. He closed the book, setting it aside. “But it’s early days,” he added, sounding doubtful.

“Why do you not just make another Cage?” Loki asked, playing with a knife.

“The Cage was created by my Father,” Raphael said. “Unless you happen to have Him on your speed dial, we’re on our own.”

“It cannot be that difficult,” Loki protested. “We have one of the finest engineering minds in this place; surely Gabriel could put something together?”

“Maybe he could,” Raphael said noncommittally, “but it’ll take a great deal of experimentation and trial and error. Which is time we don’t have.”

Loki frowned, evidently displeased with the answer.

“This is going to suck one way or another,” Dean said, sighing. He pulled back, brushed a hand over Castiel’s shoulders, and turned back to the boxes he’d been going through. “Maybe we could talk to Crowley,” he started.

The answer came from several different people, and it was an unanimous “No!”

Dean put up his hands. “Okay. No talking to the King of Hell.”

“If you can smite the guy,” Kevin said to Gadreel, “that’d be appreciated.”

“No one’s smiting anyone at the moment,” Dean said, blowing some dust off a glass case. “Specially not our own little demon.”

“Father help us,” Raphael muttered, sinking down in her chair, nose in her book.

Sam couldn’t help but snort, then promptly made himself look as engrossed as possible in his book.
The fear from his forgotten dream was only a wisp of a memory, though Sam couldn’t help but occasionally glance up at Dean for some strange reason.

He was sitting on a park bench in a park that looked vaguely familiar. There were kids playing on the playground. Dean was sitting next to him, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

“Fun place this,” Dean commented, looking over at the playground.

“I kept getting splinters on those wooden ones,” Sam said.

“Oh yeah.” Dean grinned. “I remember that. It’d take a while for me to pick those out. You were such a crybaby back then.”

“Yeah, Dean, I was three.” Sam huffed out a soft laugh, grinning fondly at the memories.

Dean laughed quietly before falling into silence. They stayed like that for a few more minutes, simply watching the children play.

“It can stay like this,” Dean said softly, not looking over at Sam. “It can always be this peaceful.”

“No,” Sam said, a weariness that he felt down to his bones settling in. “It can’t.”

“I can do it,” Dean said. “You can help me. Don’t you deserve it, Sam? To rest?”

Sam glanced down at Dean. “I’ll rest when I’m dead.”

“Yeah, well, you know how that goes.” Dean shot him an amused grin, straightening out to lean back against the bench. He stretched an arm out behind Sam, turning to face him. “But you don’t want that?” He sounded curious.

Sam gave him a tired smile. “You know I’m tired.”

“Then let me help,” Dean said earnestly. “Let me help you, Sam. That’s what I’m here for.”

“You can’t solve everything, Dean.”

“I’m your family, Sam. I’m always going to try to fix things for you. I just want to help.”

“That’s where things go wrong,” Sam pointed out, looking back at the playground, which was empty now except for two children. One was small, about three years of age. The other was around seven. The older child was leading the smaller onto the monkey bars despite the look on his face clearly saying that he didn’t think it was a good idea.

It wasn’t, as the smaller boy ended up falling right into the other’s arms and instantly starting to cry. The older one began fussing over him, inspecting his hands and face for any injuries.

“That’s what family is,” Dean said quietly, also watching the scene. “They help. Sam…will you let me in?”

Sam breathed for a few minutes, eyes closing as the wind rustled through the leaves of the trees behind them. His hair tickled his nose. “Just…to rest?”

“To rest,” Dean confirmed quietly, his body warm besides Sam.

“For a little?”
“For as long as you need. Let me in, Sam.”

There should be something alarming about those words, but this was Dean, and Dean had only ever wanted to help. Even if that help led to an angel possessing Sam without his informed consent. There were a lot of things Dean did wrong, and Sam would be one of the first to point them out to his brother, but Dean had always tried to do the right thing, even if that ended up being the more difficult thing.

No matter what happened, Sam would always trust Dean, even if Dean didn’t trust himself.

Sam opened his eyes, looking back at Dean. “Do it.”

“Yes?” Dean’s eyes were sharp.

There was a strange sense of déjà vu as Sam nodded. “Yes.”

Gabriel was jolted out of his trance by the presence of a Grace that sent sheer terror surging through him. Icy cold and pain threatened to envelop his mind, but he tugged himself back into the here and now with sheer willpower, jolting upright from his bed.

He couldn’t afford to sink back into that terrified fugue. Not with this. And why now? Why the hell now?

Gabriel bolted from his room, nearly slamming into the wall, Jarvis on his heels. He pushed off it, running to the source of the Grace.

No, no, no, no, no. Why was this happening?

They didn’t have wards against angels.

And even then it didn’t block angels from entering dreams, as Lucifer so clearly had here.

Oh, Sam…

Gabriel almost collided Dean and Castiel, who were leaving their bedroom. He didn’t give them a second glance, skirting around them to Sam’s door, pushing it open with a force that almost tore it off its hinges.

He reeled back at the power emanating from the room, one hand still on the door. “Cover your eyes!”

Lucifer’s light filled every inch of the bedroom, but it was collapsing inward to a familiar human shape.

Gabriel flicked out his sword, cutting into his arm and painting the familiar banishing symbol on the wall, only this time adding a personal touch to it: Lucifer’s name.

He didn’t finish it, a small part of him telling him to wait even as the rest of him begged to leave.

When the light coalesced into the figure standing in the room, the body of Sam Winchester remained, although there was nothing human about the way the being currently inside was stretching the muscles.

Lucifer gave a stricken Gabriel a lazy smile. “Ah, Gabriel.”
And that was all she wrote. Gabriel slammed his hand down on the middle of the banishing symbol, Lucifer vanishing in a flare of Grace and an enraged cry.

Gabriel felt Raphael leave, but he paid more attention to the shell-shocked hunter standing behind him. “Dean—”

He was slammed into the wall a second later by an enraged Dean, who didn’t seem to care about the sudden heat scorching his hands. “What the hell was that?” he demanded.

Gabriel grit his teeth, desperately trying to rein in his thrashing Grace. “That was Lucifer. Or did you miss what just happened?”

“How—”

“No wards against angels,” Gabriel bit out, his feet hitting the floor as Castiel pulled Dean away. “And Sam obviously said ‘yes.’”

“He wouldn’t,” Dean denied, stricken. “There’s no way—”

“It’s happened,” Gabriel snapped, sealing the wound in his arm with a finger. “We don’t have time for this. We’ve got to ward this place now. That banishing symbol’s good until the morning, but Lucifer will be able to waltz right in here then. And we might not be so lucky to get that painted in time.”

“If we ward against him, will it not affect you?” Jarvis asked, frowning.

“Use his name.” Gabriel shot Gadreel and Castiel looks. “You know what I mean. Show them how it’s done.”

“You are going out to face him?” Gadreel demanded, halting Gabriel in his tracks.

“You’re not,” Gabriel said, looking over his shoulder at him. “Like hell you’re not, Gadreel.”

“Let me help,” Gadreel pled.

“You can help by protecting them,” Gabriel said, eyes going to the others behind Gadreel. “Please, Gadreel.”

Gadreel inhaled anxiously, his wings shifting worriedly. “Stay safe.”

“Will do.”

He was almost at the exit when Steve’s voice stopped him. “Tony! Have you even got a plan?” Gabriel forced a smile as he turned to face him, hoping the utter terror ringing through him wasn’t completely obvious. “I’ve got twelve percent of a plan.”

“That’s not a plan!”

“I’m going to distract him – give you guys more time to finish it up.”

“You’re going to get yourself killed!”

“I don’t plan on it—”

“You left last time, and you didn’t come back. Don’t do it again. Please.”
“Steve…” Gabriel kept his voice soft, ignoring the way the others were rushing around the bunker under Castiel’s and Gadreel’s guidance. “It’ll be all right, I promise. I’m not going out to get myself killed this time, I mean it.”

“And that’s a promise?” Steve kept a careful distance between them, eyes large and desperate.

Tamping down on his terrified Grace, Gabriel reached out to pull Steve into a tight hug. “I mean it this time, Steve. I’ve got a plan. A better one than the last time. You’ll see me again, okay?”

Steve’s arms were tight around Gabriel. “I’m going to hold you to that,” he said hoarsely.

“Do that.” Gabriel gave him one last squeeze before letting go and running to the exit.

He didn’t want to go. He didn’t want to see Lucifer again. He’d hoped he wouldn’t have to – not again. But luck wasn’t on his side, and he couldn’t stop himself from shivering in fear.

His heart pounded against his ribs as he stepped out of the bunker into the cool night. Small shivers ran down his back, and he pressed his lips together as he walked forward.

His eyes dropped to the still form at Lucifer’s feet, and Gabriel bit back curses.

Raphael… He should have known what she would try to do. But it was too late now; the bloody mess on her back was proof enough along with the absence of her soul.

Gabriel met Lucifer’s eyes, fear skittering through him when he saw Lucifer’s Grace behind Sam Winchester’s physical form. “Lucifer. What did you do?” He couldn’t stop the pain from creeping into his voice, though he was proud that there wasn’t a hint of fear.

“Put our sister out of her misery,” Lucifer said. He met Gabriel’s eyes with an easy smile, completely genial and absolutely terrifying for the menace lurking behind it. “You’re looking well, brother.”

Gabriel’s breath hitched despite himself, and he forced his trembling hands to still. “No thanks to you.”

Lucifer stepped over Raphael’s body, head tilting idly when Gabriel froze. “And yet you decided to meet me here.”

“Oh yeah.” Gabriel swallowed, all too aware that the stench and sight of his terror must be radiating from his Grace. “You know how it is. Long lost family member drops in for a visit. I just need to catch up with them.” His smile was forced.

Lucifer’s smile turned into a smirk. “Admirable.”

“Yeah.” Gabriel didn’t move any closer, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. Lucifer was well aware of his terror; there wasn’t much Gabriel could do to hide it at this point.

He just needed to distract Lucifer long enough for them to get the wards up. And to do that he would need to talk.

“So.” Gabriel wet his lips, fingers itching for his sword. But he didn’t draw it. Not yet. “We haven’t really talked.”

Lucifer’s brow scrunched slightly in confusion.

“I mean, you talked at me,” Gabriel hurried to say, terror ringing through him, “but I didn’t really get
the chance to talk back. Not with…” His voice died, the memory of Lucifer tearing out his voice reverberating through him.

“Oh yes…” Lucifer’s smile was bright. “That was rather ingenious of me, wouldn’t you say, Gabriel? I did get rather tired of hearing you scream after the first few years.”

“You were the one doing it,” Gabriel snapped back unthinkingly, only to coil back in horror when Lucifer’s Grace idly brushed against his throat. A strangled gasp left him, and he ducked his head, bringing his arm up defensively.

Lucifer’s smile was all teeth. “Did you have something to say, Gabriel?”

Damn him. But this wasn’t going to stop Gabriel. He could do this. He could.

Pushing down the fear, the pain, the memories of icy cold, agony, screaming, noonehearinghim, Gabriel pulled out a grin that was all teeth, his voice whisper soft as he said, “Oh yeah. Loads. For starters, I’ve got a message.”

Lucifer’s eyes narrowed, and he took a menacing step forward.

Gabriel flinched back before he could stop himself, hands flying up defensively. “Easy now!” He kept the fright out of his voice by sheer willpower, but he couldn’t stop it from cracking. “I think you’ll want to hear this.”

“What makes you think I have any interest in listening to what He has to say?” Lucifer snapped, shoulders heaving.

“Because He’s sorry,” Gabriel said, both hands still up. “He made a mistake.”

Whatever he’d thought, Lucifer clearly hadn’t expected that. “What?”

“Dad made a mistake,” Gabriel repeated, tension vibrating through him. He shifted nervously, taking a small, fortifying breath. “When you rebelled, Lucifer, He made a mistake. And He’s sorry.”

Lucifer’s jaw worked. “That’s all? He’s sorry?” He dropped his chin, eyes fixed on Gabriel as he took two more steps forward, and his Grace roiled menacingly, brushing softly against Gabriel’s.

Gabriel’s voice froze in his throat, refusing to work beyond a strangled whine that he cut off the moment it started. He shifted back, hand at his throat and desperately reminding himself that Gadreel had fixed him.

“If that’s all you have to say,” Lucifer started, his wings flaring threateningly behind him.

“It’s not!” Gabriel shouted, the words cracking halfway through but undeniably there. He pushed all the anger and hurt he could into his Grace, drowning out the fear and panic he felt at being so close to Lucifer again. “Damn it, it’s not,” he repeated, quieter now. He flinched again, helplessly, when Lucifer’s eyes pinned him to the spot, but he stopped himself from taking another step back. He braced his shoulders, swallowing. “That’s not everything,” he continued in a calmer voice. He swallowed again, setting his feet firmly on the ground. Don’t move again. Don’t give any more ground than you already have.

Lucifer stopped moving – thankfully – tilting his chin up in a manner that told Gabriel he had better start talking. But there was a sardonic twist to his lips that said all too clearly what Lucifer thought of Gabriel managing that.
“He says you can go back,” Gabriel said, forcing the words out just to spite Lucifer. “Back to Heaven. It’s open for you.”

“Just me?”

“Everyone who followed you,” Gabriel said. “He’s sorry.”

Lucifer grinned shortly before breaking into dark chuckles. “What is this? A compensation package?”

“An apology.”

“Then why doesn’t He tell me this Himself instead than having you do His dirty work?”

Gabriel offered a broken grin. “He didn’t exactly stick around to let me ask.”

“Naturally.” The word was filled with venom. “Was that it?”

“Just stop, Lucifer,” Gabriel said, rather than blurt out everything their Father had said to Azazel. “Please.”

“Why should I?” Lucifer hissed angrily, nostrils flaring. “Don’t I have a right to be angry? He cast me down, Gabriel. He cast me down for an eternity and then turns around and expects me to forgive Him just like that?”

Gabriel restrained a terrified shiver, feeling his human soul quake where he had it bundled up inside his Grace. “It needs to start someplace. It doesn’t have to be this way, Lucifer. You…you were my big sibling.” He let out a breathless laugh. “You taught me everything I know. You think you were the only one hurt by what you pulled back then? Heaven wasn’t the same after you were gone. Why the hell do you think I left?”

“Because you were bored?” Lucifer grinned, quicksilver-like before it washed off his face, replaced by steely hardness. “I hope Michael hurt. But he didn’t stop, even though I asked him to. I did. But he didn’t want to. Too fixated on his destiny.” He spat the word out like it was poison.

“And what about you?” Gabriel nearly bit his tongue when Lucifer’s eyes snapped to his, sharp and deadly. But he couldn’t stop. “What have you been doing? You’ve been following the same script, Lucifer. Break the seals, leave the Cage, and start the apocalypse. Exactly word-for-word to what was laid down on paper. You can’t derail a prophecy without going off-script. And it only needs one person.”

“It was prophesied that Heaven would win, and that you would have your paradise,” Lucifer said, the words almost sibilant as they rolled off his tongue. “What greater victory would there be but for me to win? There would be no new beginnings; just an end.”

Gabriel worked his jaw. “And you want that? You want an end to everything?”

Lucifer smiled, slow and sweet, eyes crinkling in a way that only Sam could pull off and looked wrong with Lucifer staring out behind that face. “It would be a start,” he said gently. His eyes sharpened. “What’s in it for you, Gabriel? Telling me this, when last time you would rather have run me through with a sword?”

“I’m just the Messenger.”

Lucifer studied him. “You didn’t say anything before.”
“When did you give me a chance? Before or after you destroyed my voice?” Gabriel’s fingers twitched. “I don’t think you deserve it, Lucifer. I don’t. But, hey, Dad’s got something to say, so I’m gonna say it. It’s the least I can do after what you did.”

Lucifer’s eyes narrowed imperceptibly. “You have changed, Gabriel.”

Gabriel let out a noiseless laugh, grin too sharp. “Being human’ll do that to you.” He tilted his head to the side, letting his human soul slide forward. “And I’ve got nothing else to lose.”

Lucifer’s head snapped back, eyes wide in surprise. “What did you do to yourself, Gabriel?”

Offering a casual shrug, Gabriel let everything he was slide into place. “Me? I didn’t do anything. Ask Dad.”

“Of course.” The words were softly spoken. “As always, He favors a select few. Is that all?”

Gabriel shifted back warily, eyes flashing. “For you.”

“Then…” Lucifer’s shoulders shifted, nothing of Sam Winchester in the movement, and there was a sharp, stabbing pain in Gabriel’s chest. “I do believe you’ve filled your purpose, Messenger.”

A broken gasp later and Gabriel fizzled out in a ripple of blue energy. He appeared several feet away from Lucifer, his sword in a trembling hand.

Vividly remembered pain streaked through his Grace as he looked at Lucifer, and he ached.

“I’m not going down that easily this time,” Gabriel bit out, circling around Lucifer.

“You’re quicker this time,” Lucifer commented, not looking at all fazed. He had his own sword out his time, a change from the last time when he’d turned Gabriel’s own sword against him.

Still, despite Gabriel’s blustering, he knew full well he wouldn’t be a match for Lucifer. He wasn’t up to par, not after what had happened. But he was better than last time. And he had a plan beyond the half-assed one he’d had the last time he’d faced down Lucifer.

And when Lucifer lunged at him, Gabriel ducked under him, rolling and kicking the other’s feet out from under him. He jumped on his feet a moment later, stepping closer to Raphael’s body; he could feel the wards on the bunker finally fall into place.

Lucifer stood slowly, rolling his head around before fixing Gabriel with a penetrating stare. “I know you, Gabriel,” he said very, very softly. “You think I can’t see your fear from where I’m standing?”

“I know you can,” Gabriel said, fingers tightening around the hilt of his sword. “But you’re not even the worst I’ve faced.” He. Just. Hurt.

Lucifer gave him a curious look, but didn’t inquire further. He did throw a hand out.

Unprepared, Gabriel flew backwards, blowing through the trunk of a tree and hitting another with a deafening crack. He barely had time to reorient himself before Lucifer was there, and Gabriel flicked away to where Raphael was. The trees hit the ground with a thunderous crash just as Lucifer appeared again, sword raised.

There was a clash of steel, and Gabriel batted Lucifer’s aside, pushing him back with a force similar to that Lucifer had used scants seconds ago. Lucifer barely skidded back several feet, giving Gabriel a clearly unimpressed look.
If he’d been in a better state of mind, Gabriel would’ve offered a cheesy grin in response. But he wasn’t.

Lucifer swung out with his sword, and Gabriel ducked, hand coming up to grip Lucifer’s wrist just as he brought down his own sword. It pierced through Lucifer’s chest even as—

The form he was clutching dissipated, and Gabriel whirled, hands coming up as Lucifer’s sword came up from below.

The blade of Gabriel’s sword sunk through Lucifer’s left shoulder just as Lucifer’s own dug itself into his gut. His hand was tight on Lucifer’s wrist, fingers digging into the other’s skin until it was white.

He let go of his sword, hand coming down to Lucifer’s chest, fingers digging into the shirt. He heard a faint whimper.

It might’ve been him.

“Shh.” Lucifer guided Gabriel down to the ground, ignoring the light of Grace flaring around the sword impaled in his shoulder. “You performed very admirably, Gabriel.”

Gabriel drew in a rasping breath, hand coming down to clutch at the sword in his stomach. “Go… screw yourself.”

“Hm…” Lucifer’s hand came to rest lightly on the hilt of his sword, and even that light pressure was enough to make Gabriel gasp in pain. “Maybe I will.” He pried Gabriel’s clutching fingers off his shirt, pulling his sword out of Gabriel with a wet squelch. Standing in one fluid motion, he one-handedly pulled Gabriel’s sword out of his shoulder, letting it drop to the grass.

Ignoring the light of Grace emerging from the bloody hole in his shoulder, Lucifer raised his sword. “Well, Gabriel, it really has—” He vanished in a flare of Grace, wings flaring out.

Relief pounded through Gabriel, and he let out a ragged gasp, a whimper escaping him against his will. His hands clutched at the gaping wound in his stomach, barely hiding the Grace-light that leaked out.

“Gabriel – Gabriel.” Gadreel was at his side, hand coming up behind Gabriel’s head.

“Oh God, Tony.” Steve crouched at Gabriel’s other side, face ashen. “Tony.” The word was choked. “You promised…”

Gabriel managed a grin, tasting blood. “Not…dead…”

“We need to get him inside,” Castiel said from somewhere over Gabriel’s head.

Gabriel clutched at Gadreel’s arm. “Don’t… Raphael…”

“I have her,” Loki’s voice said from that direction. “Take him, Gadreel.”

It wasn’t Gadreel who hefted him up but Steve. And even though he did it as gently as possible, Gabriel groaned as the movement pulled at the wound. Steve made a small shushing sound, rushing to the bunker as fast as he could.

“You’ll be fine, Tony. You’ll be fine. You promised.”

Gabriel’s vision was darkening as they entered the bunker, but he did hear Dean’s startled
exclamation and Jarvis’s upset tittering, although he was too far gone to make out what they were saying.

Steve set him down on a soft surface, hands going down to replace Gabriel’s over the wound. “You’re fine, Tony. Just stay awake, okay?”

That was the last thing Gabriel could manage, and he slipped under to the sound of Steve screaming for Gadreel.

Chapter End Notes

NOT SORRY
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Writing Lucifer in Sam's dream was tricky given that he says he doesn't lie. And he didn't tell a lie. He twisted the truth to suit his own ends, but he didn't lie.

I'm still not sorry about that last cliffhanger, but do enjoy this chapter. It's rather emotionally heavy, so tread lightly.

On another note, I am so pleased that you guys love Gadreel! :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Gabriel had passed out despite Steve begging him not to, and it had been pretty heartbreaking to listen to. But he wasn’t dead yet; the light escaping from under Steve’s bloody hands was a clear sign that Gabriel was still fighting, and that was all that Dean needed to know at the moment.

That, and where the hell Lucifer had run off to. In Sam.

“Tony, Tony,” Steve kept repeating Gabriel’s human name. “Just hang on.”

Gadreel appeared next to Steve, face set in hard lines. “Steve, please move.” He didn’t wait for Steve to do so, instead taking off the other’s hands and replacing them with his own, trapping all the Grace from escaping.

Steve’s face tightened, and he stepped back enough to let Gadreel work, his hands dripping red and sizzling slightly. Dean had to turn his head, the stench of roasting meat making him gag.

“Captain.” Jarvis grabbed hold of Steve’s hand, turning it up to look at the burnt skin.

“It’ll be fine, J,” Steve murmured distractedly, eyes on Gabriel.

Loki came in, bearing Raphael’s body. He set her down in an armchair, and it was then that Dean noticed the blood in her shirt and the lack of life in her features.

“Fuck, she’s dead?” Dean pressed a hand into his forehead. First Sam, then Gabriel, and now Raphael?

“Yes.” Loki stepped back from her, focusing on Gabriel’s body on the library table. “How is he?”


“Why not?” Steve blurted out.

“Only an archangel’s blade can kill an archangel,” Castiel said quietly from next to Steve, his face weary. “And wounds to the Grace that are inflicted by archangels’ swords are impossible to heal except through time.”

“He won’t bleed out,” Gadreel said, retracting his hand and smoothing over Gabriel’s hoodie to
mend the damage. “But there is nothing else I can do.”

“Will he wake?” Jarvis asked.

Gadreel looked up, forehead tight. “I don’t know,” he said tersely. “But he needs to recover, and that will take time.” His eyes went to Raphael. “Time we may not have any more, not with Lucifer in his vessel.”

“Fuck,” Dean breathed, sagging against Castiel for a brief second before forcing himself upright. He couldn’t afford to slack off now. He had to keep it together, figure out a plan of attack.

