**Broken**

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**Broken**

by [NorthernSparrow](http://archiveofourown.org/users/NorthernSparrow)

**Summary**

The one where Cas breaks a wing. PLATONIC version of the sequel to Forgotten. (This fic "Broken" is the platonic version of the Destiel fic "Flight" - exact same fic and 95% the exact same text, just without the Destel.) A/U from mid S9; Castiel is human and wounded, and Dean and Sam need to get his grace back - and his wings. Things do not go as intended and Cas faces a difficult road. NO SLASH but super-strong emphasis on TFW friendship/family bonds. Hurt Castiel + hurt/comfort, leading (as Cas recovers) into a long plotty case fic with road trips, canon-type action, and exciting big baddies. Also features my stupidly elaborate headcanon on angels, wings, and flight, and the return of Schmidt-Nielsen's "The Physiology of Angels." :)}
Nightmares were old territory for Dean.

He'd had them since he was a kid. Starting when Mom had died, of course, and then getting worse with all the monsters he'd faced since. And since the forty years in Hell...

Well, nightmares were routine, put it that way. He had them almost every night. It'd gotten so that Dean could sometimes recognize a nightmare while he was in the middle of one.

He still could never stop it though. Even when he was sort of aware he was in a dream, the nightmare always just marched on relentlessly. Horrible things kept happening left and right; people being tortured, monsters leaping at him, people dying... Like now. This moment, now, of staggering through the mountains at night with Sam and "Buddy", desperate to get away from the terrifying magma elemental— Dean knew, in the back of his mind, this had already happened, months ago. He knew, dimly, that it had happened in the past, that "Buddy" had really been their old friend Castiel, that it was long over, and that this must just be a nightmare.

But he couldn't stop it. He had to stagger through the woods just the same, just as exhausted and desperate as always. The dark, tangled woods seemed all too real, the tangled branches poking him all too believably. Dean had to watch Sam collapse one time too many, and had to stand helplessly aside as Cas tried to give Sam some life-essence— one time too many. Dean had to watch Sam grow still and cold. And then Cas slumped down too. Still and cold. Both of them.

They were both dead.

They were both... just... lying... there... dead.

"SAM?" Dean yelled. The branch was poking him in the shoulder again and Dean shoved it aside, kneeling by Sam and slapping his face. "CAS?" he cried, turning to Cas. But neither Sam nor Cas was breathing. No, no, this couldn't be happening — Cas was dead and Sam was dead and —

The branch shook his shoulder firmly. "Wake up, Dean," said an insistent low whisper, very close, right in his ear. It continued: "Dean, it's not real. It's a dream. Wake up." The branch shook his shoulder again.

Dean woke with a gasp.
"You were dreaming, Dean," said Cas. He was leaning over the bed, still shaking Dean's shoulder. "Hallucinating while you were asleep."

"Oh...right," said Dean. He rubbed his face with both hands, trying to pretend he was wide awake—and trying to hide how desperate he'd felt just a few seconds ago. Just a dream. Just a dream. Shake it off. "Yup. Uh, hi, Cas. Uh, what time's it?"

"Three in the morning," said Castiel, adding helpfully, "Dean, you can tell it was a dream by how rapidly the memory fades." He released Dean's shoulder and sat down on the edge of the bed, saying, "The details should be getting faint now, right? That means you were really just lying in here in bed, hallucinating in your sleep. Also, if you think about what you were just doing, you'll notice now that things didn't quite make sense. That's another clue that it was a dream. Also, now that you're awake you should be able to remember going to sleep last night. Right?"

Dean almost laughed to hear Cas so carefully explaining the illogic of human dreaming. Dreaming was one of many strange human experiences that Cas had had to adjust to over the past year. Must've taken him a while to figure all that out, Dean thought. Must have been hell on him before he'd figured it out, too...

"Thanks, Cas," said Dean. He rubbed his face again, and sat up a bit on his elbows. "Just a dream. I got it."

Cas asked, "Dean, may I ask..." He hesitated a moment. Cas was still visible only as a dark silhouette against the open door, and Dean could really only see the shape of his shoulders, and the dim outline of his mussed hair. But he could hear Cas take a careful breath. Cas continued with, "You called my name. And Sam's name too. May I ask... were you dreaming that Sam and I left you?"