“We are safe in here,” Gadreel continued, standing straight. “Lucifer cannot pass through these walls so long as the wards remain intact.” The bloody sigils they’d just spent the last ten minutes painting gleamed dully in the light.

“We’re completely screwed, aren’t we?” Kevin asked rhetorically, staring at Gabriel’s motionless body. “Completely.” He ran his hands through his hair, interlocking them behind his skull. “Why do I even bother?”

“We bother because it’s the right thing to do,” Steve said, voice rough. He looked up sharply at them. “And we’re going to keep bothering because it’d be wrong to do anything else. It’s the least we can do now, even if we don’t succeed.”

“Not your most inspirational speech, Cap,” Dean said, hating himself for the words. Sammy...

Steve’s smile was pained. “I’m not really feeling inspirational at the moment.”

Dean drew in a breath through his teeth, squeezing his eyes shut. The hole where Sam should be was so painfully apparent that Dean was having trouble adjusting. Again. This wasn’t the first time he’d been without Sam, but now he also had a fucking archangel – the Devil – running around in Sam. Again.

They shouldn’t have gone to sleep, letting Loki and Gadreel continue researching, But they’d all been pretty beat, and they’d needed a few hours to keep somewhat fresh and on top of things.

Now look at them.

“We’ll figure this out,” Castiel said softly, one arm winding around Dean’s waist. “Don’t we always?”

“I think that’s my line, Cas,” Dean murmured, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes.

“It doesn’t make it any less true.”

“How did you trap Lucifer last time?” Gadreel asked, getting Dean’s attention. “Something with the rings?”

“The Horsemen’s rings,” Dean said, the only one here aside from Castiel who knew now that Sam was gone. “They could open the Cage. Sam said yes back then, met up with Michael. He managed to overpower Lucifer and throw them into the Cage.” His grin was dark. “That’s not going to work this time, though.”

“We’ll figure something else out,” Castiel insisted, his grip on Dean’s waist tightening comfortingly. “Kevin, have you found anything on the tablet?”
“Aside from the three trials that I finally translated?” Kevin grimaced. “No. Nothing on Lucifer, but there are a lot of notes from Metatron, like on the demon tablet. The guy’s a pretentious dick.”

“I do agree with that,” Castiel said wryly. “I just wonder where he is.”

“There was no sign of him in the Cage,” Gadreel said. “And as he has been Cast out, he is no longer linked to the Host or Heaven.” He’d said it before, but it was still satisfying to hear it again. “There is nothing he can do now if he is still alive.”

“It’s not like we’d be asking him for help anyway, even if we knew where he was,” Dean said. “But we’ve gotta come up with a plan, and we’ve gotta come up with one fast. Lucifer’s not going to be taking it slow now that he’s got his suit back.”

“What can we expect from him?” Steve asked, jaw set and his eyes shrewd.

“Lucifer is the Morning Star, the second most powerful archangel ever created,” Gadreel said. “He is Michael’s match in more ways than one. He is excellent at tactics.”

“Angry,” Castiel added, clearly remembering the last time he’d seen Lucifer. “Hurt. And vicious.”

“So we’ve got an archangel with a grudge who’s the equivalent of a military commander out there,” Steve summed up. “Great. That’s not bad at all.” A sardonic lilt entered his voice toward the end. “And him being inside Sam – what does that mean?”

“Sam is his true vessel,” Castiel explained, meeting Dean’s eyes briefly. “Just as Dean’s is Michael’s. It means that he doesn’t have to curtail his power, and he can remain inside Sam indefinitely without burning him out.”

“No wonder he went through the trouble of entering Sam’s dreams to obtain consent,” Gadreel said. “That kind of power is not to be taken lightly.”

“Does he have any weaknesses?” Loki asked. “Anything we can use to take him down?”

“Holy fire,” Castiel said. “An archangel’s blade. Enochian sigils and wards, as we’ve done here. But there isn’t anything we can pull together right now, not with my Grace still missing and Gabriel injured.”

“What about Heaven?” Steve pressed. “They’ve got to have some way of containing him.”

Castiel was very still next to Dean. “I remember the Fall,” he said quietly. “I remember the ways Lucifer ravaged our ranks during the battles until Michael finally faced him and Cast him out, imprisoning him in a Cage in the deepest depths of Hell. There was very little angels of my caliber could do against his might, and Michael very nearly failed. It wasn’t just love that almost stayed his hand, but the near equivalence of their powers.”

“So we are, as my father would say,” Jarvis said slowly, “absolutely and unequivocally ‘fucked.’” The crude word sounded weird coming from Jarvis, who had only ever been polite, soft-spoken, and demure during the time Dean had known him.

“He would say that,” Steve agreed quietly, his face dropping as his eyes fell to Gabriel’s still body on the table. Aside from his breathing, there was no sign of life from him.

It took Dean a moment to rally, sheer mulishness driving his actions. They’d beaten Lucifer once before, never mind that it had very nearly cost him everything; they could do it again, and this time they’d do it better. “Fuck that,” he said sharply. “We’re going to do this come hell or high water. So
what if Michael’s got a stick up his ass and won’t come running to thrash Lucifer’s ass into Hell this time. We don’t need him. We can do this, and we’re going to. Heaven or not, archangel or not, we can. We’re not giving up.”

Castiel was smiling unabashedly at him, the sight almost enough to make Dean blush. “Spoken like a Winchester,” he said, a hint of pride in his tone.

This time Dean did flush, but thankfully only lightly. “Shut up, Cas,” he mumbled, ducking his head.

It was a silent moment later before a light groan broke the air, and everyone’s eyes snapped to a slowly stirring Gabriel on the library table.

“He’s waking up.” Castiel sounded surprised.

Gabriel groaned again, one hand coming to his stomach, and his eyes fluttered open, squinting slightly in the light before he squeezed them shut, his lips pinching.

“Tony?” Steve asked anxiously, leaning closer to Gabriel.

Gadreel had an odd look on his face, something close to incredulity. Dean guessed that Gabriel waking up so soon after what was almost a fatal wound was probably something to be surprised about.

But, hey, he wasn’t complaining.

“Hey, Gabe,” Dean said, also leaning forward over the table. “How you feeling?”

“Dean?” Gabriel sounded confused and not at all like Gabriel. “Why are you calling me Gabe?”

Dean stopped short, not exactly sure what to say to that.

Steve didn’t seem to share the same qualms. “You don’t remember?” He sounded stricken.

“I think I’d remember if I was Gabriel,” Gabriel said, groaning again and slowly sitting up, wincing slightly.

“Not really,” Steve said weakly, face pale. “What’s the last thing you do remember?”

“Falling asleep,” Gabriel answered, blinking and meeting Steve’s eyes. “Why am I on the table?” He looked at Dean, confusion in his eyes. “Dean, what’s going on?”

Dean felt completely at sea with this. Gabriel had never looked at him like this before. “Kinda hoping you could tell us that, Gabriel,” he settled on saying.

“Christ, Dean, I’m not Gabriel,” Gabriel said, irritation in his voice. “That’s not funny. And why the hell does it feel like someone stabbed me in the stomach?”

Dean frowned. “Because you were? Is Lucifer stabbing you in the stomach and being zapped away not ringing any bells?”

Gabriel laughed. “I think I’d remember that happening, Dean. Lucifer hasn’t shown his face yet.”

“He has,” Castiel said quietly, face similarly perplexed as Dean’s. “How are you feeling, Gabriel?”

“Not you, too, Cas,” Gabriel groaned, and it was the use of that nickname that was setting off alarm bells in Dean’s brain, along with how Gabriel was moving. “Come on; this isn’t funny anymore.
“Where the hell is Gabriel anyway?”

“So you remember who Gabriel is,” Gadreel finally spoke, his voice neutral.

“’Course I do,” Gabriel scoffed, sliding off the table. He stopped short, staring down in confusion at his hands and legs. “Dean…” His voice was rising in panic. “Please tell me you thought it’d be a great joke to change my clothes without me noticing and shrink me down a foot.”

Dean stared, hardly daring to believe but a niggling hope rising in him.

“I thought so,” Gadreel said neutrally. “Sam, you are currently inside Gabriel’s vessel. Please do not panic.”

Naturally, Sam did. And quite naturally, he blew up everything in the bunker while doing so.

Five minutes later, Gadreel had fixed the lights and Sam-in-Gabriel’s-body was sitting, staring down at his hands as if he didn’t believe they were his own.

Which they weren’t, but eh, semantics. They were at the moment, and Dean would really like to know how the hell this was possible.

“If you’re Sam, then where’s Tony?” Steve asked, staring at Sam agitatedly. “He’s not—”

“He’s not dead,” Sam interrupted, looking up at Steve with wide eyes that were all Sam. “I can feel him here, but he’s…unconscious?” He frowned, eyes dropping. “I think. He’s hurt,” he added, one hand pressing to his stomach. “Really hurt; it’s kind of painfully actually.”

“He got stabbed through the stomach,” Dean said bluntly, “by Lucifer.”

Sam winced. “Yeah, uh…he doesn’t like hearing that. Kind of. It’s like an electrical current.” He flexed his hands. “It feels kind of uncomfortable,” he admitted. “Like I’m gonna burst at the seams.”

“That’s not going to happen, is it?” Steve sounded alarmed.

“It won’t,” Gadreel assured him.

“You’re sharing headspace with an archangel,” Dean said. “If you said it felt roomy, I think we’d have a problem.”

“How is this even possible?” Sam felt his face, fingers running over the goatee and his nose. “I…” He trailed off, clearly unable to voice his confusion.

“The archangels have abilities we don’t,” Gadreel said, sharing a glance with Castiel. “I have no idea what Gabriel did, but it is helping him.”

“This is helping?” Loki sounded skeptical.

“Sam is serving as a buffer for Gabriel,” Gadreel said. “Keeping his energy contained and the wound Lucifer inflicted closed. I believe it similar to what you humans would do when cauterizing a wound.”

“So I’m a band-aid,” Sam said.

“Of a sort, yes.” Gadreel studied him. “I have never seen it done before.”
“Neither have I,” Castiel said, arms folded across his chest, “and I’ve seen some strange things.”

“So what does this mean?” Sam shifted, one hand going to his stomach. “Lucifer’s just walking around in my body? Is Gabriel going to be okay?”

“Gabriel will heal,” Gadreel said firmly. “But it will take time. As for Lucifer…” He drifted off, frowning.

“About that…” Dean glared hard at Sam. “You said yes, Sam? What the hell?”

“I didn’t know!” Sam protested.

“How do you not notice you’re saying yes to Lucifer?”

Sam’s fingers tightened on his knees. “I didn’t know it was him,” he repeated.

Dean instantly understood what Sam meant. “So whose face was he wearing that you said yes to him wearing you to prom?”

“Yours, Dean!”

Blinking in stunned astonishment, Dean found himself at a loss for words. Had he really heard that right? Finally, he managed a choked, “You said yes to me? What happened to all that ‘let me do my own thing, Dean’?” He did a crude approximation of Sam’s voice.

“First of all, I don’t sound like that,” Sam said prissily, his bitch face looking strange on Gabriel’s face. “Second, I didn’t know, Dean. I thought it was you. And he…” He blinked. “He acted like you.” A soft laugh later and he added, “And isn’t that just fucked up.”

“I would’ve thought you’d punch him in the face,” Dean said, mouth dry. “Seeing as how he was being me and all.”

“He said he wanted to help,” Sam said softly, looking down at his hands. “And…I’m tired, Dean. He knew that; you know that. I didn’t think anything of it when he said he could help, because that’s what you do. And I might be angry with you, Dean,” he continued earnestly, meeting Dean’s eyes, “but that doesn’t mean you’re not my brother. And I trust you.” His smile was more of a grimace. “I just shouldn’t have here.”

“Lucifer can be extraordinarily persuasive,” Gadreel said, tone self-deprecating. “Better angels and men have fallen prey to his silver tongue, Sam. Myself included.”

“I just feel like an idiot,” Sam said forlornly. “Because now he’s in my body again, and we’re all completely screwed nine ways to hell. Gabriel’s in no shape to be doing anything.” He winced slightly, pressing the heel of his hand to his stomach.

“You can feel his pain?” Steve asked quietly.

“Sort of.” Sam looked down at his free hand, turning it around. “It’s like an undercurrent of something warm under my skin, something that doesn’t belong to me. And it’s…painful here.” His hand pressed hard against his stomach. “And here.” His other hand gestured to his throat. “And everywhere else, really.” He grimaced.

And he’d gone out and faced Lucifer feeling like that? Dean could scarcely believe it. Gabriel had changed a lot from the cowardly archangel who hadn’t been willing to stick it to his family and who’d rather snack on candy and play at being a Trickster.
“So what do we do now?” Kevin asked, shooting Dean a questioning look. “‘Cause I’ve got bupkis, Dean.”

Gadreel’s head snapped up, eyes going to the ceiling. “Naomi.” The word was flat.

Dean groaned. “What does she want now?”

“Let’s go see,” Steve said grimly.

“She’s alone,” Gadreel said, already moving.

And she was. Naomi didn’t look at all pleased to be seeing them all again so soon after the last time, though she did look noticeably nervous about apparently facing Gabriel again.

Well, Dean would, too, especially after that freaky lightshow Gabriel had pulled when that angel had gone after Jarvis. He’d never seen Gabriel so angry before; he’d only ever seen Gabriel hurt or pained or annoyed. And amused.

Naomi’s chin jutted out when she saw Gadreel, and she shifted in a way that Dean recognized as puffing her wings. Castiel had pulled that move often enough for him to be able to recognize that.

“Lucifer has reclaimed his true vessel,” Naomi started flatly. “Do you have a plan, Gabriel?” She looked at Sam, only to do a noticeable double take upon seeing him. “You’re not Gabriel.”

“Oh, no. Sorry.” Sam grinned sheepishly, ducking his head. “But he’s in here,” he added.

“Sam Winchester?” Naomi sounded incredulous. “How?”

“A question that I am sure Gabriel would be willing to answer once he has recovered,” Gadreel said diplomatically.

“Where’s Raphael?” Naomi demanded, eyes scouring them all.

Gadreel visibly hesitated before answering, “She is dead.”

“Well, that’s just great.” Naomi huffed. “So Gabriel is injured, Michael hasn’t shown his face in Heaven, and Lucifer is on the loose. Do you have any other news you’d like to share?”

“Do you have anything?” Dean asked bluntly, getting her attention. “Because I’m guessing you don’t want Lucifer free anymore than we do, and we could use the help.”

“There’s nothing,” Naomi said. “No one in Heaven is strong enough to combat Lucifer directly except for Michael. There are no containment methods that can imprison him indefinitely, and he’d kill you before you could even attempt it.”

“And Michael hasn’t shown his face.” Dean’s hands curled into fists at his sides. He had an inkling of a plan, but this was going to suck.

“Dean, please share your thoughts before you decide to go off and do it yourself,” Castiel said, resigned.

“I wouldn’t.” Dean scoffed. “But…I don’t think you’ll like it.”

“Any plan’s better than none,” Steve said. “And we can tweak it.”

“There’s not much tweaking for this one,” Dean said. He looked at Naomi. “You say Michael’s the
only one who can face him? Then why don’t we ask him to do it?”

“No one’s seen him since the Cage has broken,” Naomi pointed out, face skeptical.

“Then we summon him,” Dean argued. “Trap him in holy fire so he can’t get out and then we talk.”

“Let me get this straight. You want to summon and trap the Commander of the Host – the eldest of us all – in a ring of holy fire and hope he listens to you?”

“Why not?” Dean set his jaw stubbornly. “It’s not like we’ve got anything else to lose at this point.”

“He’s got a point,” Sam said, shrugging. He looked uncomfortable in his borrowed skin. “Besides, if he’s not gearing up to face Lucifer now, he probably won’t hurt us if we just want to talk. And…” A strange expression crossed his face. “I think Gabriel wants it.”

“Has he said anything?” Gadreel asked.

“No, it’s…kind of like a feeling. Gabriel wants to talk with him.” Sam made a face, rubbing at his chest. “So, uh…are we going to do this?”

“Oh, why not.” Naomi sounded resigned.

“You’re helping?” Castiel asked.

“You think I want Lucifer running around?” Naomi’s smile was sad. “It’s not what we need, Castiel. I was wrong before, and I’m sorry for what I did. I know it’s not enough, but it’s true, and this is just one way I can start repenting.”

Castiel squared his shoulders. “Then…is it possible for me to regain my Grace? I may need it for this.”

Dean’s head snapped to him, breath coming fast. Castiel had said nothing about reconsidering his stance on being human. But then…why would Castiel want to be human now? It was too dangerous. And they could use another powered angel on their side.

“Castiel…” Naomi’s tone didn’t bode anything promising, and her face was sympathetically patronizing in the way that Dean absolutely hated. “I’m sorry, but your Grace… it’s gone. What Metatron did… your Grace was used up in casting the spell, serving as the battery.”

Castiel had gone white. “He did what?”

“He was judged for it,” Naomi said. “Judged and Cast out, but I know it’s not enough. Not for what he took from you.”

“So there’s no hope,” Castiel murmured, eyes devastated. Dean instinctively reached out to comfort him, fingers interlacing with Castiel’s, who clung back desperately.

“I’m sorry,” Naomi repeated, a useless platitude that would do absolutely nothing to help them.

Loki made an impatient noise. “If that is all, how do we get started with summoning Michael? And where should we do it?”

“Loki,” Jarvis muttered reprovingly.

“We have no time to waste,” Loki snapped back. His eyes met Dean’s. “Well?” he demanded.
“Yeah, uh…” Dean took a breath, going over what they would need for this and where they had to do it.

He wasn’t at all nervous about talking to Michael for the first time since Stull Cemetery. Not at all.

Judging from Sam’s and Castiel’s faces, he wasn’t doing a good job at hiding his anxiety. Great.

Several hours later, they’d pulled everything together and set up a warehouse for the summoning. Kansas had a lot of them in easy driving distance, which Dean wasn’t complaining about. It made things easier, especially since he didn’t want to drive too far from the bunker if it wasn’t necessary.

The holy oil had been poured, and in the middle was the sigils and goblet for summoning Michael. Naomi took point on the left side of the circle, Loki directly opposite Dean; Steve and Jarvis opposite Naomi; and Sam, Gadreel, and Castiel stood by Dean. Naomi was going to cast the actual spell.

Naomi gave Dean one last look before stepping into the circle of holy oil and over to the goblet, lighting a match and dropping it into the bowl. It fizzled and sparked, the contents catching afire. Then, speaking in that guttural language Dean recognized as Enochian, Naomi began walking backwards, eyes not leaving the flaming goblet.

The words hung in the air, heavy with power and magic.

Dean fidgeted with his lighter, prepared to light it on a moment’s notice.

One moment the circle was empty, and the next Michael stood there, facing Naomi. “Naomi.”

“Michael.” Naomi tilted her chin up, meeting Michael’s gaze directly with a small smile.

Dean lit the lighter, dropping it. The oil caught fire in an instant, springing to life around Michael. “Hey, Michael.”

Michael turned to him, wearing Adam’s face. Dean didn’t even know why he was surprised; it was the vessel he’d gone into the Cage with. “Dean.”

“I’d say it’s good to see you,” Dean said, “but it really isn’t.” He hesitated shortly before asking curtly, “Where’s Adam?”

There was a brief flicker of what might have been regret before it vanished and Michael dropped his eyes. “He is in Heaven.”

There was a relieved sigh from Sam, something that Dean completely agreed with. A tinge of guilt niggled at him; he honestly hadn’t even thought of Adam in years what with all the problems they’d had.

Michael’s eyes rose to meet Dean’s, something hard in them. “Why have you summoned me?”

Dean shifted mental tracks, jaw tightening. “I’d thought that’d have been obvious. Lucifer ringing any bells?”

Michael inhaled deeply, his face suddenly weary. “I want nothing to do with it.”

“Yeah, tough luck. That’s not gonna be happening.”

Michael didn’t respond immediately, his eyes going to the men next to Dean. “Gadreel.”
Gadreel didn’t react beyond shifting subtly to stand taller.

“And…Sam?” Michael frowned, evidently confused at Sam’s new face.

“Yeah, it’s me,” Sam said, glancing at Dean. “Your brother’s walking around with my face, so I thought I’d get a new one.”

Michael met Dean’s eyes again. “I won’t do anything,” he repeated.

“See, that’s funny,” Dean said. “You were the one who sicced a bunch of angels on my tail trying to get me to fucking say yes last time round. You dumped me in an alternate future, you resurrected Adam and tortured him to get me to say yes, and now you’re saying you want out? Bit late for that, Michael.”

“That wasn’t me,” Michael said. “What Zachariah did was not on my orders.”

Dean stared him down. “But you didn’t stop him. In my book, that makes you just as guilty as him.”


“So you’re willing to let Lucifer run free and do what he wants?” Castiel sounded disbelieving.

“What happened to you?”

Michael’s gaze swept over Castiel. “I could ask the same of you, brother.”

Castiel’s eyes tightened, his jaw tensing. “Ask Metatron.”

Michael’s eyes averted. “He’s dead.”

Gadreel, Dean, Castiel, and Naomi all spoke at the same time. “What?”

“How do you know?” Naomi demanded.

“Because he was in the Cage with us,” Michael answered heavily. His lips thinned. “He didn’t survive.”

“And you did nothing,” Gadreel stated, an undercurrent of disgust and disappointment in his tone.

“There was nothing I could do,” Michael said.

Sam stiffened next to Dean. “You keep telling yourself that, big bro.”

Dean’s head snapped around to him, eyes widening upon seeing who was clearly Gabriel and not Sam anymore. Gabriel had his right arm wrapped around his torso, and his eyes were fever bright.

Michael’s eyes widened. “Gabriel? What did you do?”

“Gave a soul refuge from the mechanisms of Lucifer,” Gabriel said, eyes hard. “Not that you’d know anything about that.”

Michael tilted his head, eyes narrowing slightly. “What happened to you?”

Gabriel’s grin was all teeth. “ Doesn’t look too pretty, does it?” His feet shifted under him, widening his stance slightly. “Thank Lucifer. Again.”
Silence fell, broken only by the crackling of the flames around Michael.

“Are you going to help us or not?” Dean asked eventually, looking away from Gabriel’s stony face to Michael.

Something flickered in Michael’s expression. “There’s no reason to.”

It took a moment for the words to register for what they meant. And even then Dean didn’t understand. “What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“There’s no reason,” Michael repeated inanely. “We’re done. Father doesn’t care. Anything we do doesn’t matter.”

“Is this an existential crisis?” Gabriel bit out, eyebrows raised incredulously. “Is that what you were telling yourself down in the Cage while Lucifer was having it out with me?” His voice broke slightly on the last part.

“He would have stopped eventually,” Michael said.

“So you did nothing,” Gabriel said flatly. “And you thought that after it was all done and over with we’d have a tea party? What the fucking hell, Michael?” His voice rose in a shout.

“There was no use interfering,” Michael said in such an aggravatingly even tone that Dean was surprised Gabriel was holding it together as well as he was. “It took centuries before he and I finished with each other, and he needed to do the same with you.”

Gabriel seemed to stagger back, face stricken. His mouth worked, but no sound came out except for those little hitching whines.

“Are you even hearing yourself, Michael?” Gadreel demanded, steely anger in his tone. “I watched you, you know, before I finally broke in. I saw what Lucifer was doing. And you just—”

“You stood there and watched as he tore me apart!” The scream sent a wash of unbridled power against Dean, sending all his hairs on end and chills down his spine; the walls of the warehouse rattled ominously. He unconsciously took a step back, not wanting to be so near a volatile archangel. “I begged you to help; I begged him to stop, but neither of you listened! And then”—he heaved in what seemed more like a ragged sob than a breath—“he stopped even that. What’s your excuse, Michael? How far did you fall?”