Dean blinked at him and sat up a little further. Being "left" was actually Castiel's unique brand of nightmare, not Dean's; Cas had been having nightmares of that sort ever since he'd nearly died in that lake in Nebraska. But... well, in this case it actually sort of fit.

"Sort of," said Dean. "Not exactly but... sort of, yeah."

Cas shifted a little, taking another breath. His voice dropped a little into his throaty Important-Proclamation tone as he said, "You should know, Dean, that Sam and I would never leave you. We would not do that to you."

Unless you both go and die on me, thought Dean.

Dean managed to say, "Thanks, Cas."

Cas said, still in that very serious, you-can-count-on-me sort of voice, "Perhaps you should drink some whiskey."

That, at least, made Dean laugh. "Thanks, Cas, I'm okay."

"Chocolate milk, then?" said Cas gravely.

"No, thanks," said Dean, smiling a little now. Sam had dragged Cas along on the last grocery run. It had been Cas's first foray into a grocery store after a solid year of grinding poverty, and Sam had apparently been unable to resist buying anything and everything that caught Cas's eye even slightly. They'd ended up coming home with over a dozen grocery bags stuffed full with a thousand random foods, everything from artichoke hearts to chocolate-coated strawberries to smoked salmon to devil's-food cake. (Cas had spotted the box and had instantly been very curious about what kind of cake
devils liked, so of course Sam had to buy it.) And, yes, chocolate milk. Which had immediately become Cas's new favorite beverage.

"No chocolate milk? You're sure?" said Cas, sounding a little baffled that Dean was capable of turning down chocolate milk. "What if it were warmed up?"

"No thanks, Cas. Maybe some other time."

"How about—" Cas's voice brightened— "Whiskey mixed with chocolate milk!"

Dean tried not to laugh, and said, "I'm fine, really. But thanks. You can head back to your bed."

Only then did Dean finally realize that Castiel was in the wrong room.

Dean had been camping out in Cas's room for the past couple weeks, sleeping on a mattress on the floor while Cas recovered from his Nebraska ordeal and got the nightmares under control. Sam had been taking shifts too. But tonight had been supposed to be their first night all back in their own beds, in their own rooms. What was Cas doing here?

Dean reached out to the bedside lamp and flicked it on, and took a hard look at Cas. Cas looked pretty tired.

"Cas, what are you doing in here? Was I yelling or something?"

"Not yelling, no. But, you were talking a little bit," said Cas. "I happened to hear you."

"You happened to hear me? From down the hall in your own room?"

Cas gave a little shrug, and said, "Well... I might have happened to have been walking near your door..." At Dean's skeptical look, he confessed, "I was patrolling the hallway. Checking the whole bunker, actually."

"Checking the bunker?"

"Whenever I'm sleeping alone I always wake up every couple of hours and check. Just do a patrol, just check the boundaries."

"Wait, what? Every couple of hours?"

Cas looked a little puzzled. "I've done that ever since I lost my grace. Other people don't do that?" Dean shook his head, and Cas said, "But... how do you deal with it?"

"Deal with what?"

"Sleeping. Falling asleep." At Dean's puzzled look, Cas elaborated, saying, "How do you deal with knowing that you have to go unconscious for several hours? Knowing that there's no way to avoid it. Having to trust that your body is somehow going to know how to keep breathing on its own, and that the heart will know to keep beating... And, most of all, knowing there's no way to stay alert and keep watch. And nobody else awake to help keep guard."

"Okay, Cas," said Dean, sitting up all the way now. "Listen up. First off, your body is going to keep breathing; you just have to trust it. It knows what to do. Okay? And second, this place is really well warded. The Men of Letters definitely knew their stuff, about wards. There's even some alarms set, too, so if the wards ever broke we'd get woken up. Also Sam and I are pretty light sleepers, and we've both got weapons, and your room's between ours anyway."
"I know all that," said Cas. "I know that. But—" He sighed, and said, "In the garrison we usually worked in pairs. If one angel had to meditate or heal or even just needed some time to think, there was always a partner keeping watch. And during molt, of course, we... well... anyway..." *Molt?* thought Dean, but Cas went on with, "I suppose I'm still just not used to falling asleep alone. I've been doing it for months, of course, but I always wake up several times at night."