Michael’s eyes tightened. “You left.”

“So what if I left? You weren’t there! The only thing you wanted to hear from me was when the fucking apocalypse would start! You think you were the only one hurt by what Lucifer pulled? He was my brother, too! We needed you – we all needed you – and you ignored us!

“You shoved your duties on me and left us alone. Then Raphael went off on her own spin and there was me.” Gabriel heaved in a breath, cheeks white in anger. “Just me,” he continued in a quieter tone. “What was I supposed to do? I’m no leader – nothing special. And you guys were gone.” He held his head high. “So, yeah, I fucking left. I went out on my own.

“And maybe I shouldn’t have. But let me tell you this, Michael”—the word was Enochian but Dean somehow still understood clearly what it said and the power behind it; the flinches from the other angels just sold it—“nothing I did even holds a candle to what you and Raphael pulled. You violated our brothers and sisters; you orchestrated an apocalypse and interfered in ways you had no right to. Did you forget Dad’s other message? The one about being their protectors?”
“We wanted Him to come back,” Michael said, something lost in his tone. “We thought He would step in and stop us if it wasn’t right – if it wasn’t what He wanted. But He never did, so we thought —”

“There was nothing you could do to stop it,” Gabriel finished heavily, fine trembles running through his frame. “Maybe Paradise would bring Dad back after all. Is that right? But you were wrong.”

“I thought He would come when we were in the Cage.” Michael’s shoulders hunched. “I was the good son—”

“If you were so good, Michael, then why didn’t He?” Gabriel’s lips curled into a sneer. “You trampled over humans’ free will, orchestrating fate to your own ends. But that’s not even it. Did you ever even stop to think that maybe He didn’t want it?”

Michael frowned, looking up at Gabriel. “What do you mean?”

“Free will, Michael,” Gabriel said. “It’s a beautiful thing, and not just for humans.”

“You don’t know of what you speak.”

“Don’t I?” Gabriel’s smirk was dark. “I’m the Messenger. We’ve got free will, Michael. We’ve got the choice to decide what to do. And you’ve got a decision on your hands. Are you going to take care of Lucifer?”

Michael stared silently at Gabriel, his eyes dark.

For a second, Dean thought this might work, that Michael would say yes and kick Lucifer’s ass and do something to contain him or kill him, but then Michael’s eyes dropped, and that wasn’t the look of a man who was going to help.

“If you say we have the choice, Gabriel,” Michael said softly, “then I choose not to. I fought him before because it was my destiny – something I had to do. Now that you’ve told me this…I won’t raise my sword to him. I can’t. He’s my brother.”

“And I’m not?” Gabriel’s voice was just as soft. “Like Raphael isn’t? He killed her; he tried to kill me. It’s luck I’m still alive. You’re just going to let him go?”

Michael’s eyes dropped to the floor. “Yes. If I don’t have to fight him…I won’t.” His smile was weary. “I’m so tired, Gabriel.”

Gabriel stared at him, eyes wide and dark. Finally, he nodded jerkily. “If that’s how you want to play it, fine.” He spun on his heel, only a slight hint of unsteadiness any sign that he wasn’t fine.

“Gabriel—” Naomi started.

“Gabriel can stay here,” Gabriel said, not looking at her. “Let him stew in his own thoughts. If anyone in the Host decides to interfere or get him out, tell them that they’re going to have a very unhappy me on their hands, and they do not want to piss me off.” He didn’t wait for a response, already pushing his way outside.

Gadreel was looking at Michael with such a disappointed expression that Dean felt chilled just standing next to him. “I thought better of you, brother,” he said eventually.

Michael said nothing, his eyes downcast.
It was that image that stuck in Dean’s mind as they followed Gabriel out: Michael surrounded by a circle of flickering flames in a dark warehouse, his face turned down. It was a far cry from the terrifying archangel that had hounded Dean’s heels during the apocalypse.

Gabriel was leaning over the Impala, his back to them, and Dean could see his white fingers and the way they were clutching at his stomach. It struck him that Gabriel hadn’t once moved his right arm through the entire conversation, instead keeping it wrapped around his torso.

Then he hit the ground, his knees giving way without warning.

Steve was first to react, at Gabriel’s side a second later. “Tony!”

Gadreel was there an instant later, helping Steve turn him over so Gabriel was leaning against the Impala, his face pale.

A few seconds later he blinked his eyes open, looking dazed. “What happened?” The words were slightly slurred. His eyes focused on Dean, confused. “Where’s Michael?”

Dean crouched down to Sam’s level, keeping his eyes off Steve’s sucker-punched expression. He knew all too well what it felt like to see the face of one you loved but not have that person looking back. “We talked with him. No go.”

“Oh.” Sam sounded dazed, looking down at the arm still wrapped around his torso. He slowly moved it, wincing slightly. “Um…was Gabriel out?”

“Yeah. You don’t remember?”

“No, uh…it just gets dark.” Sam blinked, flexing his fingers and rubbing his right forearm like it was cramping. “Michael’s really not going to help?” He instantly grimaced. “Oh, okay.”

“What?”

“Gabriel’s not happy.” Sam accepted Dean’s hand to help him to his feet, wobbling only slightly before steadying. “And…I don’t think he should’ve done that. Whatever he did. He feels weaker than before.” He made a face. “Oh, shut up.”

“Is he talking to you?” Dean asked curiously.

“More like pushing images and sensations at me,” Sam said, shaking his right arm out before letting it rest at his side. “He’s…kind of pissed at Michael. Like, really.”

“So am I,” Gadreel said evenly, giving the warehouse a glare that spoke volumes.

“I’m disappointed in him,” Castiel admitted, hands in his trench coat pockets. “I thought he would help.”

“So did I,” Naomi said, sighing. “So what now?” Her eyes went to Sam as if expecting him to have a reply from Gabriel.

“Oh…” Sam looked vaguely like a deer caught in headlights. “Bunker?” he suggested weakly.

“We don’t have a plan,” Dean said bluntly, drawing everyone’s attention, “so why the hell not.” He turned to Naomi, not wanting her in the bunker even with her apparent change of heart. “No offense but I don’t trust you.”

Naomi didn’t look at all surprised by this. “I understand.” She took a step back. “I’ll see what I can
do in Heaven. Maybe Lucifer will give us a little more time to come up with something.”

Dean blinked and she was gone. “You do that,” he said to the empty air.

“I feel rather like throttling him,” Loki said mildly, his back to them. Dean had no doubt that if he could, Loki would have already set fire to the warehouse with the power of his mind. “Or maybe killing him.” His head turned to look at Gadreel. “Is that what you saw down there? Him standing idly by while Gabriel was tortured?”

There was a cracking sound, and everyone looked at Sam to find him staring in stunned shock at the simmering crack between his feet.

“Can we not talk about that while in earshot of me?” Sam asked, looking up and stepping away from the crack. “It kind of hurts.”

To be honest, everything kind of hurt at the moment, and Dean just wanted to bury himself in his bed with Castiel and wait for it to all blow over. But he couldn’t. That wasn’t his job, and that wasn’t him.

But for once, couldn’t things have been easy?

Gabriel hurt.

It wasn’t like before. Those wounds had for the most part been superficial, healable. This wasn’t. This was a wound in his Grace that leached at his core, an empty hole from which his energy leaked out of, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. Sam’s soul slowed it down, acting as a buffer of sorts, but it wouldn’t work forever.

He was running out of time – time he didn’t have.

And this was beyond stupid. This was insane. Gabriel didn’t even have a plan this time, not even a faint inkling of one beyond trying to see if he could reason with the other. He had safeguards in place, of course, but they restricted his abilities as well. And Gabriel was weak enough as is, his Grace leaking out of him like a sieve despite Sam’s soul buffering it.

He’d only made it worse with taking over to talk to Michael, but that had been needed. He’d needed to talk to Michael – to understand.

But it hadn’t really made any sense. All it did was confuse and hurt him more because Michael hadn’t thought it worth it to step in and stop Lucifer. Gabriel had begged him for help – he remembered that distantly – but nothing had come.

So, Michael was a useless lump, but then Gabriel hadn’t really expected anything different (but he’d hoped).

Raphael was dead, and she’d been human anyway. That left Gabriel to deal with this. Weak or not, he was still an archangel.

But he was terrified. Even facing the Leviathan, that could literally eat angels, hadn’t terrified Gabriel to this point because he’d had it handled. Kind of.

This was something else. This was a fear that went down to his core and had been beaten and torn into him for years. This was something Gabriel couldn’t handle, but by his Father, he was going to try.
He wasn’t the same angel he’d been in his last life. He was human now, too, for all intents and purposes, and there was no flipping way in hell that he was going to let a temper tantrum destroy this world – his old home.

So no matter how scared he was; no matter how much he didn’t want to do this, he was going to.

Because someone needed to.

Staring down at the circle he’d put together and feeling the binding magic of the numerous Enochian sigils he had drawn all over the empty warehouse, Gabriel dropped the match into the summoning goblet.

Chapter End Notes

That scene with Michael was so tricky to get down because it was all from Dean's POV, and he has no idea what's going through Gabriel/Tony's head.

So, this cliffy isn't that bad, is it?
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

It's always kind of nerve-wracking when I get really lovely review about a reader totally excited about this story and where it's going to go because it's been really dark so far (a lot darker than anything else I've written before), because I get so nervous about disappointing them. All of you, actually. Because you've stuck with me so far through Tony working out who he is, Tony getting his Grace back and becoming Gabriel/Tony, and then the absolute clusterfuck that was Gabriel/Tony breaking open Heaven and falling into the Cage. Now we reach the tipping point of his previous decisions.

That means this is the big one. After this the story will gradually come to an end, even if it's not exactly the one you were expecting when you began reading.

I hope you enjoy it, and that whatever happens, you won't be disappointed by the choices these characters make.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Steve tried to be positive, he really did, but he was getting pretty tired. The last month had been incredibly stressful emotionally, and it hadn’t abated at all even with Tony back. Now they were under a time crunch to try and figure out what to do with the Devil, and their one solid hope at dealing with him had fallen through.

He’d been dealing with Tony for a while, and Michael's actions still rocked his faith. Tony had already made it pretty clear that while angels were capable of pulling off miracles, they were also far more human than Steve would have expected. That didn’t mean that having even more proof of that wasn’t a punch in the gut, because it went against everything Steve had been taught as a child.

God wasn’t in the picture anymore – hadn’t been for a while – and now a group of humans was the only chance humanity had against the Devil and the apocalypse.

Steve had faced some pretty trying times, but this really took the cake. No wonder Dean and Sam looked so weary if this was what they had to deal with.

For now all they could do was go back to the bunker and hide behind its wards, trying to formulate a plan that would help them beat the Devil.

Steve wished Tony was actually here, because having Tony’s body here but Sam looking out from those familiar eyes was like another punch in the gut. It was utterly disorienting, and Steve didn’t like it.

It wasn’t just because he felt…like that for Tony. That month had given him time he needed to sort through his feelings and give him distance he needed, but seeing Tony had undone all his efforts. It was painful seeing Tony – or Sam – walking around and knowing that his feelings weren’t reciprocated. But it was okay – it was – because he still had Tony as a friend. And Steve would get Tony in any way he could, even if it wasn’t in the way he wanted.

But right now… Right now he was in the middle of a war that was beyond his comprehension. Give
him a regular bad guy any day and he could take them out without a problem, but this? He couldn’t handle angels that were more powerful than he could comprehend.

Dean and Sam made it seem possible, but all they had were hopes. There was nothing concrete, and Steve was a man of action. Waiting around like this was killing him because it felt like a giant hammer was hanging over his head and just waiting to fall. He had no idea how frayed the rope was that was holding the hammer up, only that it was getting perilously thin.

The silence in the bunker was tense to the point of ramping up Steve’s own anxiety and causing him to twitch for the shield every time there was an unexpected noise. Even Jarvis seemed jumpy, and the suit could occasionally be seen clomping around the bunker while Jarvis sat in the library, head bent over a book. Dean had stumbled into the suit several times, each time not looking at all pleased at having been accosted by an empty suit of armor.

Gadreel had gone down into the basement with Loki, both of them intent on finding something that might help with Lucifer. That Gadreel had been muttering about a demon wasn’t something Steve wanted to inspect too closely, as demons weren’t anything he wanted to deal with. Angels were enough.

Sam disappeared somewhere around the third hour, and Steve tried not to feel too relieved about not having to look into a familiar face and seeing a stranger looking back. Sam was inside Tony for a reason, and – oh God, he needed brain bleach now.

Pulling at his hair, Steve wished he could get rid of that last thought because he hadn’t needed that image in his artistic brain. Tony would probably be laughing himself sick now if he knew what Steve had just thought.

It was early evening and Steve was thinking about pulling something together to eat because all he’d snacked on were granola bars and some beef jerky that Dean had pulled out from the kitchen after hearing Steve’s stomach growl for the third time. His thoughts about making a meal were derailed when Gadreel came into the library, face pinched.

“How have you seen Sam?” Gadreel asked.

“Not since he went off somewhere a few hours ago,” Dean answered, looking up from his book. “Why?”

“I can’t find him anywhere,” Gadreel said tightly. “He’s gone.”

And the hammer fell.

Gabriel had to wait several hours to gather enough energy to take over from Sam, pushing him back down. But even then he didn’t have enough to keep Sam down, so he had a conscious tagalong in the back of his head who was not happy with his life choices.

And Sam was really vocal about it. Gabriel, what the hell? Are you nuts?

Gabriel didn’t respond, keeping his presence hidden from the others as he left. The second car was still out there, which was great considering he wasn’t in any shape to be flying anywhere.

I know you can hear me!

He started the car, keeping his breathing even and slow in an effort to hold back the pain swamping through him.
This time Gabriel winced. *Keep it down!*

*It got your attention, didn’t it?* Sam sounded smug, but the tone quickly changed to angry. *What the hell are you doing, Gabriel?*

*Something stupid.*

*You don’t even have a plan!*

*No need to rub it in, sasquatch.*

*Are you suicidal?!*

Gabriel didn’t respond immediately, fingers tightening on the steering wheel. *No.*

*Then what are you doing? Turn around!*

*I’m keeping them safe.*

*By going off alone? They’re not going to appreciate that if you’re dead.*

*They’ll be alive to be pissed about it.* Gabriel drew in a sharp breath as a particularly jagged streak of pain pulsed through him. *And that’s what matters.*

Sam was quiet for a moment. *What about me? I’m in here, too.*

Gabriel gave a small half-smile, meeting his own eyes in the mirror. *You’ll be fine, kid. I promise.*

The answer was distressed. *What about you?*

Gabriel moved his focus to the road, a stab of pain radiating from the sword wound. *If this doesn’t work, it won’t matter.*

The realization was slow, a sense of horror dawning in its wake. *You’re dying.*

Breathing in and out slowly, Gabriel felt a bead of cold sweat roll down the back of his neck. *Do you know how long it takes to bleed out from a stomach wound?*

*Your stomach’s fine.*

Gabriel huffed, feeling Sam’s reluctant amusement coiling inside him. *I have a hole in me, Sam, and it’s not healing.*

*The angelic equivalent of internal bleeding?*

*I thought I was acting as a band-aid.*

*You are. But it’s just a stopgap measure.*

Sam was radiating discomfort and worry. *So because you’re dying, you’re going to go and face Lucifer again? Don’t you remember what happened last time?*

*It’s not something one forgets.* Gabriel could still feel that fatal blow.

Sam didn’t speak for several miles. *You’ve changed,* he said eventually.
Gabriel gave a painful laugh. *What’s Tony Stark like in the comics here?*

Sam was disconcerted at the subject change. *I don’t read them.*

*Dean does.*


*You don’t read them?* Gabriel teased.

*So maybe I do.* Sam bristled defensively.

Snickering to himself, Gabriel considered the traits Sam had listed. *Three out of nine’s not bad.*

A wave of shock spiraled out from Sam. *You’re kidding me, right? Which ones are the three?*

*Asshole, playboy, and stubborn.* Gabriel chuckled softly, pulling to a stop in front of the warehouse that had been his goal. *That Tony sounds nice.*

*That Tony is you,* Sam protested. *I described you, Gabriel. The you that I met when you brought Castiel back. That was you, not some comic book character.*

Gabriel didn’t reply, but that was more because he was too busy trying to stay on his feet. He grabbed onto the top of the door, metal crunching underneath his fingers as he struggled to lock his knees.

His breath came in harsh pants, his eyes squeezed shut as his Grace roiled in pain and he felt a little more seep out.

*Gabriel!*

*I’m…all right.* Gabriel turned his back to the car, pressing against it and clinging to the support it offered. He couldn’t give way now. He couldn’t.

*Like hell you are. What can I do?*

*N-nothing.* Gabriel pulled in a deep breath, restraining the instinctive whimper that almost came out from the jagged pain that pierced his stomach. He pressed hard against it, almost as if that pressure would help.

*I’m sitting inside you watching and you’re going to go talk to Lucifer like this. There damn well be something I can do or I’m going to sing It’s Friday on an infinite loop!* 

*Ow, effective.* Gabriel straightened, one hand going to the top of the car to hold into the frame. *Fine. If you…lend me your strength…*

*Oh…* Sam’s soul warmed inside Gabriel. *Because souls have power. Like a battery.*

*I promise not to get addicted.* Gabriel hitched in a ragged breath, shoulders bowing under another wave of pain.

*I trust you.* Sam pressed against Gabriel’s Grace, his soul a bright beacon amidst the black pain. *Take what you need, and let’s do this.*

*Hang on…* Gabriel closed his eyes, reaching inside himself to where Sam was nestled. He fumbled
slightly, never actually having pulled power from a soul before, but quickly sent a little offshoot of his Grace into Sam, where it drew off his strength and energy. “Ah.” It took a moment, but some of the lost strength in his limbs returned, and he was able to step away from the car without falling over.

*It doesn’t hurt.* Sam sounded surprised.

*I try.* Gabriel pulled out everything he needed, mind going over what he would have to do to set up the warehouse. *Let’s get started.*

An hour later, Gabriel finally finished with pouring the holy oil. The rest of the warehouse was painted with Enochian sigils, hiding it from angels’ eyes and also restricting their power. It was uncomfortable, but Gabriel wasn’t willing to take any chances.

*So you’re really doing this.* Sam pulsed softly, his strength curling through Gabriel’s Grace, leeching away some of the pain.

Gabriel didn’t respond, setting down the jug of oil and going for the matches. He lit one, stepping up to the goblet.

Yeah, he was doing this. He was the only one who could.

He let the match fall, lighting the contents of the goblet. “I summon you, Lucifer.”

A breathless minute passed, then with a flutter of wings and a sudden surge of power heralded Lucifer’s arrival. He appeared in the circle, just in time for Gabriel to drop a second match and light the holy oil. All at once, the Grace that had been pressing against Gabriel’s was contained, unable to terrify Gabriel.

*Gabriel…* Sam’s voice in him was soft.

*Shh.*

Lucifer didn’t seem perturbed at being trapped. “Gabriel.” His voice was soft. “You seem to be in fine form.”

Gabriel managed a tight smile, eyes on Lucifer’s injured Grace. The wound he’d inflicted earlier wasn’t as large as his own, but Lucifer’s Grace also wasn’t healing. “So do you.”

“I’m surprised at you, Gabriel.” Lucifer waved a dismissive hand in the direction of the flames. “That you would summon me like this…”

“I’m going to try this one last time,” Gabriel said evenly, meeting Lucifer’s eyes. “What happens after is entirely up to you.”

“Or what? You’ll kill me?” Lucifer chuckled, clear derision in the sound.

Gabriel didn’t let it anger him. “If I have to.”

Lucifer’s smile was amused. He gestured, one eyebrow raised in a patronizing manner.

“You and I both know that Michael isn’t going to do a thing to stop you,” Gabriel said, the words sour in his mouth. “So I have to ask: Are you going let it go?”

Lucifer’s eyes narrowed. “Let humans go, you mean? Why should I? They’re the ones He abandoned us for.”
“No, they’re not.” Gabriel kept his voice calm. “He left because of us. Because we needed to stand
on our own.”

Lucifer’s entire frame was tense with anger. “Are you claiming that we have free will?”

“Not claiming. Stating. We have it, Lucifer.” Gabriel wiped his clammy hand on his jean, fingers
trembling. “That’s why He left, because He couldn’t always be there to hold our hands.”

“If we have free will, then why did He cast me down for daring to assert my own?” Lucifer sneered.

“You faced the consequences of your actions, Lucifer. Even humans jail or imprison those who kill
or try to kill others. You were going to destroy humanity. Do you think Dad would’ve let you do that
– free will or not?”

“The humans let their killers out from behind bars,” Lucifer said. “Where was my reprieve?”

“Did you even learn your lesson?” Gabriel snapped. “You’re acting like a three-year-old throwing a
temper tantrum because Daddy doesn’t love him best anymore. News flash, Lucifer, they’re better
than us.”

Lucifer’s eyes glittered darkly. “So you said before.”

“And it’s true,” Gabriel continued. “For all our power, we’re stagnant. They change. They learn.
And they try.”

“They are lesser than us,” Lucifer said. “Forever struggling to reach something better, what we have
already attained. He would have us bow to them?”

“Not bow. Lead.” The heat of the fire was blazing against Gabriel’s clammy skin, and he was all too
aware of the cold sweat breaking out on his skin. “That was our job, Lucifer. They’re our family,
too, and we were supposed to protect and guide them. And we’ve failed; I know we’ve failed, but
that doesn’t matter. We’ve got another chance here – a chance to do right. So I’m just asking you
this…are you going to help us?”

They stood there, separated by a crackling wall of flames. Gabriel held himself stiffly as he waited
for Lucifer’s response, hoping desperately that his brother would choose the right thing now.

Lucifer’s eyes slowly, inexorably met Gabriel’s. “Help those who fought me when I sought to show
you all that what He was doing was wrong? Help protect those who will never appreciate what
we do?” His true voice rattled the warehouse, cracking the cement around his feet. “Follow the
word of one who forsook me without another word?”

Gabriel flinched back at the onslaught of power that whipped at him, flinging his arms up to shield
himself from flying debris. With a thundering splintering sound, the metal supports at the ceiling of
the warehouse cracked apart, falling down with a resounding crash.

The holy fire was extinguished, and the full breadth of Lucifer’s Grace – even injured as it was –
exploded in the confines of the warehouse, struggling against the Enochian sigils Gabriel had drawn.

“If you think that, brother,” Lucifer’s normal voice said from behind Gabriel, “then you never knew
me at all.”

Gabriel whirled, sword dropping in his hand, only for Lucifer to grab hold of his wrist and twist; his
suddenly lax fingers let the weapon drop, and Gabriel’s breath left him in a pained gasp as Lucifer
kneed him in the stomach.
“You’re not alone in there,” Lucifer noted easily, those eyes too knowing as he observed Gabriel wheeze for air, practically hanging from his grip. “And Sam isn’t in here. What did you do, Gabriel?”

“Go fuck yourself.” Gabriel grabbed hold of Lucifer’s wrist where it was holding him up.

“Oh, I will.” Lucifer bared his teeth. “But first…” His hand plunged into Gabriel’s stomach, right into the hole of his Grace. “You have something that belongs to me.”

Gabriel!

Someone was screaming, but Gabriel barely registered that through the twisting and scorching pain and utter terror of having Lucifer’s Grace in his own. Icy cold spread through him from the contact, Lucifer’s Grace freezing his own and sending him right back into the Cage.

There was no relief from the pain, no relief from the ever-present agony, no relief from having his Grace torn apart over and over again, no relief from the burning screams tearing his throat apart—

“What’s a Messenger without a voice?”