"Meg's not quite enough, huh?" said Dean.

Meg was the abandoned cat Castiel had rescued when he'd been living alone in his little mountain cabin. She rarely left his side now.

Cas said, "Meg is marvelously reassuring and I don't think I'd have gotten any sleep at all in the last couple months if she hadn't been with me. But, Dean, Meg is very small, and she doesn't know how to operate firearms."

Dean had to laugh at that. "Bet she's no good with angel-blades either, huh."

Cas nodded and said, "I tried to teach her once but she doesn't have opposable thumbs." Dean had to stifle another laugh, faking a cough, as Cas went on to say, "She does have claws of her own, of course, and she's actually a good hunter, but I think she could only take on mouse-sized demons. I hate to leave her the only one on guard. Especially since I still feel so weak, and I'm not... I'm not... well, I know I'd be no good in a fight."

Something in there had caught Dean's attention. Cas had said, *I'm not...*

"You're not what?" said Dean.

Cas glanced away, and didn't answer. And Dean went on alert at once.

Dean studied him for a moment. Cas still had the three diagonal whip scars across his face from Wyoming, and the bruises from Nebraska. He was still too thin, but he looked about normal, though. His hair was all mussed, as usual; he was wearing his usual mismatched sleeping outfit (an old flannel shirt of Dean's, a pair of Sam's old sweats with the cuffs rolled up about a foot, and a ridiculous pair of bunny slippers, completely with little ears. Sam had spotted the slippers on their shopping run and Cas had apparently fallen in love with them instantly; and also the slippers helped the cuts on his feet not hurt as much).

All looked about as usual. Cas looked about as he always did.

He looked exactly the same as he had two weeks ago, in fact.

Even the bruises and the whip-cuts looked exactly the same.

*Which... means...* Dean realized slowly, *He's not healing.*

It had been a couple weeks. Sure, Cas shouldn't be totally healed in two weeks, but there should have been more improvement. Dean realized now that he'd been trying to ignore this, trying to convince himself that Cas was healing just fine. But now, looking at him, with Cas sitting so close like this, and the light right on his face... the three diagonal whip scars across his face were still far too raw, the bruises still far too livid. There were dark circles under his eyes now too, and those just seemed to be getting worse every day. And Cas was still terribly thin, despite all the food Sam had been shoveling into him. At least Cas was walking a little better, but that was mostly due to the elaborate pack of gauze padding Sam had worked out for his feet.

Dean said, "You're not healing. Are you."
Cas just looked at him.

After a moment, Cas said, "My estimate of five years may have been inaccurate."

"Five...years," repeated Dean. "You mean... you mean, how many years you have left?"

Castiel nodded.

"Then how long?" said Dean quietly.

Cas gave a little shrug. "I don't know," he said. He sounded almost unconcerned. "Perhaps less than a year? I don't know."

There was a little pause.

"We gotta get your grace back," said Dean. "Immediately."

"Dean, I know you and Sam have been spending the last several weeks trying to figure out where Metatron hid my grace, but you must understand, this may be an impossible task—"

Dean broke in with, "I have a plan B. I've been thinking about it all week. Tomorrow we start plan B."

Cas frowned and said, "Your Plan B's are like other people's Plan Z's, Dean. Realistically—"

"We're not giving up on you, Cas," said Dean, cutting him off. "You just gotta accept that. Even if it's a Plan Z, we're gonna try it."

They sat there looking at each other for a moment, and finally Cas gave a reluctant nod.

"Plan Z tomorrow," said Dean, giving him a clap on the arm that was half a shove away, half a friendly pat. "Now you go get some sleep, and I'll patrol."

"You'll patrol? Dean, you don't you have to patrol. I can—"

"I'm awake now anyway. You go get some sleep. I'll patrol. Not a problem. It's a good idea,"

So Dean spent the rest of the night walking the hallway, and checking the wards, and walking the whole bunker. He took special pains to walk back and forth by Cas's door every hour, so that if Cas were awake, he'd hear Dean's footsteps and he'd know all was well.

He checked the bunker, and the library, and the kitchen, and the upper floors. When he got downstairs he stood in front of Crowley's door for a while, thinking about Plan B. Or — maybe Cas was right? — Plan Z.