All the finesse of a blunt scalpel tore out his voice, silencing his begging and screaming and why wouldn’t anyone help him—

Always cold, freezing him from the outside in, and it didn’t even numb, only highlighting the pain of having his wings ripped into, his core violated repeatedly—

Lucifer pierced into his core – where Sam was bundled up in Gabriel’s Grace – and Gabriel was only distantly aware of the warehouse rumbling around them, the sigils eroding under the weight and raw power of two archangels, and the screaming.

GABRIEL! Sam’s terrified voice pierced through the pain.

It took everything in Gabriel to tighten himself around Sam, withdrawing the tendril of Grace he had been using to bolster himself on Sam’s energy, but there was nothing he could do about the way Lucifer was sapping his energy faster than he could deal with.

Then, suddenly, Lucifer was gone, and Gabriel hit the floor before he knew what was happening. His body ached from head to foot, and his Grace was one writhing mass of agony and leaking out from the hole like a geyser. Sam’s soul was a panicking mess inside his Grace, but he was safe.

His dazed mind barely registered the presence of an achingly familiar and powerful Grace before someone was rolling him over and pulling him into a soft chest.

“Oh, Gabriel, foolish sibling,” a soft voice murmured, ringing with a power and breadth Gabriel had only ever heard in his own on select occasions. “You idiot. What were you thinking?”

Gasping for breath, Gabriel forced his eyes open, struggling to focus and faintly bewildered to see Raphael’s face above him, glowing with an ephemeral light that was too much for her body to contain. Her eyes were white, and her skin was practically translucent with the energy pouring off her.

Something crashed in the distance, two Graces coming into conflict for a brief moment.

“R-Raph—”
“Hush, Gabriel.” The power was receding slightly from Raphael’s voice. “Hush. It’ll be all right.” Her hand cradled the back of his head. “Remember, it’s your choice.”

Gabriel had no strength left to ask her what she meant. Not that it mattered, because at that moment Raphael bent her head to press her lips to Gabriel’s, exhaling in a long rush.

Power surged through him, filling in the empty spaces and stopping up the hole, keeping his Grace contained. It was an exhilarating rush.

Gabriel, it hurts. Sam twitched inside him, withdrawing from the raw power coursing through Gabriel.

It’s okay, kid. I’ve got you. Gabriel pulled together what remained of his natural Grace, compacting it around Sam to act as a natural buffer to the far more powerful raw Grace in its natural form that was swirling through him.

His eyes snapped open, and he was standing now, Raphael’s hand on his shoulder. Gabriel was aware that he was now also glowing with that light he had seen in Raphael, but all he really could feel was his Father, because it was His power inside Gabriel now, and it was more than anything Gabriel had ever dealt with.

It would burn him alive if he wasn’t careful.

“How are you feeling?” Raphael asked softly, looking entirely normal now except for the fact that she now had Grace in place of a soul.

Gabriel exhaled, a wisp of light escaping his lips. He struggled to separate the power from his voice, succeeding after a moment. “Better. You’re—”

“An archangel again.” Raphael smiled at him, eyes crinkling. “By His grace and love.” The smile vanished when those two Graces Gabriel had felt earlier clashed again, but they were joined by a third now. “What will you do?”

Gabriel didn’t answer, instead turning to the hole in the wall that Raphael had punched through the warehouse. In an eye-blink, he was outside and throwing Lucifer away from Gadreel and Naomi, standing in front of them protectively.

“Stand down,” Gabriel said, voice vibrating with barely restrained power.

Raphael appeared next to him, just behind his shoulder.

Lucifer stood, eyes wide as he looked at them. “You—”

“Hello, brother.” Raphael’s voice was cool.

Lucifer couldn’t move before Gabriel stepped in front of him, one glowing hand reaching out to touch him and finish it.

A powerful force grabbed hold of him, wrenching him back and directly into Raphael, throwing them both over onto the ground.

Gabriel didn’t feel it, his Father’s Grace buffering the pain. He stood, eyes fixing on Michael standing between them and Lucifer. “Michael.” This time he couldn’t stop the power from seeping into his voice, twisting the air.
“Hold, brother.” Michael’s voice was soft.

Tilting his head, Gabriel studied Michael. “Why? You’re not going to do it.”

Michael glanced back at Lucifer, who was gazing at him impassively. “No,” he eventually admitted, eyes returning to Gabriel. “I won’t.”

“Then step aside.”

“I can’t do that.”

A streak of anger flashed through Gabriel, and the air boiled around him. “Then you would have him destroy everything?”

“There must be another way,” Michael plead. “Please, Gabriel. You have Father’s power running through you. Surely you can think of an alternative solution.”

Gabriel’s lips pressed together, that terrible power roiling through him, amplifying his emotions and the fury surging through him. “Why do you even care anymore? You’re tired.” The word was like a whiplash, Michael flinching back from it.

“I am,” Michael confessed. “I’m even more tired of this fighting. But this is something I must do. I won’t kill Lucifer, but I also won’t see him hurt.”

“No.” Michael held his head high. “I won’t let him do that. I won’t let you do that,” he repeated, looking back at Lucifer briefly before turning to face Gabriel and Raphael. “But I won’t kill him either. Gabriel, this is my choice.”

Gabriel drew in a small breath, only to stop short when with a sickly squelching sound, a sword jammed itself through Michael’s chest, the blade gleaming darkly with blood.

Lucifer leaned over Michael, his cheek pressed to Michael’s sandy hair. “And thank you, brother.” He ripped the sword out, and with a terrible scream that shook the Host, Michael’s eyes and mouth flared with holy light.

His body hit the ground seconds later, the enormous shadows of wings burnt into the pavement. Lucifer stood over him, a bloody sword in his hand.

Father’s Grace in Gabriel twisted violently, sudden agony piercing through him at the loss. Gabriel winced, hand coming up to his sternum as he fought to suppress the struggle. It burned against his Grace, a faint wisp of it escaping through his mouth.

“Michael.” Raphael’s voice was stricken with grief. “Lucifer, how could you?”

“I put him out of his misery.” Lucifer’s hand dropped to his side, his face stony. “And now, Gabriel? What will you do?”

Gabriel struggled to breathe, fury and pain surging through him.

*It’s burning in here, Gabriel.*

Head snapping up to meet Lucifer’s gaze, Gabriel pushed forward, freezing Lucifer and grabbing hold of his jacket, bringing his head down to his own.
“That body isn’t yours.” Gabriel pressed their mouths together, pulling at Lucifer’s Grace and yanking it out, bringing it into his own body to nestle inside the burning pain of the more powerful Grace surrounding his own.

Then, before Sam could be hurt, he exhaled, carefully bringing Sam forth and pushing him back into his body. Stepping back, he let Sam drop to the ground, snapping his fingers, clearly picturing what he wanted.

The last vessel Lucifer had used sprang into being in front of him, and Gabriel brought his hands to his chest, grabbing hold of Lucifer and holding him in place above his hands before shoving him into the empty shell’s chest.

Disoriented, Lucifer stumbled back from Gabriel, falling to the ground before him.

Gabriel stared down at him, boiling anger licking threateningly at the edges of Lucifer’s Grace. “You’ve got five seconds, Lucifer, before I hunt you down.”

Gazing up at him, Lucifer was gone in three. Gabriel tilted his head, part of his awareness tracking Lucifer through space. The rest of it was on what he needed to do now.

“Gabriel—” Gadreel’s voice cut off as Gabriel brought his hands up, energy and Grace coming into being and forming an object that he hadn’t used since the Fall.

When the Horn was fully formed, Gabriel blew, pushing all his breath into the sound.

It rang, a clear and beautiful and haunting melody, reverberating through the entirety of time and space and through the souls of every living being in the universe.

When the sound naturally died out, Gabriel let his Horn dissipate into the pocket he had pulled it from. The energy from the sound rang in the air around him, its message still ringing through time and space despite the original sound having dissipated.

“What are your orders, Gabriel?” Raphael asked.

Gabriel looked at her. “Damage control.”

Surprise radiated from Naomi. “Damage control?”

“It’s not humanity’s reckoning.” Gabriel turned his attention to where he could sense Lucifer. “It’s his.”

Within the blink of an eye, Gabriel took off.

He appeared on the top of the Rockefeller Monument, right in front of Lucifer and surrounded by people.

“Gabriel.” There was fear in Lucifer’s Grace.

“You can’t hide from me.”

There were exclamations and shouts from the people surrounding them, registering that a man glowing in their midst was not normal.

“You won’t do anything,” Lucifer said, voice calm. “Not here. Not where your precious humans can be hurt.”
He felt Raphael on the periphery, hovering around and giving him the equivalent of a green light. “I wouldn’t count on that, Lucifer.”

With a flick, Gabriel was behind him, throwing Lucifer across the entire roof and into the protective glass walls protecting the humans from falling over. The glass shattered under Lucifer’s weight, and there was screaming now from around Gabriel.

He threw himself after Lucifer, finding that the other had already disappeared. Gabriel followed, dipping back into the physical world across the Himalayan Mountains, the scalding heat of his Grace melting the snow and ice of the mountains surrounding them.

Lucifer’s own Grace froze their surroundings, but whatever chill lingered behind Lucifer was quickly melted with the power radiating off Gabriel.

He couldn’t push himself too fast. His Father’s Grace was burning him from the inside out, and too much would debilitate more than help. All he could do was stay on Lucifer’s toes.

Water evaporated around them in the oceans; then they were in the Arctic, Grace flaring brightly from both of them.

Gabriel lunged in front of Lucifer before appearing in the Sahara, grabbing hold of him and flying them both into the vacuum of outer space. He overshot his goal, and they crashed into Jupiter, Grace burning through the toxic and heavy atmosphere of the gas giant.

Lucifer pulled out of Gabriel’s burning hold, flying out of his reach and pushing past the moon before Gabriel caught up, grabbing hold of his wings and striking out with raw Grace, burning them away.

Injured, Lucifer spiraled through the atmosphere of Earth, plunging through it like a falling comet, Gabriel close on his heels.

Lucifer hit the ground with a thundering crash, raising dirt, stone, and other debris into the air. Gabriel landed more lightly, Grace burning inside him.

It took several moments before Lucifer reacted, the tattered remnants of his ruined wings hampering his movement. He reached out to strike at Gabriel, only to be pinned to the grass a second later, Gabriel sitting on top of him, sword in hand.

Lucifer’s Grace flinching back in pain from Gabriel’s scorching touch, he looked up at Gabriel. “Well, brother? Finish it.”

The words echoed through him, along with the pounding fury and grief from Michael’s death. It had been so senseless, so utterly useless. And he should – he really should—

A warm weight pressing against nir Grace, welcoming nem into the family. “Well, aren’t you a little one. What’s your name?”

Ne knew this. Nir Parent had told nem this the moment after creating nem. “Gabriel.”

“My name is Samael.”

Oh, he could remember.

Ne’d seen Samael do such curious things with nir Grace, things ne wanted to learn. “Could you teach me how to do that?”
Samael had been all too amused but willing to teach ne. “It’s done like this…”

The times long past.

Their Parent was still Creating, and ne found this latest Creation fascinating with how different they were from anything before. “What’s Ne making?”

There was a hint of something dark in Samael’s tone even then, but ne hadn’t recognized it for what it was. Not then. “They’re called humans.”

When they’d been young and devoted.

Absolute fury and shock radiated from Samael. “Ne said what?”

Ne didn’t understand. “To love and cherish and protect them. What—”

And utterly foolish and blind to what was happening in their midst.

Samael had been pulling away from them all since the Creation of humans, and ne didn’t know why, only that it wasn’t good. “Samael, what are you doing?”

“What do you think of the humans?”

Ne was honest. “They’re interesting.”

Ne didn’t recognize the bitterness in Samael’s tone. “Interesting is one word for it.”

Until it was too late to do a thing.

Someone had unleashed sin, twisting Lilith into something dark and utterly foul and the only word ringing through the Host was Samael. But nir sibling wouldn’t do that, would ne?

“Gabriel, would you stand with me?”

“For what? What have you done?”

“Only what is right. We are better than they are; we were the first. Why should we bow to them?”

“You’ve Created something that shouldn’t exist—”

“I didn’t Create anything. The capacity for Sin was always there; I just brought it into existence. She is rather beautiful, isn’t she?”

“Lilith is an abomination. You twisted her soul into something wrong! How could you—”

“How could I, Gabriel? How could I? Tell me, do you want to be subservient to these insects? I’m fighting for our freedom, the freedom to do what we want, not what our Parent commands us to do. Are you going to stand with me, Gabriel, or will you fight me?”

Ne couldn’t understand. Why Samael was doing this was beyond nem. Their Parent was doing what was best after all. “…I can’t, Samael. What you’re doing is wrong—”

Samael’s Grace was no longer as warm as ne knew it to be; it was far colder than anything ne had ever touched. “My name, Gabriel, is Lucifer.”

And they lost it all.
The war ravaged Heaven, spilling out into nir Parent’s beloved creation, wreaking devastation everywhere. And Gabriel fought, of course ne did. Ne was first and foremost a weapon, and although it tore nem apart to raise nir sword against nir siblings, ne did. Because the alternative was utter destruction at the hands of the Morning Star.

Michael tore down Lucifer (no longer Samael) from Heaven, casting nem down into the fiery pits of Hell into a Cage that their Parent had created especially for Lucifer.

It was impossible to turn back the clock and restart.

“Michael, I have a message: The sixty-six seals will break the Cage, and the Apocalypse will begin. You and Lucifer will meet again then. The end of the Apocalypse and your victory will bring in Paradise, but failure will mean Lucifer’s victory.”

A tiredness suffused Michael’s entire being, though Gabriel didn’t really recognize it, exhausted and battered as ne was nemself. “The seals?”

“Only two matter: The first seal shall be broken when a Righteous Man sheds blood in Hell. As he breaks, so shall it break. And the first demon shall be the last seal.”

“Very well.” And Michael turned nir back to nem.

But what if it was possible?

Only later did ne realize that it was the beginning of the end. The end of their time as an actual family, and the beginning of their splintered state.

Nir Parent disappeared soon after, leaving them all utterly alone.

Lost as ne was, Gabriel remembered that one shining moment when Samael had greeted nem when ne had been new and young, and taken nem under nir wing—

A second chance?

“Free will is a choice, one that not everyone will take. It’s what one does with the choice that decides the war.”

“Remember, it’s your choice.”

Lucifer lay underneath him, Grace utterly still in his hold. “Finish it, Gabriel,” he repeated.

Fury and grief and devastation coiled in him, threatening to break free. With a frustrated, anguished scream, Gabriel brought his sword down, embedding it in the dirt by Lucifer’s head. Droplets of water splattered a stunned Lucifer’s face, and Gabriel registered dimly that he was crying, tears running unbidden down his face.

He should, he should, but he couldn’t. It wasn’t in him to kill another after so many had already died. It wasn’t in him to kill his big brother, the one who had taught him almost every trick he knew. It wasn’t in him to kill someone who had once been filled with so much love and light that he had been the most beautiful and the brightest of them all.

“Can’t do it?” Lucifer’s voice was shaky but amused despite the fear thrumming through him. “Can’t say I’m surprised. You always were the softest of us all.”

“I’m not you,” Gabriel whispered, fingers digging into Lucifer’s shoulders. “I’m my own person.
And this…is my choice.”

He didn’t give Lucifer a chance to say anything else, plunging his hand directly into Lucifer’s chest and into his Grace.

Pained screaming tore through the atmosphere, the anguish and pain of the brightest one of them all ringing through the world.

Once he had it in his hands, Gabriel sat back, balancing his weight on his toes, staring dazedly at the glowing ball that was the core of Lucifer – the core of Samael. This was everything that made up his brother, and he was holding it in his hands.

Taking in two slow breaths, Gabriel closed his eyes, bowing his head over the fluttering ball and focusing his energies on Creating something he had only done four times in his life. He built it around the core, slowly breathing it into life with a care and attention he had afforded very little in his lifetime.

His surroundings turned white, and when Gabriel was finished, he stood on the topmost branch of a gigantic redwood tree in the middle of a ruined cemetery. The skies were clear, the stars bright across the dark expanse.

But Gabriel didn’t see it. His attention was on the small body he held in his arms, the container of the soul that he had brought into life mere moments ago.

The Grace embedded in the tree he stood on pulsed strongly beneath his feet, and it took Gabriel a second to pull out the sigils he needed to make sure that the Grace would remain irretrievable until he came back. He painted it into the bark, seeing the blood flare white before it sunk into the bark, protecting the Grace from every being that would seek to use it for nefarious purposes.

“Gabriel…” Raphael was there next to him, voice soft.

Gabriel smiled at her, his Father’s Grace burning painfully bright in him, and reached out a hand to touch her shoulder, transporting them in an instant to the warehouse where it had started. Gadreel was there, his true form gradually receding into his vessel until he looked entirely human. Behind him were the Winchester brothers, Castiel, and Gabriel’s family.

Steve and Jarvis both seemed rather wide-eyed, staring at Gabriel with faint incredulity. Loki seemed restrained, but his eyes were narrowed. The others just stared, Dean supporting Sam’s weight and Castiel standing there next to him.

Gabriel looked down, his attention on Michael’s vessel’s body. He handed the sleeping baby to Raphael, crouching down to touch the body.

“Rest in peace, Michael,” Gabriel murmured, eyes stinging. The body gradually dissipated into molecules, the wind taking the faint traces away as Gabriel watched.

Standing, Gabriel found that they were now surrounded by the entirety of the Host in human vessels, having arrived for the sendoff. He didn’t pay them any attention, his focus on Castiel and what would need to be done to expel the Grace burning him out.

“Castiel,” Gabriel said quietly, raising a hand in his direction, “come here.”

It took a moment, and then Castiel was walking to him, nervousness in his entire bearing.

Smiling at him, Gabriel took his face in his hands. “Castiel…you’ve done well.” He pulled him
down, letting the hot Grace in him spill out of his mouth and into Castiel’s, filling Castiel to the brim with holy light and Grace that was his.

“I Name you, Castiel,” Gabriel breathed, “Angel of Thursday and the Archangel and Guardian of Free Will.”

With a gasp, the last of the Grace entered Castiel, and he glowed white under Gabriel’s hands, wings of pure light arching out from his back, the light almost painfully bright before it started to fade under Castiel’s skin.

Gabriel had enough strength left in him to grin at a bewildered looking Castiel before his knees gave out and he hit the ground, only Castiel’s reflexive grip on his arms saving him from falling over completely.

“Gabriel.” Castiel’s rough hands grabbed hold of Gabriel’s neck, tilting his head up so he was staring up at the painfully bright visage of Castiel’s true form under his human face. “You’re not dying – not now.”

Gabriel inhaled sharply as Castiel pressed a hand to his stomach, the touch comfortingly warm as he reached into Gabriel’s Grace and pulled together the wound that had been killing him by inches. He didn’t stop once it was sewn close, also going through the rest of his Grace, soothing over the various wounds and injuries Gadreel hadn’t been able to heal and mending them until only scars remained.

When he was done, Castiel withdrew his hand, the light between them fading into Castiel. Gabriel opened his eyes, suddenly completely free from pain for the first time in what seemed like forever.

He laughed wetly, pressing his forehead to Castiel’s. “Hey, bro,” he whispered. “How’s the search for Dad going?”

Castiel smiled back, the weight of his Grace warm against Gabriel’s. “It doesn’t matter.”

They separated, Castiel’s hand remaining on Gabriel’s shoulder as he helped him stand. It was now that Gabriel turned his attention to the angels surrounding all of them, all of them absolutely silent in the wake of what had happened. Behind them, a dozen feet away from the warehouse, stood Steve, Jarvis, Loki, Dean, and Sam.

Giving Steve, Jarvis, and Loki a small smile, Gabriel looked at Raphael, who was still holding the sleeping child. She extended nem, giving nem to Gabriel to hold.

“Is that Lucifer?” Castiel’s voice was quiet, but it was loud in the silence.

“No.” Gabriel brushed aside a small lock of dark hair, smiling as the gesture caused nem to twitch and scrunch nir nose. “Samael. That’s nir name.”

“A fresh start for nem, hm?” Raphael’s lips curled into a sad smile.

“No.” Gabriel looked up from Samael, eyes sweeping over the watching angels. “It’s a fresh start for all of us. There won’t be any more plotting or planning of humanity’s future. That’s up to them decide. As for whether angels should walk on Earth or stay in Heaven, that’s a choice up to you.”

“There is a great deal we can learn from humans,” Castiel said, cutting off any protests that would come. “It’s something you all should consider.”

“Right,” another angel said skeptically.
“Hey now.” Gabriel kept his tone mild. “He’s right. We’ve got a lot to learn from humans. But it’s your choice.”

“You’re kidding me, right?” Dean came up behind Gabriel, ignoring the stares the other angels gave him. “They aren’t gonna blend in.”

Gabriel tilted his head, turning his attention to the chatter on the radio waves of the humans. “Don’t think that matters anymore. Knowledge of the supernatural’s out there now.”

Dean gaped, clearly not expecting that. “What did you do?”

“Do you know what the word ‘apocalypse’ really means? A lifting of the veil and new beginnings.” Gabriel’s eyes flickered down to Samael. “And this, Dean, is a new beginning for all of us. The supernatural’s come out into the light.” He stretched his awareness out to blanket the entirety of the Host, letting every one of them hear them. “Keep an eye on what’s going on. Make sure nothing gets too crazy, and answer any questions you need to as long as it’s something humans could have found the answer to themselves.”

Many of the lower ranking angels flew off after he finished speaking, apparently to do just that. There was an undercurrent of eagerness to their actions, which brought a faint smile to Gabriel’s face.

“You would let Lucifer live?” another angel demanded. It took Gabriel a moment to place his ranking as just short of Gadreel’s, though the name still evaded him. “After all he’s done?”

Gabriel met his eyes evenly. “Yes.”

“We all received a second chance,” Raphael said before the angel could put his foot in his mouth any further. “I didn’t deserve mine, but here I am. My actions were no less condemnable than Lucifer’s. Would you strike me down as well?”

“No.” A different angel stepped forth, his outfit consisting largely of leather. “But what of him?” He pointed to Gadreel.

It was Gadreel’s reaction that caught Gabriel’s attention. The other’s Grace shrank back, curling in tightly on itself in fear.

A slow burning anger simmering in his stomach, Gabriel gave Samael to a confused Dean, who grabbed hold of nem without fumbling. “You wouldn’t happen to be Thaddeus, would you?”

“I am.” Thaddeus straightened.

“Oh, good. That means I can do this.” Without further warning, Gabriel reared back and punched him in the face, knocking Thaddeus to the ground. He followed through, dropping to one knee and fisting Thaddeus’s jacket to haul him up. “That was for Gadreel, you asshole.”

Thaddeus blinked up at him, carefully still in his grasp. He didn’t seem to comprehend why Gabriel was so furious with him.

“You were given a duty,” Gabriel said softly, “and you abused your privileges.” Now Thaddeus flinched, eyes skittering to Gadreel.

“Gabriel.” Gadreel’s voice was quiet. “I hold no anger against him.”

Gabriel looked at him over his shoulder. “What do you want?”
Gadreel didn’t reply immediately, his eyes on Thaddeus, who was radiating a suitable amount of terror. “It doesn’t matter,” he said eventually. “There is nothing that can be done about it. The past is the past.”

Mouth twisting, Gabriel returned his focus to Thaddeus. “That may be,” he said, pulling Thaddeus to his feet, “but there’s one thing I’m going to insist on.” He let go of Thaddeus’s jacket, smoothing out the wrinkles and giving Thaddeus a genial smile that elicited a wide-eyed stare from the other. “Apologize.”