The next afternoon Dean hauled Crowley up from the basement, safely secured in devil's-trap handcuffs and shackles, and led him outside to where Sam (totally on board with Plan B) and Castiel (totally not on board with Plan B) were both waiting with the Impala.

It was a blustery day in early November, with a bright sun shining sporadically through short squalls of chilly rain. Dean hustled Crowley over to the Impala, and Crowley slipped a little on some damp fallen leaves, blinking in the bright light. Crowley complained, "Dean, slow down, would you? It's so nice to have a pleasant outing like this with you all, but this bright light is hurting my poor weak eyes. I've just been alone for so long in that sad lonely dark dungeon, alas... with only Buffy the Vampire Slayer and one hundred eighty cable channels for company...and no premium channels at
"Hell's bells, Castiel, you look just awful. What have these boys been feeding you?"

"Devil's-food cake and chocolate milk," answered Castiel.

"Devil's-food cake?" Crowley cast a mock-horrified look at Sam and Dean. "You're feeding him devil's-food cake instead of angel-food cake? What's wrong with you two? Didn't the pet store explain to you how to take care of your pet angel?"

"Get over to the trunk," snapped Dean, hauling him to the back of the Impala.

Crowley let Dean drag him over, still chattering cheerfully, "Angel-food cake at all times, and don't forget the litterbox. You can train pet angels to use litterboxes, did you know that? The smarter ones, anyway; I'm not sure if Cas here would qualify."

Dean gave Crowley a sudden sharp shove on the chest just as Sam grabbed one ankle. Together they flipped him unceremoniously into the trunk and slammed it shut, ignoring the muffled yelps coming from inside. Dean turned to Sam and Cas, and said, "Let's get this show on the road. I want to do this as far away from the bunker as possible, just on general principle."

"Dean, I'm really not sure that—" Cas began.

"Plan Z or bust, Cas," said Dean. "Unless you've got a better idea?"

Cas still looked unhappy. He said, "I just hate to see you lose your biggest asset on my account."

Sam pointed out, "Crowley never turned out to be that much of an asset. Just good for the jokes, really. And we know how to summon him later if we ever need."

"Also I have truly had it with his theories about Buffy and Spike," said Dean as they all clambered into the Impala.

Dean drove to the far side of the Missouri River. The drive was a couple hours, but Dean always felt a little better when he got a good-sized river of running water between demons and home. Demons could actually travel over bridges, technically, but apparently the old lore about magic being weaker over running water did have a grain of truth; demons' powers were reportedly a little bit weaker near big rivers. Every little bit helped, right?

They found a deserted parking lot in a little-used state park with a nice view of the water. It was near sunset, the sun sinking down over the river, as Dean hauled Crowley out of the trunk and set him down on a folding chair, while Sam spray-painted a devil's-trap around him. Cas kept pointing out little spots Sam had missed, and finally he grabbed the can from Sam and added a few mysterious details of his own, while Dean got Crowley settled.

"Far side of running water, I see," said Crowley, glancing around. "Classic old-school touch, Dean, nicely done. Where are we, anyway? Missouri? This is getting more and more interesting. Why'd you bring me all the way out here?"

"We got a proposition for you," said Dean.

Crowley sighed. "Oh, spare me. Another long round of negotiations? Some spell you need to make a birthday cake for Castiel here? Or, let's see, do you need me to translate some damn scrap of ancient Mayan in order to save your pet hamster? Boys, I told you before, during your previous little adventure with that Cretan minotaur you already gave me everything I want except for setting me
free, and I know you're not going to do that. So, whatever you're selling, I'm not interested."

"Get us what we want and we'll set you free," said Dean.

"Oh well in that case I'm all ears!" said Crowley, brightening suddenly. He sobered a second later and said, "Though knowing you lot, it's going to either be something one hundred percent impossible, or something that'll get me one hundred percent killed. Re-open Heaven? Get Lucifer out of his cage? Make you into an archangel? If it's something like that, boys, I can't do it."

"Find Castiel's grace for us," said Dean.

Crowley shut his mouth. He looked at Dean for a long moment, and then turned and looked at Cas.

And kept looking at Cas. Thin, pale, Castiel; bruised, beaten, all the whipmarks and bruises as fresh and raw as ever. He was on his feet, at least; but only just.

"Oh," said Crowley. "I see." He looked back at Dean, a little smile creeping over his face.

Dean added, "Metatron stole Cas's grace from him. We need it back. We can't find it."

Crowley still said nothing, his little grin just growing wider, and at last Dean snapped, "What are you grinning about?"

"Oh, nothing," said Crowley, all innocence suddenly. "Nothing at all." He leaned back in his chair, raised his eyebrows, and said, "Listen up, boys. Despite being cooped in your dungeon, I actually do manage to hear a bit of chatter - you really should have checked those cable channels, you know - and in fact, a while back I did hear something about a spark of angelic grace being present on Earth. Not attached to an angel, either, like usual; just in its raw form. And I even developed a pretty solid theory about where it might be. It's not easy to hide something like that from demons, you know. It sort of itches at us. But here's the problem: I can't handle it myself."

Crowley paused and looked at each of three of them in turn. The sun was setting now across the river, the wide river gleaming with reflected sunset, and Crowley's face seemed lit with the colors of Hell - oranges, yellows, reds.

Crowley explained, "Castiel knows this but you two probably don't: an untethered angel's grace would burn me if I tried to handle it directly. Even just getting near it would be quite uncomfortable. That's exactly why it's so hard to hide a thing like that from demons; we can feel it when we're anywhere near it. But you're in luck! I just happen to have a couple of, um, associates, shall we say, who are able to handle grace safely, and who might be willing to help." Crowley paused, waited a few beats (Dean could almost see him thinking "I'll pause here for dramatic effect") and then went on, dropping his voice and staring meaningfully at Dean.

"Here's my proposition," Crowley said, suddenly in his lawyer-mode, stating each word very slowly and clearly. "You let me go. I see if I can negotiate with my associates to locate the grace and bring it to you, Dean. I don't control them, so I can't guarantee they'll hand it over to you, but I'm willing to go out on a limb and make a deal that they'll at least bring it to you and be willing to negotiate with you. If they do bring the grace to you and are willing to open negotiations, I walk away free. If not, I walk back into your dungeon. Do we have a deal? Usual contract, signed and sealed and ratified like always."

Dean hesitated.

Crowley added, "You know my word is good. Once I sign a contract I have to abide by it. If I don't hold up my end of the bargain, I'll walk back right back into your devil's-trap in your dungeon. And
that's the best I can do for you, boys. And before you ask, no, I absolutely won't put you directly in touch with my associates, because I'm not a complete idiot; and no, you can't stick any codicils on this, because this really won't be an easy job and I absolutely despise grace jobs anyway. So, take it or leave it." He smiled cheerily and added, "One-time offer, today only, act now!"

The sunset had gotten even redder now, the sky and the river positively aflame with red, and Crowley's eyes glinted red for a moment. He suddenly looked at his most demonic.

Dean thought, I don't like this.

Sam pulled Dean several feet further away and said, "I don't like this."

Cas limped over to both of them and whispered, "I really don't like this."

"Great minds think alike," muttered Dean back to both of them.

Cas whispered, "Or, stupid minds." Dean could only shrug at that; Sam gave a little laugh.

Dean thought a moment, and said softly to both of them, "What other options do we have? At least if we get within shouting distance of the grace we have a chance. We're pretty good negotiators, Cas, don't you think? Whoever these "associates" are, we can come up with something. At least we'll find out where the grace is. And even if Crowley surrounds us by demons right away, or has hellhounds all around us or something, at least we'll have a chance. Some kind of chance, at least."

They were all silent a moment.

"All in favor?" said Dean.

"I'm in," said Sam, with a sigh.

"Me too," said Dean.

Cas said, "I don't know, Dean. I really don't want to put you two at risk. I'm not sure it's worth it."

Dean said, "Two to one, motion passes." Before Cas could say anything else, Dean called to Crowley, "You got a deal. Let's write it up."

Twenty minutes later they were on the road back to Lebanon, this time with Cas riding shotgun and Sam in the back. The trunk was empty, Crowley was gone, Dean was still ferociously wiping his mouth and spitting periodically out his window, and Sam was laughing in the back seat.

Sam finally got his laughter under control long enough to say, "There's nothing like the taste of a Crowley kiss to put you off your appetite, huh?"