Thaddeus stiffened as Gabriel stepped aside, giving him a clear view of Gadreel standing there. “I…”

“It’s the least you owe him,” Gabriel said blandly. “I’d say you’re getting off pretty lightly.”

Thaddeus’s eyes flicked around at the silent angels still standing. There was no help to be had from Raphael and Castiel, and Gadreel wasn’t moving.

Finally, Thaddeus met Gadreel’s eyes. “I am sorry for what happened.” There was nothing more forthcoming.

Gabriel made a displeased sound. “I’ve heard better from villains.”

“It’s fine,” Gadreel disagreed. He nodded once at Thaddeus. Then, there was a sudden sound of bone breaking, and Thaddeus was on the ground again, Gadreel standing above him, uncurling his hand from a fist.

“Oh my God,” Gabriel heard Sam say.

Gadreel was smiling when he looked back at Gabriel. “Now I’m good.”

Pushing down the surprise, Gabriel grinned back at him. “Great.”

“I will deal with you in Heaven,” Raphael told Thaddeus. “Go.”

Thaddeus went.

“Hey, Gabe.” Dean sounded rather alarmed. “He’s waking up.”

Gabriel turned, coming close to Dean to see that Samael was stirring, nir gray eyes blinking muzzily before focusing on Gabriel’s. “Hey there, Samael,” he breathed softly, smiling down at nem. Slowly taking Samael from Dean’s arms, Gabriel held nem up, grinning at Samael.

“Samael looks different,” Naomi observed clinically, head tilted to the side.

“Yeah.” Gabriel looked at Samael’s soul, bright and familiar like Jarvis’s and his other kids; only the core was Samael’s original, that which he had taken from Lucifer. “A new start for nem.”

He smiled up at Steve, Jarvis, and Loki now that they had come closer. “A new start for all of us.”

Chapter End Notes

This story is about family. It's about the choices we make. And, ultimately, it's really a
story about redemption.
Gabriel/Tony said it best in the last story, that forgiveness is divine. Killing's easy. But forgiving someone and letting go? Giving second chances? That's hard. It's messy and difficult and everything people find impractical unless it's really worth it. And for Gabriel/Tony, he's spent too long being a weapon and having blood on his hands. The blood of his family, the blood of innocents...

I asked my friend kurowrites if it was really impractical to go this route given everything Lucifer's done so far, but we both came to the agreement that for Gabriel/Tony, this is the best choice for him to make after everything he's been through.

I avoided saying anything on the topic of Raphael, largely because I always planned for her to be resurrected ala Castiel-style. I also planned for there to be interference from the Big Guy, because anything else would have gone so very badly for the characters given Gabriel/Tony's physical state and Lucifer's wrath. So call it a deus ex machina, but sometimes they're the best writing choice, especially when done right.
And I hope I did it right here.

And, uh, I don't usually use gender neutral pronouns, so if I'm doing something wrong, please let me know so I can fix it. ^^

Please give me your thoughts.
Several hours later, once all the angels save for Raphael and Gadreel had left, they were back in the bunker with one additional passenger. Samael had been set up on an armchair, watching everything solemnly with all the gravitas that nir small body could afford.

Kevin had been bewildered. “Why is there a baby?”

“The baby’s Lucifer,” Dean explained.

“Not anymore,” Gabriel said, giving Dean a look. “Don’t call nem that. Would you like me to say your soul’s still bound for Hell or that Castiel’s Fallen? Samael’s got another chance, and Lucifer’s dead.”

“He’s sitting right there.” Dean pointed to Samael, who tilted nir head curiously.

“No, ne’s not.”

“And what’s the deal with that?” Dean demanded. “I thought I didn’t hear it right the first time, but you’re still using those weird words!”

Gabriel couldn’t help but smirk in amusement. “What, ne? Angels don’t have gender, Dean. Not the way you think of it. I’m not going to set a gender on Samael. I made a mistake with one of my kids before; I’m not going to do that a second time.”

“The pronouns ‘ne,’ ‘nir,’ and ‘nem’ are a class of gender neutral pronouns,” Jarvis said, reaching down to let Samael take hold of his fingers. “There is a broad spectrum when it comes to gender, Dean, even if many would prefer for there simply to be two.”

“What about sex?” Sam asked, sitting at the table. “I mean biological sex,” he clarified quickly when Gabriel grinned too broadly. “He – ne is human now, right?”

“Actually, no,” Castiel said, glancing down at Samael playing with Jarvis’s fingers. “Samael’s soul is similar to Jarvis’s, who is…” He trailed off, glancing questioningly at Gabriel.

“An artificial intelligence,” Gabriel finished easily as Sam, Dean, and Kevin also looked at him. “Dad’s got the market on human souls. I’ve got something different.”
Sam’s eyes widened. “An artificial intelligence?”

“Like Terminator?” Dean sounded vaguely alarmed.

“I assure you,” Jarvis said amiably, “I harbor no desires to subvert the human race. Fiction depicting artificial intelligences does so from a human perspective with the innate fear of anything different.”

“Is that supposed to be reassuring? ’Cause let me tell you, it isn’t.”

“Relax, Dean.” Gabriel grinned brightly at the other as Dean looked at him. “J’s nicer than I am.”

“Thank you, sir.” Jarvis sounded amused.

“So what’s going to happen to Samael?” Sam asked, eyes flickering down to nem.

“It’s a good question,” Raphael said, turning her head to Gabriel. “Ne can’t stay here.”

Gabriel’s lips thinned. “You’re certain about that.”

“Ne won’t be safe,” Raphael said calmly. “I can’t promise that.”

“Why would you need to promise such a thing?” Gadreel looked between the two, confusion written on his face. “Are you not staying, Gabriel?”

A pained smile flitted across Gabriel’s smile. “No.” He felt more than saw Steve and Loki exhale softly in relief, and even Jarvis’s shoulders slumped slightly as a minute tension Gabriel hadn’t even realized was there left his frame. “Come on, guys.” He looked at them, unable to mask the hurt. “Did you really think I was going to just send you back and stay here?”

“I wasn’t sure,” Steve admitted. “You missed this place so much…”

“Sure I did. But things change.” Gabriel shrugged lightly, smiling gently at him. “This place isn’t my home anymore. Hasn’t been for a while.”

“So where will you go?” Gadreel’s voice was blank, carefully free from any emotion.

“Where I’ve been for the last so many years,” Gabriel gestured vaguely in the direction of the Iron Man suit standing in a corner. “Different universe. Gets kinda lonely at points since there aren’t any other angels around, but it’s home.”

“You won’t return?”

“I’m not really sure if it’s possible,” Gabriel admitted slowly, glancing at Raphael. “I was told it was a one-way trip, but that seems to have changed.”

“It was more difficult than it should have been to come here,” Loki said. “I had to use some of your energy to bolster my magic, otherwise we would have been lost. I would not chance a second trip.”

“Then you would leave us,” Castiel said evenly.

Gabriel grinned briefly in amusement. “You’ll be fine, Castiel. I was never much help anyhow. All I’ve got is political clout, and I’m too lazy to use it. The gig’s more your thing than mine, and my place isn’t here anymore. Hasn’t been for a long time.”

Samael made a soft cooing sound, the hand not occupied with Jarvis’s reaching up for Gabriel.
Gabriel couldn’t stop himself from looking for Lucifer inside Samael’s soul, and finding only Samael. His Grace still ached in places, even Castiel’s amped up healing touch unable to fix everything, and he had to admit to himself that this wasn’t what he had anticipated when making this choice. All he had wanted…was not to kill his big brother. Because it was something he was incapable of doing.

And he had Samael now, someone who was completely innocent without any of the memories or taint of Lucifer. But Raphael was right: Samael would never be safe here, not with Lucifer’s history marring nir pervious life.

“And it looks like you’re coming with me,” Gabriel noted softly, crouching down in front of the armchair. This put him in easy reach of Samael’s reaching fingers, and they groped at Gabriel’s nose, reaching up to his hair to tug at the strands lying over his forehead.

Taking Samael’s hand in his own, Gabriel looked up at Jarvis. “How do you feel about being a big brother, J?”

Jarvis didn’t respond immediately, blinking rather rapidly in a telltale manner. “I…would be honored.”

Gabriel smiled at him, a little bubble of happiness surging through him, the feeling foreign after so long without it. It took him a moment to adjust to the giddy feeling that he was no longer accustomed to.

“So when are you leaving?” Dean asked, arms folded across his chest.

Gabriel stood, quieting Samael’s fussing nose with a soft *shh*. He ruffled Samael’s dark hair before turning to Dean. “Until I’m sure things have settled down here. Castiel’s going to need some settling in, and I know not everyone’s happy with how things turned out. So that’s going to need to be dealt with. But it’ll be only a few days at most. And if you don’t want to put up with us for that long…” He raised his eyebrows, wiggling his fingers demonstratively.

“It’s fine,” Castiel assured him, sharing a quick glance with Dean that only elicited a grudging eye roll from the latter. “We have space here.”

“Not that you need sleep anymore,” Dean muttered, rubbing his mouth.

“Sorry, did I hear you praise my stunning good looks and wit?”

Dean snorted. “You wish. I admit the vessel’s a step-up from the last one, but your humor’s just as corny as it was last time.”

“You like my humor, Dean-o. I have it on tape.”

“Dean’s sense of humor is ridiculous,” Sam interrupted before Dean could say anything else. “Slow-dancing aliens are exactly his kind of shtick.” Loki and Steve had very curious expressions on their faces as he said this. “Is there anything you have to do?”

In lieu of an answer, Gabriel snapped up a TV, setting it up on the table in easy access of everyone. He threw the remote to Sam a second later. “TV?”

Sam’s answering bitch face was completely worth having to make a TV that ran on pure Grace.

An hour later, Gabriel wasn’t able to ignore the stares from Steve, Jarvis, and Loki anymore. The
news channel the TV was playing wasn’t holding their attention anymore after continually replaying
the same footage of weather disasters all over the globe and mysterious lights in the atmosphere,
along with numerous accounts of “a strange sound that was like a horn.”

Samael had made his way to Gadreel’s lap in the intervening hour, and Gadreel seemed rather
adorably flustered with how to deal with the attention of a small child that was physically about six
months old. Raphael had taken some feathers and was dangling them just out of reach of Samael’s
hands.

It was rather funny seeing his older sister play with a baby when Gabriel knew for a fact that
Raphael had never done so in her life.

Smiling as he gave Raphael and Gadreel one last glance, Gabriel left the library, heading somewhere
they wouldn’t be overheard easily. Because he suspected there was going to be some shouting in his
near future.

They ended up in his bedroom, and Gabriel turned the lights on, coming to a stop at the foot of the
bed and hearing the door shut behind the last person to enter. “So who’s going first?”

He turned, keeping a fixed smile on his face, only to flinch when Jarvis enfolded him in a crushing
hug. It took him a moment to process the harmless touch and return it, his arms wrapping around
Jarvis’s waist.

Gabriel said nothing when Jarvis finally let go, his hands lingering on his arms. There really wasn’t
anything he could say to wipe off that strained worry on his son’s face. Except for: “I’m all right.”

“You worried us,” Jarvis said quietly.

Loki stepped up to Gabriel’s other side. “If you ever do such a thing again, you will not like the
consequences.”

Gabriel managed a smile, not quite meeting Loki’s eyes. “Fighting words there.”

Loki’s jaw was tight. “Do you not think me serious, Gabriel?”

“No, I do.” Gabriel felt the weight of the vial that had contained his Grace at his sternum, hidden
under his shirt. “But there’s no world where I wouldn’t do that again.”

“You should have taken us with you,” Steve said, standing just out of reach, his arms folded tightly
across his chest. “Why didn’t you?”

“Put you at risk? I’d be dead before that happens,” Gabriel answered flatly. “That was never in
consideration. I don’t care what you are, super soldier, god, or artificial intelligence; Lucifer would
have killed you before you even had a chance to blink.”

“He almost killed you,” Steve pointed out tightly. “In fact, as you like to remind us every so often,
he did kill you. What were you thinking, going off to meet him alone like that? We were working on
a plan!”

Gabriel laughed before he could stop himself. Even the glares couldn’t stop him. “Ah, I’m sorry,
but…” He snickered, shoulders shaking. “We all know that there wasn’t any chance of us coming up
with a plan that would deal with Lucifer. And I wasn’t going to sit back and wait.”

“Then why not take us with you?” Loki demanded. “Did you think that we would not be willing to
fight?”
“Trust me, that wasn’t in question.” Gabriel met his eyes evenly. “But there wasn’t a chance in this world that you were coming with me.”

“You almost died,” Steve said, voice wavering and eyes just a bit too bright. “We were outside that warehouse, unable to get in but hearing you. We couldn’t do anything. Gadreel couldn’t get in, but we could all hear you in there. And then it stopped. Do you have any idea how terrifying that was?”

“I’m sorry.” And he was. But there wasn’t a thing he would change. It was a no-brainer for him. He wouldn’t – couldn’t – put his family at risk like that. “But that doesn’t change anything.”

Steve stared at him, a muscle jumping in his jaw. “Can you tell us why at least?”

“I told you.” Gabriel stepped away from Jarvis and Loki, half-turning to the bed and the ruined bedspread with its scorch marks and melted fabric. “Putting you at risk was never an option. He would have killed you.” He looked back at them. “And there wouldn’t have been anything I could’ve done to stop him. So no. I wasn’t risking that.”

“You put yourself at risk. Or are you telling me that you could’ve beaten him then?”

Gabriel folded his arms across his chest, all too clearly remembering the state he had been in at that point. “No…” The word was soft. “But it wouldn’t have mattered either way what happened. I needed to try…there had to be a way of getting through to him. And if it failed…it wouldn’t have mattered,” he repeated, eyes on the bedspread.

“Why?” Loki’s voice was sharp. “Because you would be dead?”

“I would’ve been dead regardless of what I did,” Gabriel snapped, head jerking up to Loki. “Win or lose, whether or not I met Lucifer. I would’ve been dead within the week. So what the hell, I didn’t have anything to lose by giving it a shot. I was the only one of us who even had the slightest chance.”

Steve’s face was stricken, skin ashen. Loki’s eyes were too wide.

Jarvis was the one who spoke. “You were dying?”

Gabriel’s gaze turned to him, his voice gentling as he answered, “Yeah. I was.” He looked down, the gut-wrenchingly painful feeling of his Grace leaking out and sapping his strength still sharp and clear.

“So you thought it would be best to die alone.” Jarvis’s tone was dull.

Gabriel’s muscles bunched up, and he pushed close to Jarvis, getting his attention. “I wasn’t going to send my kid to die. I wasn’t going to send my best friends on a suicide mission. I’m a lot of things, but I’m not someone who can do that.” He looked at Steve and Loki. “So go on and shout at me all you want for leaving you in the dark. But don’t tell me that I should’ve taken you with me and watched you die. Because that’s what Lucifer would’ve done if you were there.” His smile was bitter. “He would have gladly trapped me there and let me watch as he ripped you all apart slowly and painfully, knowing that I couldn’t do anything.”

He stepped back, fingers clenching tightly into fists. “And no matter what I am, that’s not something I would be able to handle. I’ve a lot of regrets, but going out there and facing Lucifer isn’t one of them. As long as you’re safe…” Gabriel pressed his lips together, holding Steve’s eyes for a moment before meeting Jarvis’s. “It’s worth it.”

And call him a coward (because he was), Gabriel left, leaving the bunker entirely and heading
straight for where Lucifer’s Grace now resided. It was quiet there, peaceful despite the destruction that had occurred there hours ago.

It took Gabriel a moment to recognize the place for what it was, and then he was in hysterics, bracing himself against an intact tombstone as the laughter shook his body.

Because of course he’d finished it where he’d fallen into the Cage. He could still feel the energies of that foul place in the ground, even with Lucifer’s Grace saturating the air around the tree.

It took several minutes for Gabriel to regain his composure, and even then faint hysteria marred his breathing. He slumped to the ground by the tombstone, leaning back against it to face the tree, craning his head back to look up at the branches.

It was thirty minutes of utter silence and solitude before Gabriel felt Gadreel arrive, his wings almost silent.

“’Lo, Gadreel,” Gabriel said when it became clear that Gadreel wasn’t going to speak first. “You here to yell at me, too?”

“No.” Gadreel came to a stop next to Gabriel, standing right next to where he was sitting. “Although I am upset that I missed the fact that you were apparently dying…” His eyes dropped to his feet.

“Not your fault.” Gabriel’s hand rested on his stomach, lifting with every breath he took. “I hid it as best as I could.”

Gadreel’s eyes snapped to his. “Why would you do that?”

“Because there wasn’t anything you could do.” Gabriel gave him a half-smile. “You were doing all you already could. Knowing about the shape I was in wouldn’t have done anything but make you worry.”

Gadreel fell into a tense silence, his vessel stiff. Only his anxiously ruffling wings were any sign of his internal distress.

Gabriel didn’t say anything else, keeping his head propped up against the tombstone, his eyes on the tree and the Grace he could see imbued in it. It was just energy now, although he could still sense the pain, hurt, and sheer anger in it that had been Lucifer in his final moments. And…loneliness. Utter loneliness.

An aching loneliness that made Gabriel shudder just feeling it peripherally.

Lucifer wasn’t there anymore. He was Samael, and Samael had a new chance. One that Gabriel hopefully wouldn’t fuck up like he’d fucked so many other things up.

“You are leaving,” Gadreel said eventually, voice subdued.

It was a statement of fact, not even a question, so Gabriel kept silent. He did adjust his head to look more easily at Gadreel, who wasn’t looking at him.

“Do you think…” Gadreel shifted, head tilting up to look at the night sky. “Would it possible for me to come with you?”

Gabriel shifted upright, surprised. “Gadreel?”

“There is nothing for me here,” Gadreel continued, slowly turning his head to meet Gabriel’s eyes. “I
have been isolated from the Host for millennia.” His Grace pulsed in silent distress. “All those who
look at me see a traitor.”

Gabriel stood, eyes not leaving Gadreel’s. “That can change.”

Gadreel’s lips quirked into a sad smile. “Because you tell them I have been forgiven? It won’t do
anything.”

Gabriel studied him for a minute, lips pressed together. Finally, he settled on the one question he had
to ask. “Why?”

Stepping closer to him, Gadreel brushed his wings tentatively against Gabriel’s. “Because I was lost,
and you offered me forgiveness,” he answered softly. “I was hiding, and you pulled me out into the
light. I was alone, and you offered me love. So if you would…please let me come home with you.”

Gabriel tilted his head slightly. “I can’t promise a way back here if you regret it.”

“I won’t.”

“It’s quiet there,” Gabriel said softly, looking up to the skies and Heaven briefly. “No angels…no
Heaven… Are you sure you want to do this? You have a home here, too.”

“My home is with my family.” Gadreel felt jittery with nerves against Gabriel’s Grace. “Do I have a
choice?”

“You know you do.”

“Then this is mine,” Gadreel said steadily. “I would leave with you and your friends. I would follow
you to your home.”

Gabriel smiled at him, reaching out to touch him on the arm and tracing his wings along Gadreel’s,
glad when the other simply reciprocated the gesture instead of flinching. “Then come, brother. I’ll be
glad to have you at my side.”

Tension left Gadreel’s frame, and he closed his eyes, nodding. “Thank you.”

“No.” Gabriel glanced back at the receptacle for Lucifer’s Grace, the echoes of pain and torture
reverberating through his Grace as he remembered. “Thank you. If it weren’t for you, I don’t know
what would have happened.”

“Thanks isn’t necessary,” Gadreel said quietly, his hand coming up to cover Gabriel’s where it still
rested on his arm. “I did what was right. I am glad that you are well now, brother.”

Gabriel just smiled in response, unable to offer much else.

Not when it might be a lie.

It was 6:33 in the morning when Tony joined Steve in the kitchen, appearing on the countertop,
hands in the pockets of his hoodie and head resting against the cabinet. Steve was radiating a
palpable tension that even the humans in the bunker could sense, and it had been that had finally
tipped Tony’s hand.

Steve was his friend, and Tony didn’t like seeing him so upset. Especially if he had been partly
responsible for causing that distress.
There were no words in the minutes since Tony arrived, just the soft sounds of Steve sketching on a piece of paper.

Tony restrained the curious urge to go and see what he was drawing. It would be rude, not to mention an invasion of privacy. And he didn’t really feel like treading on anymore toes than he already had.

“Death said something else,” Steve said finally, ten minutes after Tony had joined him.

Tony shifted slightly, head brushing against the wood of the cabinet. “Did he?”

“He said,” Steve continued quietly, not looking at him, “that angels can’t love like humans.” The constant motion of the pencil hesitated slightly, coming to a stop altogether several seconds later when Steve met Tony’s eyes. “Is that true?”

Exhaling slowly, Tony considered his answer. “We’re weapons. But we were also made to love, like I told you before.” He thought. It was still difficult to remember what had happened just before he’d fallen into the Cage. “All that hippie stuff”—he gestured vaguely—“and more. But no. We can’t love like humans.” His hand went back into its pocket. “If this is about you—”

“It’s not,” Steve interrupted him, shaking his head. “At least, not entirely. No, I just…wondered.” He bit his lip, lowering his gaze to his hands, his fingers anxiously rubbing over the pencil. “During that month you were…gone,” he started haltingly, “I had a lot of time to think. It was just about the only thing I could do, since hunting wasn’t allowed.” Steve rubbed his hands together, anxiously wetting his lips. “And…I still – that’s not the question – but…you’re my best friend.” He glanced up at Tony, smile wry. “You gave me a home, you know.”

“I was lost and alone. And you – Gabriel – he gave me a home.”

“You said before,” Tony acknowledged quietly.

“Yeah, I did.” Steve’s eyes dropped, skittering back to his hands and the paper he had been sketching on. “The thing is…it’s not home without you in it. So…” He inhaled shakily, rubbing his forehead and hiding his eyes. “That you nearly died – again – it terrifies me. I’ll take you anyway I can get, Tony, whether or not you remember or feel the same way, but I can’t handle losing someone else close to me.

“And I know,” Steve continued, forestalling what Tony was going to say, “I know that you protected us because you love us. I know that. That’s – that’s not in question. But…it scares me that you’d go on and do something like meet the Devil without telling us. You didn’t tell us anything, and we were just sitting here while you drove off on your own.” Steve pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes for a brief moment before dropping them, giving Tony a weak grin. “You’re all right now, I know, but you almost weren’t.”

Tony swallowed, throat working for a moment. “I’m sorry about that. I am.” He leaned forward, feet bracing against counter. “There are a lot of things I’d risk, Steve, but your lives aren’t one of them.”

“And your life is?”

“Well, it’s my life, isn’t it?” Tony gave him a small smile that slipped off his face as quickly as he could bring it up. “I didn’t have a whole lot of options, and I was running out of time. So I took the fight to him.”

“I get that, I do.” Steve nodded jerkily. “I’m a soldier. I know about making hard calls. But I also know the value of having a team at your back.”
“You think I don’t?” Tony let out a small laugh, leaning back again. “I know better than anyone what the Winchesters can pull off when they get serious, but I also know what it cost them last time. I wasn’t going to let you pay the price.”

Steve’s throat rippled as he swallowed. “I almost paid it anyway. Do you think we would’ve been happy if you’d died?”

“Better than the alternative,” Tony said quietly. “Where we all ended up dead.”

“Right.” Steve’s voice was just as quiet. “He would’ve done that.”

Tony’s smile was flat. “Doubtlessly.”

Steve looked back at the paper in front of him, rolling the pencil across the tabletop. “When I saw you again,” he said finally, “after Gadreel got you out…all I could think was ‘Thank God he’s all right.’ But you weren’t. And there was nothing I could do to help.” His fingers flexed, curling into a fist. “I was helpless.”