Dean spat out the window again and said, "Don't think I'll be able to eat for a week. Maybe two."

"Maybe you can wash down a demon kiss with some of that devil's food cake, back at the bunker," said Sam, still chuckling. "Or, wait. Angel-food to neutralize it?"

"I was thinking something more like, five gallons of whisky to sterilize my mouth," growled Dean.

Out of the blue Cas asked, "Was he right about the cakes?"

Dean couldn't even remember what he was talking about, till Cas added, "I liked the devil's-food cake. Should I be eating angel food?" He sounded a little worried.
Sam leaned forward to say, "Crowley was just joking, Cas. Devil's-food isn't for devils; it just means dark chocolate. It's named that just because it's so good it seems like a sin to eat it. It doesn't mean angels can't eat it. So, don't worry, it's totally fine if you like it."

Cas said, now sounding puzzled, "It's named that because it's good? But... shouldn't angel cake be good? And devil cake be bad? Or... do people think..." He paused. After a moment he said, "So it's backwards... I see. People prefer the food of devils?"

A little silence fell over the car. Dean glanced over, and found that Cas was just staring quietly at his feet.

Sam leaned forward and patted Cas on the shoulder, and said, "Cas, angel-food's also a good cake. People love it."

"They do?" said Cas, craning around to look at him.

"Yup. Angel-food's a sponge cake. It's really light and fluffy. It's like a cloud; that's how it got its name. And it's great. I love it, actually, it's lighter. They're both good cakes, Cas."

"Hey. I got an idea," said Dean. "Once we get back to the bunker let's make both, a devil's-food cake and an angel-food cake and have them side-by-side. With burgers. And pies. And with chocolate milk and at least five gallons of whiskey. And Cas, you're gonna tell us all about where you want to fly to first, when you get your wings back."

Dean snuck a glance at him. Cas was still quiet, and was still staring at his feet. But now that Dean had mentioned wings, Cas was smiling.

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_A/N - And off we go into platonic-land! And don't worry, any Destiel fans reading this; you'll find there's still loads of emotions and feels even in a platonic fic. Remember the big message of Forgotten: even if it's all "just" platonic, our two boys and their angel do love each other, and they need each other. :)_
Days slid by with no word from Crowley.

The contract he'd written out, that evening by the banks of the Missouri, had specified that he'd work "with all possible haste and all due diligence." But it had not promised that he'd find the grace instantly, and Crowley had steadfastly refused to add any such "totally unfair clauses", as he'd put it.

So day after day drifted by. November tightened its gray chilly hold on northern Kansas; the last of the leaves fell from the trees around the bunker. Dean had to force himself to relax and try not to be on tenterhooks every day about whether Crowley would succeed, whether today they'd hear from him, whether the "associates" would negotiate or not.

Fortunately Cas was actually doing okay. He still wasn't exactly healing, but he wasn't right at death's-door either, and both Sam and Dean began to feel a little hopeful that he might have a little more time than they'd feared. But a foreboding sense of limited time seemed to be hanging over the bunker, and Sam and Dean agreed privately not to take any more cases while Cas was still so weak. If Cas got his grace back soon, then they could all go on hunts again. If he didn't...

Well, they didn't actually talk about that possibility.

But Dean noticed how Sam started making every tasty meal that he could think of, all sorts of stir-fries and home-made pizzas and special salads, and, yes, the cakes; everything Sam thought Cas might like. While Dean, for his part, found he kept coming home with new movies for Cas to watch, or shows he thought Cas might enjoy, or music he thought Cas should hear. Or just taking him on little drives in the Impala to some local parks, to show him the last of the fall colors.

So, no more hunts for now. They'd agreed.

But then the lightning strikes started hitting the news.

And then the hurricanes.

In the second week of November, a weird series of hundreds of lightning strikes began hitting buildings, trees, and even some unfortunate people, all up and down the West Coast. A week later, a set of tornados went roaring through Ohio that seemed almost to be striking towns on purpose, hopscotching across the landscape from town to town with bizarrely targeted jumps, striking heavily populated areas with deadly accuracy.

Dean didn't really notice it too much at first. Till one night when Sam was poking around on his laptop. Cas was conked out on the library sofa again — Sam had just read him off to sleep with a few chapters from "Ozma of Oz" — and Sam had taken the opportunity to check up on the news.