Tony said nothing, keeping his eyes fixed on the side of Steve’s head.

“I don’t like being helpless.” Steve’s hand uncurled, and he turned it palm up, tracing the lines with a finger.

“You did everything you could,” Tony finally said. “More than I expected, honestly. Hell, you came here for me. You didn’t have to do that, but you did. Anything that happened after that is on me.”

“How could it?” Steve snapped, head jerking up to glare at him. “Did you ask for that to happen? You’ve made mistakes, but no one deserves that.”

Tony stared at him. “You really believe that.”

Steve’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Yes. I do.” He huffed a second later. “And it’s nothing to do with how I feel for you.”

Tony laughed softly, knocking his heels against the counter. “You deserve better.”

“Don’t tell me what I deserve,” Steve snapped, hand coming up. “Don’t. That’s for me to decide. Not you.” He shook his head, running a hand over his face before tangling it in his hair. “Did you know my brain chemistry was changed by the serum?” he continued in an apparent non sequitur. “I didn’t, not until Bruce came to me with the results of my latest physical workup that he’d done. Everything’s amplified, not just touch and sight and sound and taste. But emotions, too.” He took a breath, looking up at the ceiling. “It’s hard. I can’t let things go. They just…stick. And—” He rubbed his face again, wiping at his eyes and not meeting Tony’s eyes. “It’s—” Breaking off again, Steve shook his head, once more wiping his eyes.

Within a blink, Tony was sitting on the table in front of Steve, pulling him in tightly, his arms wrapped around his shoulders.

Steve grabbed back just as tightly, his fingers digging into Tony’s shoulder blades. “I can’t, Tony, I can’t—”

Tony tucked his chin over Steve’s head. “I messed up. I’m sorry. I’m an idiot, just completely awful at emotions. I threw my last relationship down the tank and she only found out last minute that I wasn’t really Loki. And I’m messing this up right now, like I did last time.”
"There was a wet laugh from Steve, his face pressing into Tony’s shoulder. “I think you’re doing okay.”

“Nah, I’m not.” Tony rubbed a hand up and down Steve’s back. “I don’t like getting attached. It’s messy and complicated, and they always leave. Especially humans. You die so easily; you’re like mayflies. But…I am. For better or worse, I’m attached to you, and it’s too late to change that.”

Steve was silent for a moment. Then, in a muffled voice that was almost too quiet for Tony to catch, he whispered, “Is that so bad?”

Tony continued rubbing Steve’s back, his cheek pressed into Steve’s hair. “You’re going to die one day,” he said eventually. “And where you live, there’s no Heaven. Only Valhalla, and I’m not welcome there.” He all too clearly remembered the taste of that place when he had skimmed it briefly the first time he’d regained his Grace. “Here…I could see you in Heaven. But there, that won’t be an option. And that’s…not something I’m equipped to handle.”

Steve’s fingers dug briefly into Tony’s skin. “But you’ll have to.”

“Yeah, I will.” Tony closed his eyes, taking in a slow breath. “I wasn’t going to send you all off to your premature deaths, not if I could stop it. You’re going to die, but not now, and not at the hands of my brother.”

Steve’s hands drifted down to the small of Tony’s back to interlink together, his head shifting so that his forehead was pressed to Tony’s shoulder. “And that’s why you won’t…”

“That’s one reason,” Tony agreed softly.

Steve pulled back enough to look Tony in the eye. “There’s another?”

“Love’s a scary concept,” Tony said slowly. “Not one I’m familiar with. And it’s not one I think I’m capable of.”

Steve’s brow furrowed. “You said angels can.”

“Not really the kind of love you’re thinking of,” Gabriel said quietly. “That – eros, the Greeks called it – wasn’t really for us. Because we love, but not in that way. Not usually. When it happened, the usual result was Falling.” He closed his eyes, remembering Castiel. “Not that it stopped those who did fall in love.”

“Dean said you pushed him and Castiel together,” Steve said. “Why would you…?”

“Because love’s a beautiful thing when expressed right.” Gabriel smiled sadly, brushing the side of Steve’s jaw with a thumb before letting his hand drop. “And Castiel’s young. He didn’t have the same burden of power that I do.”

It took Steve only a few seconds to catch onto what he was implying. “He does now, though. That’s not going to change anything, is it?”

“I put a lot of responsibility on his shoulders.” Gabriel closed his eyes, the memory of that burning Grace leaving him to take hold inside Castiel, ascending him to something higher than anything he had been before. “Responsibility that he’ll handle, but it’s going to be difficult. I’ve no doubt that Dean’s going to be right there with him, and when it’s his time, Castiel will be right there as well.”

Steve’s lips thinned. “If you’re saying you should be alone, then you really are an idiot.”
Gabriel chuckled softly, feet bumping gently against the sides of Steve’s legs. “Then I guess I am one.”

“You won’t be, though.” Steve’s voice was steady and sure as he said this. “I promise.”

The corner of Tony’s mouth lifted in a small smile. “That’s not one you can make.”

There was something in Steve’s eyes that Tony didn’t recognize, and he wasn’t going to go sifting through his mind to find out what. “Yes,” he said, “it is.” One hand dropped off Tony’s back to reach out to something Tony had displaced earlier when he’d appeared on the table. He pressed the paper he had been drawing on into Tony’s hand, pulling back. “It’s for you.”

Then, standing, Steve leaned in, brushing his lips gently over Tony’s temple. He drew back with a small smile and left, leaving Tony there, stunned.

When he finally managed to look down to see what Steve had drawn, he found a delicately drawn portrait of him holding a sleeping Samael. Gabriel almost didn’t recognize the expression on his face, one of absolute tenderness and a small smile playing at his lips.

At the bottom of the portrait, Steve had written *Cherished*.

Dean hadn’t meant to eavesdrop on the conversation between Gabriel and Steve, but it had happened. Gabriel hadn’t seemed to notice his frozen presence behind the door, but one never knew with the archangel.

Luckily he’d left before Steve came out, confused and rather dazed at what he’d heard.

He hadn’t considered the repercussions of Castiel being an archangel now, though he really should have. Castiel was bigger than a regular angel. He had responsibilities that he hadn’t had before. Who was to say he really would stay on Earth when he had so much to clean up in Heaven?

And that part about love… Castiel had never told him that, although they’d had plenty of conversations about Castiel’s asexuality and what that would mean for their sex life as their relationship progressed.

Rubbing a hand over his face, Dean entered their bedroom and made sure to lock the door so Sam couldn’t come in. Not that he would after walking in on him and Castiel one too many times, both naked and fully clothed and watching TV.

Then, sitting down heavily on the bed, Dean buried his face in his hands, focusing on his breathing. It didn’t mean anything. Gabriel had sounded relatively confident Castiel would be staying with Dean. But Gabriel was also leaving soon, and he had been known to make mistakes.

What if this was one of them?

Not that Dean was upset about Castiel being an angel again. Really. Being an angel was such a fundamental part of who Castiel was that it’d been weird having him as a dorky, lovable human who treasured his sleep and still had the occasional trouble hitting the target with a gun. So the fact that Castiel was whole again was great.

It was just that Dean had no idea where he stood now in relation to Castiel’s new responsibilities as an archangel and guardian of free will. Which was a really lofty title.
Castiel would probably be way too busy to deal with him—

“Dean?” Castiel’s worried voice drew Dean out of his thoughts. “Are you okay?”

Dean lifted his head from his hands, making sure his voice was even. “I’m fine.”

There was a skeptical pause before Castiel said, “I can almost hear you thinking. You don’t sound fine.”

“Yeah, well, I am.” Dean closed his eyes, hoped Castiel would get the message and leave, but then heard the sound of the door unlocking and Castiel’s footsteps approaching him. He couldn’t even bring himself to be upset, as nothing but relief filled him at feeling Castiel next to him.

“You’ve told better lies,” Castiel said when Dean didn’t immediately speak. He rested a light hand on Dean’s shoulder, his skin warm even through the layers of clothing Dean wore.

“The door was locked,” Dean managed, meeting Castiel’s eyes.

“It’s locked again.” Castiel sat down next to him, his shoulder brushing against his companionably. “What is it?”

Dean remembered Gabriel telling Steve angels weren’t really made to love romantically. “It’s nothing.”

Castiel said nothing for several seconds, then he sighed. “I thought we’d been working on the talking thing.”

“I’m talking.”

“Yet you’re not saying anything of substance.” Castiel shifted. “Is this about me being an angel again?”

Dean’s jaw tightened, but he didn’t respond, keeping his eyes on his hands.

“So it is,” Castiel murmured. “Dean, what’s wrong?”

Dean swallowed, remembering Castiel promising that he’d stay, but that had been when he was a regular angel and human, not a freaking archangel. “You don’t have to stay with me, you know,” he said finally, voice low.

Castiel was very still next to him; he didn’t even sound like he was breathing. Then, in a voice that promised almost certain destruction to the unlucky party that had incurred his wrath, he said, “Who told you that? Who said I would leave?”

Dean’s eyes fluttered up to Castiel’s face, taking in the glittering eyes and flaring nostrils. “No one had to. You’re an archangel, Cas. You’ve got responsibilities. I don’t expect you to waste your time down here—”

“Being with you is not a waste of my time,” Castiel said fiercely, gripping Dean’s elbow tightly. “It’s what I want to do. And whether or not I’m an archangel now has no bearing on my feelings for you.”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Dean protested, all too clearly aware of how duty and emotions could be completely incompatible. “You’ve got things to take care of now. You don’t have time—”

“My time is my own to delegate,” Castiel interrupted him, lips thin. “I have no desire to return to
Heaven full-time for things I could do better down here. What’s more, Heaven doesn’t have you.”

Dean’s cheeks heated, his breath stuttering.

“What brought this on?” Castiel pressed, eyes narrowing. “You didn’t think about this before.”

“I…” Dean swallowed, arm shifting in Castiel’s grip. “Something Gabriel said, that’s all.”

“Gabriel hasn’t been in Heaven in a long time,” Castiel said. “And the way things were run before is not the way things will be run now. We won’t be cut off from Earth anymore. And I am not leaving. Get that out of your head.”

Dean inhaled shakily. “It’s not going to be the same.”

“No, it’s not.” Castiel’s eyes softened, and he slid his hand down Dean’s arm until their fingers were intertwined. His hand was ridiculously warm, and his thumb soothing as it stroked over Dean’s knuckles. “It’s going to be better.”

“You’ve got duties now,” Dean pointed out. “A responsibility to your family.”

“My family is you. And I have a choice.” Castiel’s smile was amused. “Raphael will help, and it’s time we step back and let our brothers and sisters do things independently.”

“Because of free will?”

“Because it’s time to change things. The old way wasn’t working.” Castiel gave him a small half-smile, his other hand drifting up to the side of Dean’s face. “And, yes, because we have free will. I’d be an incredibly crappy guardian of free will if I didn’t even exercise my own,” he said plainly. “I want to be with you. I choose to be with you. And if my brothers and sisters can’t accept that, then I’ll just quit.”

Dean frowned. “You can’t do that.”

“Who says I can’t? Free will, remember?” Castiel smiled wryly, darting in to press a dry kiss to the corner of Dean’s mouth. “So I’m not leaving,” he breathed against Dean’s skin. “And I won’t ever. You’re stuck with me one way or another, Dean Winchester.” He drew back, eyes crinkling as he grinned. “Is that going to be a problem?”

Dean swallowed, throat thick. “Hell, no.” He fist ed his hands in Castiel’s coat, pulling him in for a deeper kiss, chasing after the taste of brimstone, heat, lightning, and other in Castiel’s mouth. Castiel was warm and pliant under his hands, and Dean could so clearly recall a time when Castiel had been nothing but immovable stone, a celestial being in a vessel he was unaccustomed to inhabiting.

Castiel could still be like stone. But at least here and now, Dean was reassured that Castiel was his, and he was fully willing to be however Dean wanted him.

Chapter End Notes

Now with art from thalia-the-guitar! They made a gorgeous picture that pretty much captured exactly what I was picturing with Steve’s drawing.

This isn't everyone's head canon, but I kind of personally view Gabriel/Tony as aro/ace.
As in, he's fully capable of loving platonically, but romantic love is a bit out of his scope. That doesn't mean he can't have relationships, but anyone he gets into a relationship with should know that. And for Steve, it's a bit of a tough pill to swallow, even if he still has Gabriel/Tony there as a beloved friend and emotional support.

So, there were a lot of other uncomfortable and emotional conversations here, and they were all necessary given the decisions Gabriel/Tony made before. Because he went off without any warning on a virtual suicide mission knowing full well he wasn't going to come back, and no one liked that. Least of all his friends and family.

And this is the last intimate scene we're gonna have of Dean and Castiel in this story. I hope you enjoyed the glimpses we had into their relationship. Sooner or later we're going to see just how they got to this place in For Want of a Nail, which is still a WIP.

I hope you enjoyed it! Please let me know what you thought!
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

My apologies for the later update than usual. I'd neglected to add about a 1,000 words or so to this chapter because I was too busy gaming. In any case, it's done now and I think typos are taken care of, so...

We still have an epilogue to go after this, and then this story is done at over 170,000 words. It's a lot longer than I expected it would be when I started!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Two days later, things had calmed down enough to the point where Tony was relatively sure that the Winchesters would be fine. Castiel had a good handle on his new abilities, and Raphael would be there to help him with any other issues that rose.

The demon in the basement that Kevin had complained about had been cured after some debate between Gabriel and Raphael as to whether they should finish it or just put the poor sap out of his misery. The matter was settled when Castiel eventually admitted that they had a lot to owe to the former crossroads demon, even if he had also caused them a lot of grief. So now Dean and Sam had one cured demon on their hands who was thoroughly remorseful, and neither of them seemed very certain what to do with him. Especially since Crowley’s main avenue of work was out of question.

In any case, that wasn’t Gabriel’s problem. No, he was quite happily washing his hands of that. Besides, he had his own things to worry about. Namely Samael, and how he was going to handle raising the little one.

The picture of a well-adjusted being he wasn’t, and Tony didn’t think he was the best choice for this. But there really wasn’t another option. Samael couldn’t stay here, not with the actions of Lucifer coloring his previous life.

Gadreel would be coming back as well, although Raphael had seemed rather doubtful of this choice. Castiel had, however, supported him from the moment he had announced it to everyone else. Not that anything would have swayed Gadreel from his decision; Gabriel knew that very well.

So now they were standing outside the bunker, ready to head back to Tony’s home universe. Which wasn’t anything he would have pictured himself doing several years ago. Or even several months ago, actually. Things had really changed.

Jarvis was holding Samael, who seemed extremely fascinated with the shiny light of the arc reactor and the armor in general. Tony could already tell that Samael was going to be a nuisance in the workshop.

“I’m going to miss you,” Raphael said, body as straight as a board. “Don’t die again.”

Gabriel snorted, grinning. “I’m going to ask the same of you, sis.”

A small smile curved at Raphael’s lips, and she glanced back at the others standing by the Impala. “I think we’ll be fine.”
“Yeah.” Gabriel waved at Castiel, who smiled in response. “I think you will.”

“Take care of my company,” Raphael said.

Gabriel stilled, head tilting back slightly. “I’m not actually related to you in human terms…”

All he got was a smirk. “It’s been worked out.”

“No fair.” Gabriel folded his arms, rocking back on his heels. “I’m the Trickster here.”

“Retired, remember?” Dean called.

“You kidding me? Once a Trickster, always a Trickster.” Gabriel grinned, snapping his fingers and turning Dean’s flannel jacket into a puffy white winter jacket that was bedazzled with shiny stones.

“Hey!” Dean yelped, slamming an elbow into Sam’s chest, who winced and took a careful step away from his brother.

“Mature, Tony,” Steve said from behind Gabriel, sounding all too amused.

Gabriel looked at him, winking. “I thought so.”

“In all seriousness,” Raphael said, eyes flickering between him and Gadreel, “I most likely won’t see either of you again.”

Gabriel’s smile faded. “Yeah.” He forced a cheerful tone. “You won’t even notice my absence, not with all the stuff here to keep you occupied.”

“I’ll notice it.” Raphael’s smile was regretful. “I wish we had more time together, but I respect your choice.” She met Samael’s eyes, stepping up to Jarvis to brush fingers through nir dark hair. “As for you, Samael, I wish you luck and good fortune.”

Samael said nothing, but nir eyes studied Raphael solemnly, a spark of awareness that no other child nir age had. Ne turned toward Gabriel, raising nir arms in an unspoken question.

“Not yet, Samael.” Gabriel let Samael take his hand to lighten the blow. He needed his arms free to do what he had to.

Raphael gave Gabriel one last smile, then took several steps back, hands held behind her. “You are blessed and protected,” she said, speaking the words in Enochian. “Go forth and live well. May we meet again.”

Holding her eyes, Gabriel repeated the words, hearing Gadreel do the same after he was done. The ritualistic magic of it settled around his shoulders, warm in the protection it offered.

“One more thing.” Castiel closed the distance between them, wrapping Gabriel in a sudden hug that he didn’t expect. “I wish you luck, brother. And thank you for all that you’ve done.”

Floundering slightly, Gabriel eventually closed his arms around Castiel’s shoulders, returning the gesture. “Be well, Castiel. You’re going to be fine, little brother.”

Castiel nodded briefly, his chin digging slightly into Gabriel’s shoulder. He pulled away a moment later, arms dropping to his sides. “Safe travels.”

“Thanks.” Gabriel waved to Dean, Sam, and Kevin, who waved back, though Dean raised his eyebrows while doing so. “Take care of them.”
Castiel didn’t ask who Gabriel meant. “You know I will.”

Unable to resist smiling, Gabriel nodded, looking back at his family. “Ready?”

“How long do you think we’ll have been gone?” Steve asked from next to him.

“Time differences being what they are…” Gabriel turned on his heel, facing them all and making sure they were in their places. “I’ve absolutely no clue.”

Then, placing his hands on Steve’s and Jarvis’s shoulders, Gadreel standing directly opposite him with Loki by his side, Gabriel unfurled his wings and pushed, tracing the boundaries of the universe and stepping through them, following the path he had taken last time. Tendrils of his Grace and the power of the Tesseract still clung to the path, smoothening the way.

He could feel Gadreel’s Grace behind him, bolstering his power and also keeping hold of their passengers.

One moment they were in the darkness between universes, and the next Gabriel found himself stumbling to a halt on the helicopter pad of his tower, his wings quivering with the energy he’d just expended. Behind him, he heard Gadreel take in a deep breath and let it out, his Grace in a similar state.

Steve’s hand came to Gabriel’s elbow, pulling him upright. “We’re here.” He sounded faintly disbelieving.

“Did you think I wouldn’t manage it?” Gabriel elbowed him in the chest, getting an amused huff for his efforts. “I’m hurt.” He grinned, looking back at the glass windows of the tower.

“I’m sure you are.” Steve sounded like he was grinning, and a quick glance confirmed this.

“It is strange how different this world feels,” Loki said, looking up at the blue sky. “I had not even noticed.”

“There are different energies here,” Gadreel agreed, eyes unfocused.

The faceplate lifted, and Jarvis looked at Tony, smiling softly. “There is incoming,” he said teasingly.

“What, you mean bombs?” Tony grinned brightly, snagging a surprised Gadreel by the arm. “C’mon.”

Tony pulled open the door in time for a small body shrieking “Dad!” to jump into his arms. He caught Dummy just in time, arms tightening around his eldest. “Hey, kid.”

Dummy’s legs wrapped around Tony’s waist, ankles locking together. “It’s you?” he asked into Tony’s neck.

Butterfingers and You stood there, both looking uncertain despite Dummy’s eager greeting.

Dropping to one knee, Tony propped Dummy up and inclined his head at the two, smiling. “You don’t want one?”

It was all the invitation they needed before they slammed into Tony. It was only by the grace of his balance that he didn’t tip over, instead bracing himself for the exuberant hugs.

“It’s me,” Tony said quietly, pressing his lips into Butterfingers’ dark hair. “I’m sorry.”
“But you’re back now,” You said in Chinese, and the words clicked in Tony’s mind the way they hadn’t before when he’d been entirely human.

“And I’m staying,” Tony responded, a glow of happiness lighting in his chest at You’s bright expression.

Dummy wiggled slightly in his grip. “Who’s that?” he whispered, his breath tickling Tony’s ear.

Tony cheated, spreading his awareness back to see who specifically Dummy was referring to, and wasn’t at all surprised to find that Gadreel was still standing out there like a statue, clearly uncertain of his welcome. “Gadreel.”

Shifting back, Tony let go of Butterfingers and You, standing with Dummy still clinging like a barnacle to him. “Don’t be a stranger.”

“I am,” Gadreel protested, though the words were weak as Tony took hold of his wrist and pulled him inside, kicking the door shut as he did.

Supporting Dummy’s weight in one arm, Tony wrapped the other around Gadreel’s shoulders, pulling him into his side and grinning brightly at the people in his living room. “This is Gadreel, my younger brother. He’ll be staying here.”

“Nice to meet you,” Rhodey said casually, stepping forward and taking Gadreel’s slack hand to shake it. “I don’t suppose you’ve got any good stories about Tony as a kid?”

“We were never children,” Gadreel said mechanically, a faint sense of panic radiating off him.

“That’s okay,” Rhodey reassured him. “Any story’s fine, actually. As long as it’s embarrassing.”

Gadreel was silent for a moment, eyes flickering to Tony. “There was this one time that he attempted to sneak into Eden,” he said finally. “He tried to bribe me with a blue apple.”

“How was I supposed to know apples weren’t blue?” Tony demanded, the laughter in his tone signaling he wasn’t mad. It was also the cue for the last of the tension in Gadreel’s to vanish, and Tony relaxed his grip. “We’d never had apples around before.”

“To be honest, brother, I was always more surprised that you knew what the color blue was.” Gadreel was smiling.

“Why is there a baby.” Clint sounded rather dismayed.

“J, give me nem.” Tony made a soft shushing sound as Samael made a disgruntled sound at being moved now. He bent down to his knees, letting Dummy go and propping Samael up. “This is Samael,” he said, thumbs rubbing over Samael’s wrists. “Your younger sibling.”

He heard the startled murmurs from the others at the name, but he ignored them to keep his eyes on his kids.

“Sister or brother?” Dummy asked, tentatively reaching out to touch Samael.

“Don’t know yet.” Tony jiggled Samael slightly. “I’ll nem decide when ne’s a little older. So how about it?” He looked at his kids. “Ready to have a younger sibling again?”

Dummy stared down at Samael, eyes inscrutable. He looked back at his siblings, who were both huddled up behind him, peeking over his shoulders. Then he met Tony’s eyes, nodding. “Yeah.”
Tony grinned. “Want to hold nem?”

In answer, Dummy held out his arms, curling them around Samael as Tony lowered nem. He looked fascinated, rocking back slightly as he took Samael’s entire weight. “Tiny,” he breathed, glancing up at Tony with big eyes.

“How’s be for very long.” Tony ruffled Dummy’s hair, standing. He looked up at the others, seeing James Barnes next to Natasha, eyes inscrutable and metal arm gleaming faintly.

“So you remember?” Natasha asked, voice carefully modulated.

“I remember a lot,” Tony said, a small smile flickering over his lips before disappearing. “But it’s been a while.” But not long enough to cover the hurt and pain he’d felt while amnesiac.

“You were gone almost four weeks,” Natasha said, shoulder brushing James’s.

“Almost four weeks?” Tony gave Steve a thumbs up. “Looks like I managed to squeeze back some time.”

“You were gone longer then?” Bruce asked, face curious.

“A lot longer,” Tony said pleasantly, keeping his face clear of the memories that struggled to surge forth.

“A little over a month,” Steve said, giving Tony a worried look.

Gadreel’s wings brushed against Tony’s, giving him enough reassurance and warmth to pull him out of the memories of cold and pain, and then twin loud meows distracted him from the rest.

“They missed you,” Butterfingers informed Tony as Suzie and Dustin wormed their way around Loki’s feet to greet Tony, Dustin running into Tony’s shins before coming to a stop and kneading his feet. Suzie rubbed herself against Tony’s legs, looking up at him with wide eyes and meowing.

Now that he had his senses back, Tony could clearly sense the love and sharp awareness from the two kittens. They knew exactly who he was, and neither of them was afraid, instead drawn to the energy he radiated like a moth was to a light.

He crouched, taking Dustin’s face in one hand, thumb scratching his chin as he thought. He remembered Castiel pressing two fingers to Dustin’s forehead, sorrow and pain written on his face because he couldn’t help. It was true that Dustin would adjust, but he would always be in a sort of danger that Suzie wouldn’t be. Such was the danger of navigating a world without sight.

Tony held Dustin still, rubbing a thumb over the kitten’s eyes, healing destroyed nerves and growing two organs where there had been none. When he withdrew his hand, Dustin blinked open green eyes, focusing on Tony’s face seconds later.

“You healed him!” Butterfingers dropped to her knees opposite Tony, snatching Dummy up without any warning. “He can see now!” She was grinning broadly, nuzzling Dustin’s face.

“Such a bleeding heart,” Loki drawled as Tony straightened, gently shooing Suzie away.

“You knew exactly what you were getting into,” Tony said, waving a dismissive hand. He refocused on the others. “How’ve you been?”

Natasha shared a look with Steve. “Quiet.”
“So quiet,” Rhodey agreed, smiling at Tony. “We’ve missed you, you big lug.”

It was as easy as breathing to smile back at Rhodey, warm happiness growing in his chest.

“Was there any trouble while we were gone?” Steve asked.

“Nothing we couldn’t handle,” Natasha said offhandedly.

“Well, there was a man-lizard,” Clint said, “but he wasn’t any trouble.”

“A man-lizard?” Steve sounded alarmed.

“Wanted to turn all of us into lizards, too,” Clint continued. “But this kid in a spider suit kicked his ass before we could do anything.”

“Dr. Connors has been locked up,” Natasha assured Steve. “And Spider-Man knows how to contact us if he needs us.”

“Does he have spider powers?” Tony asked. “Name like Spider-Man…”

“He crawls up walls,” Clint said. “And shoots webbing.”

“The webbing is actually some kind of tech,” Bruce pointed out.

Clint waved him off. “It counts.”

“Anything else?” Steve pressed.

“You’d think you didn’t trust me,” Natasha said wryly. “Relax, Steve. Everything’s fine. Dr. Connors was the only trouble we had.”

“By the way…” Rhodey edged closer to Tony. “Where’s Raphael?”

Tony gave him a lopsided smile. “Decided to stay there. They had need of another archangel.”

“And you’re going to stay here?” Rhodey’s voice was quiet, his eyes carefully not meeting Tony’s. Snorting, Tony gently ribbed him. “This is my home, idiot. Sure, it was nice seeing the family and all, but they don’t need me. And I would’ve missed your bad jokes too much.”

“Hey.” Rhodey shoved a finger into Tony’s face. “Pot, meet kettle. Your sense of humor is atrocious.”

“It’s highly developed,” Tony disagreed, grinning broadly.

“Oh, it’s something, all right.” Rhodey’s eyes crinkled as he grinned back. “It’s good to have you back, Tony.”

“I was never gone,” Tony said, but then he remembered how lost he’d been. And frightened. “Just kinda…lost.” He dipped his head closer, dropping his voice. “Thanks, by the way.”

“For what?” Rhodey’s voice was just as quiet. “You’re my best friend. Think I’d leave you alone like that?”

“Thanks,” Tony repeated, smiling at Rhodey’s little huff.

There was a tug at the fabric of space, a flare of magic, and then a man in an ostentatious outfit was
standing in the room, facing Tony. The collar of his cape was ridiculously high, going up past his neck, and for a second Tony wondered just why before reminding himself that magic users could be eccentric.

“You are Tony Stark?” the man demanded Tony when the other didn’t speak.

“That’s what they call me.” Tony gave the man one more sweeping look before realizing that he’d seen him before briefly. “You’re Dr. Strange.”

“You know him?” Natasha’s eyebrows were raised.

“I make a habit of checking out magic users in a universe that doesn’t have much magic. And you’ve got a lot of it.” Strange did a double take when he saw Gadreel. “Who’s this?”

“My brother Gadreel,” Tony answered easily. “Is there something you needed?”

“I sensed a disturbance, and the spells I set went off,” Strange said, eyes returning to Tony. He saw Loki a second later, and an amused smile curled at his lips. “I’m pleased to see that your trip did succeed after all.”

Loki didn’t look at all impressed. “Was there any doubt?”

“A significant amount, yes,” Strange said, unfluffled. “In any case, you should know that your brother has been asking after you. He was displeased to hear that you had left without a word.”

“Ah.” Loki’s eyes averted shiftily for a moment before he looked at Tony. “I will take my leave of you then, Gabriel. Just to be certain that Thor has not burnt Asgard to the ground in my absence.”

“Don’t be a stranger,” Tony said casually. “You’re both welcome here anytime.”

“And you as well,” Loki returned, inclining his head. It took only a moment, and then Loki was gone, his magic taking him to Asgard.

Strange was studying Tony, eyes dark. “Which is it then? Tony Stark or Gabriel?”

Rocking back on his heels, Tony offered a nonchalant shrug. “Both. Neither. I’m an incognito angel.” He put a finger to his lips, winking.

“He prefers Tony,” Rhodey added, giving Tony a longsuffering look. “Less questions that way.”

“Which reminds me.” Tony looked at Steve. “What happened to the two idiots that had Castiel and me?”

“What are you going to do if we tell you?” Natasha eyed him warily.

The slightly hidden hostility in Natasha’s tone had his hackles rising. It had been over a decade for him, but the emotions were no less sharp than they had been when he’d just been human. And the hurt that lingered from the days before he and Castiel had been transported to their original world was too strong for him to ignore.

Not that he was that mature anyway.

Tony’s smile was flat. “Okay, don’t tell me. Not that I need your permission.” It took him a moment to locate the two, and then he was there, standing in a sterile room with two beds wired up to several
different machines.

Zachariah and Uriel lay in the beds, a myriad IV lines inserted into their arms. He checked the bags, noting the horse sedatives that were being pumped into their bodies and a cocktail of other drugs that suppressed most of the effects of Extremis. Faint orange flickers simmered beneath their skin, Extremis burning out the sedative practically as fast as it could be pumped in.

“Gabriel.” Gadreel appeared behind him.

Gabriel didn’t look back at him. “You recognize them?”

Gadreel hesitated slightly before saying, “No.”

“Zachariah,” Gabriel said, gesturing to Zachariah, “and Uriel.”

It took Gadreel a moment before he spoke again. “They are human.”

“We all were,” Gabriel said, memories turning to Azazel and Raphael and Lilith. “Lilith wasn’t, but Azazel was. And Raphael. Me.” He rubbed the back of his head, glancing back at Gadreel with a distracted smile before he snapped a chair into existence. “You planning on staying?”

“What are you going to do?” Gadreel sounded uncertain.

Gabriel sat, eyes on Zachariah’s still face. “Don’t know yet.” He crossed his legs, leaning an elbow on the armrest, hand going to his chin. “They won’t notice me.” He’d been invisible the moment he’d arrived, and S.H.I.E.L.D. tech was easily manipulated.

Gadreel moved up to stand behind Gabriel’s shoulder, the jacket rubbing against the back of the chair. “You left rather abruptly,” he noted. Unspoken was the statement that the others were worried.

“Hm.” Gabriel closed his eyes, his fingers trailing up to rub his temple. “Emotions, Gadreel. They’re a bit trying.”

“Did something happen?” Gadreel sounded confused.

“Not then, no.” Gabriel dropped his hand, craning his head back to look at his brother. “But before. It’s been a while, but they’re still…raw.”

Gadreel said nothing else for several minutes, and Gabriel returned his focus to Zachariah and Uriel, mind whirring.

“What would you have me tell them?” Gadreel asked finally.

Gabriel rubbed his fingers together before pressing them to his lips, coming to a decision. “I’ll be back soon. Just have to take care of something here.” Leaning forward, he yanked the IV out of Zachariah’s arm, turning the alarms on the monitors off with an impatient twitch of his fingers. He did the same to Uriel a minute later.

Standing now, Gabriel folded his arms across his chest, waiting at the foot of the beds for the men to wake up. It didn’t long, both of them waking rather abruptly to find themselves chained to the railings of the beds.

Gabriel didn’t say anything, waiting for Zachariah and Uriel to notice his presence. When they inevitably did, their eyes widened briefly; he couldn’t stop a cold sense of satisfaction from flashing through him.
There was rattling at the door to the room, the lock jimmying as the guards outside the room evidently realized that something was wrong because Gabriel had shut off the machines but he hadn’t stopped them transmitting, not caring enough to do so. The door banged open for all of a second before Gabriel slammed it close with a hand gesture, barring it shut.

“You’re alive?” Zachariah sounded faint.

“I’m a rather hard man to kill, Ty,” Gabriel said. “You should know better.” He let a small tendril of his power out, letting it fill the room with an interminable pressure and weight; the lights crackled ominously. “You’ll find that I’m rather displeased with the two of you.”

Zachariah’s hands pulled at the cuffs, but the cocktail of other drugs that S.H.I.E.L.D. had him on left him weak enough that his efforts did nothing. “H-how?”

“Just luck, I suppose.” Gabriel drew in his power, and the lights steadied. “Now, what to do with you two, because I really can’t have you running around like you are.”

“You won’t kill us.” Uriel’s voice was filled with venom, his eyes hard. “Not you.”

“Really.” Gabriel let some of his anger slip into his voice, the cold fury that had filled him since he’d come here and seen what his brothers had done to themselves. “Not me?” The metal at Uriel’s feet started glowing with heat.

“We’re sorry,” Zachariah said quickly, getting Gabriel’s attention. “It was nothing personal, Gabriel, really.” He laughed nervously. “Just business. I’m sure you understand?”

“Oh, of course.” Gabriel put on a genial smile. “Just business. I’m sure that’s the excuse you used when you orchestrated an apocalypse. The same excuse you used when you threatened to torture Castiel. It was. Just. Business.” A light bulb went out, shattering glass and throwing sparks.

“Gabriel.” Gadreel’s voice was quiet, but it cut through the red haze.

Taking a calming breath, Gabriel plastered another blank smile on. “Well, as it so happens, you’d be right, Uriel. I’m not killing you.”

“Then what?” Uriel sneered. “You’ll lock us up? There isn’t a prison on this planet that can hold us.”

“Funny. What are you in right now?” Gabriel laughed. “It’s a prison, Uriel. Humans are a lot more ingenious than you’d give them credit for. Hypocritical, actually, considering you’re one right now.”

“I am better—”

“I told Lucifer this, and I’ll tell you this, too, before I finish. They’re better.” Gabriel came up to the side of the bed, rolling back his sleeve over his elbow. “Messy, painful, warlike, brutal…they try so hard, and they keep getting back up no matter what happens. And”—he flashed Uriel a smile—“they’re better than we ever were.” Without another word, he plunged a hand into Uriel’s chest, sinking directly into his soul and his genetics.

Howling in pain, Uriel writhed, struggling to pull away from Gabriel’s hold but failing. His skin blazed orange, and it danced in intricate patterns down to Gabriel’s hand, swirling around it. It took minutes, the orange slowly receding from Uriel’s skin to congregate in a roiling mass around Gabriel’s hand.

When he was done, Gabriel pulled his hand out, fisting a glowing orange mass that he let dissipate into the air. At the same time, he brushed two fingers across Uriel’s forehead, wiping any and all
memories he had of his past lifetime and of the last several years.

Turning to Zachariah, Gabriel raised an eyebrow at the other’s rather terrified look. “No worries, Ty,” he said easily, going to Zachariah’s bed. “It’s nothing personal.”

Later, after they left S.H.I.E.L.D.’s premises to hide in the recesses of Earth’s atmosphere and watch the planet spin under and around them, Gadreel spoke. “It felt rather personal.”

“Yeah, well…humans lie.” Gabriel dipped back, letting the heat of the sun soak through him. “And so do angels.”

“They won’t remember, will they?”

“Echoes and impressions, but no.” Gabriel spun over Gadreel’s form, letting his wings brush the other’s teasingly. “Can’t do anything about their stellar personalities, sadly. There’s only so far I’m willing to go.”

Gadreel pushed back at Gabriel, tentative amusement flickering through him. “Will you return now?” he asked after a moment.

Letting his awareness slip through space to find his home and the people inside, Gabriel considered the question. The memories were still a sore spot for him, but he wasn’t quite as likely to yell at them. Considering how volatile his temper was at the moment, that was a very good thing.

He didn’t feel particularly inclined to explain just why he broke things when he lost his temper when it had never been a problem before.

“Yeah,” Gabriel sighed, dropping below Gadreel to spiral through the atmosphere. “Let’s.”

He spent a few minutes amusing himself dashing ahead of Gadreel before doubling back and tugging at him teasingly. The fact that Gadreel kept startling and didn’t seem to know what to do was both amusing and sad, though Gabriel didn’t let the latter thought show, simply laughing when Gadreel halfheartedly griped at him the third time Gabriel tugged at his wings.

When Gabriel finally landed back in his home, he felt rather windswept, even his hair reflecting this.

Gadreel was just as unruffled, his jacket slightly askew before he straightened it.

“Where were you?” Natasha asked sharply, phone in hand and screen on. “I’ve been fielding calls from S.H.I.E.L.D. for the last half hour.”

“There’s your answer then,” Tony said, grinning exuberantly. It took him a moment to calm down from the glee running through him, and even then he couldn’t stop from vibrating in place. It had been so long since he’d flown like that with a sibling.

“Do I want to know what you did?” Steve sounded simultaneously amused and resigned.

“You’ll find out shortly anyway.” Tony waved a dismissive hand before running it through his hair and tidying the unruly locks. “Extracted Extremis and wiped their memories. They’re as human as you are now.”

“Which doesn’t really say much considering who they are,” Pepper said dryly. She smiled at him, stepping into his space and giving him a tight hug that Tony returned. “I’m glad you’re back, Tony.”

Tony smiled into her shoulder. “How’s the company?”
“Just fine. Relieved that they haven’t had any pranks to deal with.”

“Well, now.” Tony raised his eyebrows at a visibly amused Pepper. “That’s just not on, is it?”

“Can we help?” Dummy asked eagerly, grinning at Tony over a sleeping Samael’s head.

“We can do the vents,” You added.

“We have paints,” Butterfingers said solemnly, but her eyes were bright.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” Steve objected.

“Are you kidding me?” Clint smirked. “Can you imagine the chaos?”

“Yes, in fact, I can.”

“I don’t really think you’re one to talk,” James said idly, “considering you had a fair hand in some chaos yourself.” His lips twitched as Steve looked at him.

“Little chaos’s good.” Tony smirked at Gadreel, who just gazed back implacably. “But I think for now we can settle for some downtime. It’s been a crazy—decade, give or take a few years—‘month.’”

The tone of the words had his friends looking at him worriedly, brows furrowed.

“You’re all right?” Pepper asked, eyes searching.

Tony’s grin was soft, his eyes scanning the room with his friends and family. It wasn’t perfect, but then home usually wasn’t. “I’m great.”

Later, when Tony had set up the bedroom for Samael and figured out how sleeping arrangements were going to work given that ne wouldn’t be sleeping as much as a human, he sat back in the armchair he’d set up by the window and forced himself to relax, closing his eyes and soaking in the familiar energies of his home.

It was only minutes before he heard Natasha quietly enter the room and close the door behind her. He didn’t react, keeping his eyes closed and his head back.

Five minutes later, Natasha finally spoke, voice low. “Samael…wasn’t ne your older sibling?”

Tony cracked his eyes open slightly, seeing that Natasha was standing right by Samael’s crib, eyes dark. “I couldn’t kill him,” he said after a moment, tone flat. He looked up at the vent in the ceiling, Clint’s soul shining through the ceiling in a way that completely ruined all attempts at subterfuge. “I…just couldn’t.” There was no way he could explain it, not to a human.

“Samael is a child,” Natasha said, meeting Tony’s eyes. “Whatever ne did previously doesn’t have any bearings on who ne is now. I understand that.”

Tony said nothing, but he did raise his eyebrows.

Natasha fidgeted slightly, chin coming up imperceptibly. “You’re upset with me.”

Jaw tightening, Tony pushed down the flare of anger that was incited by her casual tone. He couldn’t afford to lose control here. “What gives you that impression?” He propped his elbow up on the armrest, head coming to rest on his knuckles.
Natasha’s shoulders straightened, almost as if she was bracing herself for something. “What we talked about before… I said some things I shouldn’t have.”

Throat working, Tony closed his eyes, remembering that ugly argument. “So did I.” His voice was quiet.

“You were hurting,” Natasha said, her eyes meeting Tony’s. “And we pushed you for more than you could give.”

Tony shifted, dropping his hand into his lap. He pushed his shoulder blades into the soft back of the armchair, using the physical sensation to ground himself. “Do you know what it was like, seeing you look at me and wanting someone else? There was nothing I could do about it, because I was… just Tony.”

Natasha’s mouth opened, almost as if she was going to say something, but then she closed it. Her stance slid into the standard military pose.

Looking at her, Tony felt the anger and hurt dim slightly, banked by the resigned look in her eyes, like she was expecting to be reamed over the coals for something that she really couldn’t have helped anymore than Tony could have when he’d been Grace-less. And he was just… tired. And while he was still angry about what had happened – about the way his friends had handled the situation – there wasn’t anything he could do about it. Anything they could do about it.

They’d been unequipped to handle him without his memories. They’d been unequipped to deal with a traumatized human who knew too much but not enough.

“I’m not going to fight with you about this, Natasha,” Tony said finally, unable to keep the weariness out of his voice. He stood, closing the distance between them to stand in front of her. “What’s done is done, and there isn’t anything we can do about it.”

Natasha looked at him, nervousness radiating off her in a way that only Tony could see. “I don’t like making mistakes,” she admitted.

“Neither do I, but I make them. It’s part of being an intelligent being capable of making decisions like a big boy.” A small smile flickered across Tony’s face before it faded.

Hesitating minutely, Natasha took a small breath before saying, “You always said that you were the same person. But Tony – when you didn’t remember – you didn’t say that.”

“I am the same person.” Tony couldn’t keep the recrimination out of his tone. Stopping, he took a quick breath, keeping his voice calm as he continued. “There’s a difference between who I was before and who I am now, because you can’t comprehend it. I’m not the same person I was before I became Tony Stark, and I’m not the same person now that I remember. I’m more. And humans… you can’t understand that. I couldn’t understand that.”

A weak smile pulled at his lips. “I am who I am, Natasha. Whatever you think, I am Tony Stark, and I’m also Gabriel. But only at the same time.”

There was a short pause before Natasha answered. “You’re right, I don’t really understand it. But I can tell you I’m sorry about what happened; it won’t happen again.”

“No, it won’t.” His smile now was noticeably brighter. “Not in the least because I won’t let it.”

“Intentions aren’t everything,” Natasha said quietly, something dark entering her eyes.
“Yeah, I suppose they aren’t.” Tony glanced at the closed door, senses going to the people elsewhere in the tower. “Tell James that if he wants, I can see what I can do about his memories.”

There was no hiding the shock on Natasha’s face now. “You’d do that?”

“I would.” Tony’s fingers twitched slightly at the memory of Gadreel’s Grace burning hot in his own as he struggled to heal the damage inflicted on Gabriel’s throat. “But the mind’s a tricky thing; he should think it over.” And Tony should ask Gadreel if he’d be willing to do it in his stead, because it wasn’t very likely that Tony would do much good at this point. He would be more likely to destroy than heal.

Though she looked rather like she suspected what was going through Tony’s head, Natasha graced him with a small smile. “I’ll let him know. Thank you.” She hesitated briefly, then touched him gently on the arm. “I’m glad you’re back with us. It wasn’t the same without you.”

Tony grinned. “Funnily enough, I missed you guys, too. I’ve even missed the way Clint spies on us through the ceiling vents.”

There was a low curse and then a scuffling sound as Clint scrambled away.

Natasha was definitely amused now, and she was smiling as she went for the door. It wasn’t until she was out of the room that she spoke again. “Thank you for coming back.”

The door closed before Tony could think to respond. He stood there wordlessly for several moments before turning to the side to look down at a sleeping Samael, who hadn’t woken up at all through the conversation.

The image of a piece of paper with a portrait flashed through his mind, and Gabriel couldn’t help but reach down into his pocket where he’d tucked the folded piece of paper away for the trip, feeling its folds under his fingertips. “How couldn’t I?” The fingers of his other hand closed around the bars of the crib, his eyes on Samael. How could I not?

One decision had been the easiest thing in the world, and the other the hardest he’d ever had to make. But he couldn’t regret it.

Not if it brought him this.

Chapter End Notes

HUGS ALL AROUND. The kids needed them, and so did Gabriel/Tony. Zachariah and Uriel have been dealt with and the story is winding down. That last difficult conversation between Gabriel/Tony and Natasha was one that needed to be written, and a lot of you guys were asking for Gabriel to ream his friends out for the way they treated Tony at the beginning. Given all that Gabriel/Tony's been through now, he's not likely to ream them out beyond saying that wasn't cool. He gets it was difficult; he remembers what it was like.

We've got an epilogue to go, and then we are done. I am going to miss this story...

I hope you enjoyed this. Please let me know what you thought!
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Yeah, this is the end. At long last, we've come to the end of The Last Archangel: Redemption. I hope that this story met and (hopefully) exceeded expectations for a sequel to The Last Archangel. I know I found it at points difficult to write, but it was a tale that needed to be told for these characters.

I also wanted to thank the readers and writers who have been amazingly kind enough to write their own inspired sequel to this story, spin-offs, and even a roleplaying blog for Jarvis. philoda has been writing their own sequel to The Last Archangel: The Other Side of the Coin. Alatar Maia wrote a spin-off of sorts in Chapter 6 of her own story The Drawer of Ideas and Impossible Things. And brightestfallen on tumblr created a roleplaying blog for Jarvis. Thank you all!

I would really love it if every single one of you could drop a note and let me know what you thought of this story. Did you like it? Why? If you didn't like it, why did you keep reading? What did you love about it? What did you hate? What could I improve? What would you like to see in any timestamps I write? Give me some feedback please!

In addition, I have a tumblr. If you've got questions and want me to put them on a more public forum, hit me up there!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It took a few months for everyone to sink back into normality. Even after the conversation Tony had with Natasha, it took a little bit before team dynamics were back to normal. The addition of James was a welcome change to their team roster, especially after Tony and Gadreel did what they could to fix what HYDRA had done to him.

There were still days when Tony had the sensation that he was back in the Cage. There were times when he looked at Samael and saw Lucifer and his voice locked up and he left so no one could ask him what was wrong. Those were the days he spent in his workshop or going out for a trip through the universe, letting the solitude calm his Grace.

But just as there were bad days, there were good days. Samael’s first word had been a joyous if disconcerting event where Tony had tried his best to get nem to say “Uncle Tony,” not “Dada.” So far Samael hadn’t seemed to get it, but Tony had hopes that ne would.

Gadreel fit in well enough with Tony’s makeshift family, although there were times when Gadreel seemed lost. Tony pulled him into various shenanigans when those times rolled around, not wanting to see his brother lost in the doldrums. The kids helped, too, if Tony asked, sometimes too exuberantly. (Tony hadn’t stopped laughing for days after the time the kids had successfully managed to dye Gadreel’s hair rainbow, turn all his clothes pink, and have the most obnoxious pop songs play whenever Gadreel entered a room.)

In any case, Gabriel was overall pretty pleased with how things had turned out. Sometimes his thoughts turned towards the rest of the Host in his old world and how Castiel was doing as a newly promoted archangel, but there was nothing he could do about it, so he turned his attention to other
matters. There were moments when he thought about Michael because he couldn’t not, not with Michael’s last moments engraved in his last mind like a brand. Again, that way only led to madness, so he forced himself to concentrate on something else and not on the little flicker of resentment that the memory sparked in him when he looked at Samael.

It wasn’t Samael’s fault. It wasn’t.

Though sometimes Gabriel really had to remind himself of this fact because there were so many similarities between the two that it was jarring (and he really shouldn’t have expected anything different, really).

Never once did he regret giving Samael this chance.

There was no way he could, not with Samael’s zeal and love for life infecting every single day he lived. It was absolutely remarkable, and it definitely brightened up their days.

All things told, Tony was content. Which was why he never expected something else to happen that would turn everything topsy-turvy.

In the months since Tony had come back, the world had managed to sort out most of its problems post-Leviathan. There were a lot of structural problems in the governments, but most of the panic was over. It meant that Rhodey was called back to the army and that Tony was kept busy with his company, making sure it stayed on top of new developments.

The villains crept out of the woodworks just as many times as the Avengers beat them down. Tony took up the Iron Man suit again, more amused now that he was seen less as a vigilante than as an eccentric superhero who joined in on the Avengers’ fights.

The days and nights when it was possible for the team to kick back and relax were cherished, with most of Tony’s time taken up by the team, his kids, and making sure that Samael didn’t get into messes because for someone who was less than a year old, the kid could get into some crazy stuff (no one spoke about the time that Samael had managed to get himself lost in the vents).

It was a run-of-the-mill evening with no foreseeable appointments when Fate decided that Tony needed another kick in the pants. (He was going to have words with her at some point or another, even if it meant that she’d be pissed with him.)

It was the good kind of evening, Pepper with them even though she’d been spending more of her nights with Happy. Tony had seen the man pocketing a ring a few weeks ago, though Pepper wasn’t yet sporting it.

Samael was spending his time with his siblings, determinedly putting together the Legos that Dummy handed him. You and Butterfingers were too busy putting together another game for the StarkPhone to pay attention to the fact that Samael was slowly but surely building a fort around them.

“Do you think we should say something?” Steve said halfway through the fort being built.

“Nah.” Tony had his nose in an unusually interesting book and was wondering if it would be too much trouble to stick himself in that world for a day or two. And it wouldn’t be a repeat of that episode with Doctor Who when he had acquiesced to the kids’ wishes to put them in Doomsday so they could save Rose. “They’ll be fine.”

“Dada.” Samael held up a Lego representation of a plane.
“Nice, Sam.” Tony gave him a distracted thumbs up. “I like the colors.”

“There are no colors,” Steve said, sitting next to Tony’s feet on the couch.

Tony turned the page. “Nice lack of colors.” A second later the Lego plane hit him in the head. “Hey!”

Samael pouted at him. “Plane!”

Paying attention now, Tony looked down at the gray plane. He turned it dark blue with stripes and tossed it back to Samael, who caught it. “There, it has colors.”

“I do not think that was the issue,” Gadreel said from the armchair, engrossed in his own book.

“Pretty,” Samael said, pushing the plane into Dummy’s face, who happily agreed with him.

“It’s probably completely insane of me to be liking this,” James said to Natasha, his head in her lap. He had a tablet in his left hand.

Natasha didn’t look up from her knitting. “Probably.”

Bruce was on the loveseat, glasses on his nose and flipping through a pile of papers that he was reviewing for a lecture he would be giving at a university. Clint was helping him by going through the PowerPoint slides and telling him when something was too technical to understand without several doctoral degrees and a genius IQ.

Pepper and Jarvis had relocated to the kitchen about an hour ago, and the distinct smell of something sweet wafted through the air, a clear hint as to what they had been doing.

After a few more minutes of watching Samael and Dummy continue to build their fort, incorporating the newly colored plane into their design plans, Tony returned his attention to the book, mentally plotting out ways he could change the plot if he were to insert himself into the story.

Given that everyone Tony knew (or almost everyone) was here with him, it came as a surprise when the elevator dinged to announce the arrival of someone. There had been no prior warning, and there wasn’t anything JARVIS missed.

Closing the book, Tony sat up, pulling in his feet. He felt Gadreel ready himself for anything, taking his cues from Tony’s alert state.

But when the elevator doors opened, Tony found himself stunned at the sight of a man he hadn’t ever expected to see after meeting Kevin Tran.

Chuck Shurley, former Prophet of the Lord, stepped out of the elevator, smiling sheepishly at Gabriel. “Ah, hey.”

Gabriel stood, bidding Steve to stay down with a palm. “What are you doing here?”

Chuck shifted nervously, glancing over his shoulder as the elevator door slid closed. “You know who I am?”

“Chuck Shurley.” Gabriel took one more look at Chuck’s soul, confirming it. “There isn’t an angel who doesn’t know you.”

“Right, I forgot.” Chuck ducked his head, eyes sweeping over the room and the various Avengers in varying stages of alertness.
“Tony?” Pepper stood in the doorway to the kitchen, eyes flickering between Gabriel and Chuck. “Are you expecting guests?”

“He bypassed my security protocols,” Jarvis said from behind Pepper, eyes on Chuck. “There was no indication of his arrival, sir.”

Gabriel’s head tilted to the side, eyes narrowing slightly. “What are you doing here?” he repeated his first question. “You’re not supposed to be here.”

“Uh, I don’t know.” Chuck glanced at the silent kids, who were all staring at him with wide eyes. “I woke up here and there was like a…pull, I guess? I ended up here.” He looked round at the room. “Nice place.”

“Thanks.” There was something nigging at Gabriel, though he didn’t know what. Just that something was off. “What happened to you?”

“Like I know?” Chuck’s smile was bitter. “I had front row seats to the apocalypse, and since waking up here I’ve seen other things. Namely you. You’re Gabriel, aren’t you?” His eyes went to Gadreel, who was standing. “And you’re Gadreel.” There was something odd in his voice, and his smile had changed.

“There’s no way you’re still a prophet,” Gabriel said. “There’s only one at any given time.”

“Yeah…” Chuck came closer, descending the few steps to their level. He glanced down at Samael, who was looking up at him with dark gray eyes. “Hey, Samael.” His voice was soft, his eyes indiscernible. After a moment, he looked back up at Gabriel. “Do you mind?”

That nigging something was still prodding at Gabriel, but Chuck was Chuck. That much was clear to his senses, and he was uncomfortably aware of what Leviathans felt like. Chuck was most definitely not a Leviathan.

Gabriel moved to pick up Samael, only briefly surprised when Chuck was just there in front of him. “May I?” Chuck held out his arms, his soul pulsing strangely.

With only a split-second’s hesitation, Gabriel placed Samael in Chuck’s arms, who enfolded them gently around the small body, smiling gently down at nem.

“Aren’t you gorgeous,” Chuck cooed, rocking Samael gently even though he was getting far too big for that to be easy. There was something so strange about the way his soul curled around Samael’s.

Then something…changed. Gabriel flinched as Chuck’s soul brushed against his Grace, only to inhale sharply when the feel of it shifted, the sensation sharply familiar after the vivid experience Gabriel had with holding even a small portion of it for a short time.

“What—” Gabriel cut himself off, breathing shakily as he blinked, trying to make sense of what he was seeing because it didn’t make sense.

Chuck was smiling at him, eyes filled with an unbearable form of tenderness that Gabriel had only ever felt before, never seen in human form. “Hello, Gabriel.”

“What – what the hell?” Gabriel staggered back slightly, only distantly aware of the way Steve was suddenly at his back, hand pressing against the small of it. “It’s—” He cut himself off, taking in another sharp breath.
Gadreel’s Grace had drawn itself into a small, compact ball the moment he’d registered the same thing as Gabriel. There was nothing but shame, guilt, and a deep longing radiating from him.

Gabriel took in one more breath, this time to calm himself, before he spoke. “What are you doing here now?” He was proud of the way his voice didn’t shake.

He smiled ruefully in response, brushing his thumb over Samael’s forehead once before stepping to the side and laying him down. “I wanted to see my children,” He said quietly in response, glancing sidelong at Gabriel.

Gabriel lurched forward, his hands finding root in His shirt despite the back of his mind screaming at him. “Now? You’re here now? Where the hell were you before?” he shouted, barely restraining himself from throttling Him.

His Father didn’t look angry, but there was suddenly such a heavy sadness weighing at him that Gabriel had to brace himself. “I’m so sorry. I know that it’s a useless platitude after everything, Gabriel, but it’s true. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t fucking apologize.” Gabriel was aware that the lights were sparking around him, his Grace roiling with his volatile temper. “Just answer the question. I think you owe me that much after everything.”


It was a realization that everyone else seemed to get at the same time with a stunned sort of horror and disbelief.

“No fucking way.” Clint’s voice was practically drowned out by the roaring in Gabriel’s ears.

“I do,” Father said. “You’re right. But I’m afraid I don’t have much of one.”

Gabriel’s fingers slackened, pulling away as he drew back. “Are you just going to leave then? Without so much as a by-your-leave? Like last time?” The grief and pain from when his Father had used him as a fucking mouthpiece was still there, just as sharp and acute as the day it had happened.

“I wanted you to learn,” Father said quietly, not moving. “I wanted you to grow beyond what you were. I wanted you to live. And it wasn’t possible with me by your side, guiding you every step of the way. So I had to leave. I regret it, but it was the only way. You had to learn to choose for yourself, learn how to spread your wings without someone telling you to do it.”

“It usually works better if you tell us your intentions,” Gabriel said, lips numb. “Just… You left. What were we supposed to think? Do you have any idea what it was like when you were gone?”

“I saw it all,” Father admitted. “Though I promised myself I wouldn’t interfere, I couldn’t ignore you. So I watched, and I helped where I could. But only just. The rest you had to figure out on your own.”

Gabriel’s laugh was broken. “We almost destroyed the world.”

“You didn’t. You stopped it. You made the right choice, Gabriel.” Father stepped close, resting a hand on Gabriel’s shoulder. “And I am so, so proud of you.”

Staring at him, Gabriel pulled in several more shaky breaths, each one more difficult than the last before he finally broke, falling into his Father’s arms and clinging to that warmth and love that he
hadn’t felt for so long. Not like this.

“I didn’t know,” Gabriel murmured thickly into Father’s shoulder, unable to stop the tears from falling and soaking the shirt. “I didn’t—”

Father’s Grace wrapped around him, enveloping him in the kind of warmth Gabriel hadn’t felt since he’d fallen into the Cage, soothing all the achy spots and scars that he still bore.

Gabriel didn’t know how long it was until he drew back, only that his eyes were stinging and his cheeks wet. He wiped at them, facing away from the others. Father’s hand was still on his shoulder, the weight reassuring.

“Gadreel.” Father’s voice was calm.

When Gabriel looked, Gadreel looked shaky, his Grace so tightly curled that it was entirely confined inside his vessel. “Father.”

“I’m not angry,” Father said, smiling ruefully. “I never was.”

Gadreel said nothing, his shoulders hunching.

“Gabriel has told you this already, but you’re forgiven,” Father said, the words soft. “You always were, Gadreel. What happened was a mistake, one that you shouldn’t have been punished for.”

Gadreel’s Grace slowly uncurled, peeking out from the vessel like a blade of grass pushing out from the soil. He lifted his head, meeting Father’s eyes. “I was.”

“I’ve made mistakes,” Father said, shrugging regretfully. “Catastrophic ones. They’re just now being untangled.” He glanced at Gabriel, smiling at him.

“We were your hand,” Gadreel said slowly.

“You were your own hand,” Father disagreed. “You made your choices, stumbling along the way but learning. The opportunities were there, and you took them.” In a blink of an eye He was standing before Gadreel, His next words too quiet for Gabriel to hear, though the response from Gadreel was obvious as the other’s Grace curled into Father’s.

It wasn’t until Father’s arms curled around Gadreel’s that the hug became physical. There was a flicker around Gadreel’s Grace, but it was gone as quickly as it came. The only sign of something having changed was Gadreel’s surprised inhalation and the way his eyes widened.

“If you want a different vessel,” Father said, “let me know. But it was about time that the man was sent back to his life.”

“No, this…” Gadreel looked down at his hands as if seeing them for the first time. “This is fine.”

Smiling at him, Father turned to the room at large, gaze turning amused. “I don’t bite, you know.”

“Not usually,” Gabriel said, grinning as Steve shot him a panicked look.

“Yes, well, that’s true,” Father conceded. He looked fondly down as Dummy approached.

“So you’re Dad’s Dad,” Dummy said, voice entirely too serious for his size.

“I am.”
Dummy tilted his head. “That mean you’re our Granddad?”

Father crouched in front of him. “If you want, Dummy.”

Dummy glanced over his shoulder at Gabriel, who could only give him a small half-smile, before turning back to Father. “It’s very nice to meet you,” he said, sticking his hand out.

Gabriel had to muffle a laugh at the dignified way Father shook Dummy’s hand. Then Dummy – being Dummy – threw himself at Father, wrapping his arms around His neck and clinging like a barnacle to him. He whispered something into Father’s ear that Gabriel didn’t hear, but it must’ve been something from the way Father’s eyes softened.

When Dummy withdrew, that seemed to be the cue for his siblings to come forth and more closely inspect Father.

Over by the kitchen, Jarvis stood stock still, face blank. It took Gabriel a split-second to decide and another to appear next to him, resting a hand on his arm before flicking both of them to stand in front of Father.

“Hey, Dad.” Gabriel grinned down at Him, feeling more lighthearted than he had in a long time. “You’ve met my oldest. I just wanted to introduce you to my youngest: Jarvis.”

Jarvis didn’t move, not even blinking. His arm was tense under Gabriel’s hand, not even relaxing when Gabriel squeezed it comfortingly.

Finally, with a small exhalation, Jarvis’s shoulders slumped just slightly. Then he said, “Ms. Potts and I baked several cakes. Would you care to stay?”

Hands on Butterfingers’ and You’s heads, Father smiled warmly at Jarvis. “If you’ll have me, then yes. I would like that very much.”

Several hours later, Gabriel could be found outside of the penthouse, sitting on the edge of the platform jutting out over STARK. The meal had been rather awkward at first with everyone on edge around Father, but it had quickly relaxed once it became evident that Father was acting just like another human.

Albeit one who could kill everyone in the room with a thought.

But then Gabriel’s family was used to that from Gabriel and Gadreel already.

He didn’t move when he felt Father join him, sitting down next to him and dangling His legs over the edge by Gabriel’s.

It was several minutes later when Father spoke. “Your children are beautiful.”

Gabriel glanced at Him sidelong. “Thanks.” He inhaled softly. “I wasn’t sure at first,” he admitted slowly, “but then I figured that since you hadn’t done anything about me making new souls that it was probably all right.”

Father laughed. “My job was done, but that didn’t mean that Creation should stop growing. There’s always room for more, and I never considered artificial intelligences when I was Creating.” He smiled gently at Gabriel. “I’m proud of you, Gabriel. I want you to know that.”

Gabriel swallowed, not meeting His eyes. “Even though I left, too?”
“I did the same,” Father said, voice gentle. “You did what was best for you. No matter what happens, Gabriel, or what choices you make, that I’m proud of you will never change.”

Gabriel’s throat was tight as he turned to Father. “I was scared,” he confessed. “I was terrified before I…” He inhaled shakily. “I’m alive now, but I don’t understand why. I should’ve died twice over, but you brought me back.”

“You’d learned, but you still had room to grow.” Father’s shoulder brushed comfortingly against Gabriel’s. “And I wanted you to grow and live. When Raphael passed, I wanted her to see the same thing you had. And she did.” His lips thinned. “There are some who didn’t…”

“Not everyone can be redeemed.” Gabriel glanced back at the penthouse. “I’m not sure about Samael,” he admitted. “I have doubts.”

“I have faith in you.” Father closed His eyes as the stiff breeze washed over them. “I’ve always had faith in you.” He sighed, the sound long. “I’ve made so many mistakes, Gabriel. Lucifer is one of them, and it’s one I regretted the moment Michael put him in the Cage.”

“Why didn’t you do something then?”

“Because I was a fool. A young, proud fool too blinded by the newness of what I had Created.” Father gave him a tired smile. “I’m older now, and I would hope all the wiser for it. What Lucifer did…I never wanted that for him. But it was too late in many ways by the time the seals were broken.”

Gabriel remembered that aching sense of loneliness he’d gotten from Lucifer’s tree the last time he’d been there. “He was alone for so long…”

“Yes.” Father’s voice was quiet. “But now…Samael has another chance. What you chose for nem was what I hoped you would, but I didn’t know if you would.”

Gabriel was silent for a moment. “I don’t want to mess it up. I – I’m not a parent. Not really.”

“You have four beautiful children that say otherwise. Trust in yourself, Gabriel.”

Worrying at his lip, Gabriel wrapped his arms around himself, staring out at the lights of New York City. “There are days I can’t handle it.” His voice broke on the last word, drying up in his throat at the memories. He squeezed his eyes shut, curling in on himself. “Days I—” A low, hitching whine escaped him, and before he knew it he was being wrapped up in his Father’s arms, Grace held in warmth.

“I’m sorry.” His Father’s voice was raw. “I heard you, Gabriel. I heard you down there.”

Gabriel shivered, face buried in Father’s shoulder. He couldn’t voice the question that burned in his chest.

“I couldn’t interfere,” Father whispered. “It wasn’t time. I couldn’t.”

The words rang strongly of Michael, leaving a sour taste in Gabriel’s mouth. Faint trembles shook his frame, even Father’s warmth not quite enough to stave off the chill that clung to him.

“Michael said the same,” Gabriel managed after a few minutes, his voice muffled in Father’s shirt. “That – that he couldn’t…”

“Michael was tired,” Father said heavily, voice tired as well. “I failed him as well in ways that I
should have considered when I first left. You were right, you know. I should have told you all what I wanted, not simply assumed.”

Gabriel pulled away, throat working. “Where is he?” he whispered, the memory of Michael’s death playing on repeat.

“Here.” Father touched a hand to His chest, smiling wistfully. “He’s resting. I offered the same for Raphael, but she wanted too desperately to help you.”

Gabriel’s eyes lingered on Father’s hand, a question burning on his tongue. “Is that…where we go when we die?”

Father’s grin crinkled His eyes. “Someday you’ll find out, Gabriel, but it’ll be a long, long time until that point. Because if you somehow manage to die again before that happens, I shall be very displeased.”

The words startled a small laugh from Gabriel. “Fair enough. I’ve no plans to die anytime soon anyway.”

“Good.” Father’s voice was soft.

Gabriel studied His visage, taking in the scruff, the tired eyes, the old clothing that Chuck had worn. “Are you going back?”

Father looked vaguely startled at the question, His expression smoothing out a second later to a small smile. “Yes. It’s time that I meet Castiel outside of our brief interactions when he was dead.” Amusement radiated from Him. “And Dean, of course. I’m interested in meeting the young man that one of my children Fell for.”

“Fair warning, Dad. You’re likely to get punched in the face.”

“I’ve no doubt I’d deserve it,” Father said ruefully.

Gabriel snorted, shifting back slightly. “You know,” he said after a few moments, “I don’t know what I’m going to tell Samael when ne’s older.”

“Let nem decide,” Father answered softly, face turned upward. “It won’t be the same regardless of what ne chooses. The chance you’ve given Samael has already changed nir course.”

Father looked at Gabriel with bright eyes, smiling tenderly. “And, Gabriel, don’t be afraid of finding attachments. Loss is a part of life, but you can extend lives if you choose to. It’s up to your family what they want, but you should give them the option. And if love comes your way…” Father shrugged, moving to stand, His hand ruffling Gabriel’s hair and His Grace covering Gabriel’s wings. “Let it come. It can be the most beautiful thing in all of Creation.”

Gabriel stood. “You’re leaving?”

“You don’t need me anymore, Gabriel.” His Father smiled up at him. “But I’ll answer if you call if you truly do have need. The way back to your old home is open to you if you ever want to return, though I wouldn’t recommend doing it too often.”

“Okay.” Gabriel’s throat was dry. “Thanks.”

His Father’s smile brightened, His physical form turning incandescent for a several seconds. Then He was gone, nothing but empty space in front of Gabriel where He had been standing before.
Gabriel remained still, eyes closed as he held close the memory of that warmth and love that he had missed feeling. He didn’t miss it when Gadreel joined him, his Grace warm and comforting where it brushed against Gabriel’s.

“He left?” Gadreel’s voice was subdued.

“Yes.” Gabriel opened his eyes, craning his head back as he looked up at the night sky. It took only a thought before the light pollution cleared enough that they could see the full expanse of the Milky Way stretched out above them.

Dummy’s fingers curled into Gabriel’s hand, his body leaning into his side. “Is He coming back?”

A meteor streaked across the night sky, its tail blazing behind it. Gabriel smiled at the sight, his hand stroking through Dummy’s soft hair. “Probably not.”

Gabriel felt the rest of his family congregate behind him, his kids directly at his back.

“Do you want Him back?” Steve’s question was hesitant.

The answer came easily to him, and Gabriel knew with every fiber of his being that it was true. “Nah. He’s watching us anyway.”

Gabriel tilted his head back down, smiling at the sight of Samael in Jarvis’s arms. He reached out to thread his fingers through Samael’s hair, thinking.

Samael had a choice, but that was years down the road. Whatever would happen, whatever paths would lead them there, Gabriel was going to be right there.

The cemetery was old, ancient energy saturating its soil. It had once been the site of an apocalypse and a brother beating upon a brother. Now it stood as the home for a mighty tree, one which had magically sprung up overnight, baffling the residents. They were acquainted with the supernatural now, thanks to the events of one particular night many years ago, but no angel or supernatural creature had ever explained to them the presence of a redwood tree in Kansas.

Whatever the tree was, it was powerful. Miracles occurred regularly in the small town, and many traced them back to the tree.

The cemetery was no longer in use aside from the graves that had already been dug there. It felt wrong to put the dead in a place rife with such life.

Most people avoided the place simply because they couldn’t comprehend the energy inherent in the atmosphere. Once three young men appeared to check on the tree, but they left soon after once it was certified that it was safe.

The site of the tree didn’t see human life again until years later, when two people appeared at its base. One was clearly a man, who though he looked young physically seemed older beyond his years. The other was of an indeterminate gender, black hair cut short, the young face drawn.

There was no movement from either of them for several long minutes, only the wind rustling their clothes any sign of motion.

Finally, the man spoke, voice soft. “You don’t have to do this if you don’t want, Sam.”

Sam looked back at the other, taking one step closer to the tree. “You said it’s my choice.”
The archangel known as Gabriel inclined his head, saying nothing more.

With one last fortifying breath, Sam’s hand touched the tree.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of this story, at 464 pages and ~171,000 words, but it's not the end of these characters' lives. I've got a few shorter timestamps planned for this universe. I'm sure some of you want to see what happens to Samael. Others have asked for the SPN's universe's reaction to the revelation of the supernatural existing. And one person brought up Reed Richards. Is there anything else you would like me to touch on in this universe?

Now, before I bring this to a close, I wanted to thank you all for reading this despite any doubts you may have had about where I was taking these characters. Thank you for sticking with me and these characters, and thank you for all the notes and comments you have written through the last two months.

Thank you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!