A few minutes later Sam called to Dean quietly from across the long wooden table, saying, "Dean.
Did you realize there's been a Category 5 hurricane hitting the East Coast every single week for the past five weeks?"

"Oh, that doesn't sound good," said Dean. He got up and walked around the table to peer over Sam's shoulder at the laptop. "I guess I heard something about hurricanes in the news, but didn't realize it was getting that unusual."

"Worst hurricane season in history, Dean," said Sam. "Take a look." He tilted the laptop toward Dean. "And. Dean. Also it's been the worst tornado season, and kind of out-of-season, too. And also, the most lightning strikes ever recorded in one year."

Dean skimmed the news article. Sam then clicked a few keys to get to some NOAA weather maps. Which showed masses of lightning strikes, and tornadoes virtually carpeting the Midwest, and what seemed like a really strange number of hurricanes and tropical storms sweeping up from the Atlantic Ocean toward the East Coast.

Dean said quietly, hoping not to wake Cas, "Dammit. That's... a ton of stuff. I didn't realize it was that many things all at once."

"Yeah. There's definitely something up. Lightning, tornadoes and now hurricanes? And it's all over the continent, and, get this, cyclones in the Pacific are up too. A lot of big waves, apparently. Every kind of storm possible, everywhere you look."

Dean frowned at the little maps. Even as they watched, a map refreshed with some more lightning strikes added. "Huh. This is so... widespread." Dean said, leaning over the table on both his hands to get a closer look. He said, "How would we even start with something like this? Where would we go? I mean, literally, where should we go, specifically?"

Sam shrugged, his mouth twisted in a little grimace. "That's the problem. I've got no idea where to go. I mean, look at that mess—" he gestured at the maps again— "I don't see any kind of cluster anywhere. No focal point. It's everywhere. Lightning to the west, tornadoes in the middle, hurricanes to the east. I don't really know how to start with a weather problem that's hitting the entire damn continent."

Sam shrugged, his mouth twisted in a little grimace. "That's the problem. I've got no idea where to go. I mean, look at that mess—" he gestured at the maps again— "I don't see any kind of cluster anywhere. No focal point. It's everywhere. Lightning to the west, tornadoes in the middle, hurricanes to the east. I don't really know how to start with a weather problem that's hitting the entire damn continent."

Sam began drumming his fingers on the table, and they both just looked at the NOAA maps for a moment.

Dean finally said, "If we tried to tackle any of this on our own it seems like we'd just be outmatched immediately. I mean, we could try... but..."

Sam shook his head, saying, "We have exactly zero clue what we're up against. I can totally see us heading out to try to do something and just getting zapped by lightning instantly."

Dean nodded. "And then Cas'd be stuck here on his own, too."

And then he couldn't help picturing, for a moment, just what that would be like for Cas. If Dean and Sam went off on a hunt and never came back.

It came with the territory, for hunters. And for hunters' friends, of course. But couldn't they just have a month or two of peace together? Just one month, maybe, while they tried to fix up Cas?

Sam got a rueful little grin on his face. He looked up at Dean and said, "Remember when we just had to tackle a ghost here or there? Maybe a monster? Maybe one demon, on a really bad day." The memory almost made Dean laugh. Sam added, "You know what I'm thinking?"
"What?"

"If we we learned one thing in Wyoming, we learned that when things get really major-league like this, we need an angel on our side." Sam dropped his voice even lower, to just a whisper, and said, "Maybe Cas'll get his grace back soon and we can deal with it then?"

Dean nodded, and whispered back. "So we stick to our plan. Such as it is."

"Such as it is," agreed Sam. "Stay here, take care of Cas, see if Crowley comes through. I'll keep researching in the meantime. Then when Cas is angel'd up, maybe he can help us try to tackle all this lightning-and-hurricane stuff."

*When*, Sam had said. *When* Cas is angel'd up. *Not if.*

Dean glanced at him, and Sam looked away.

They both automatically glanced over to the library, where they could just see the edge of Cas's sofa. From here, Dean could just see the top of Cas's head. Looked like Cas had just passed out there again, his face turned toward the warmth of the fire.

Cas seemed to be feeling cold more, this week. And sleeping more...

"Hey, maybe I'll get dinner started," said Sam. "Thought I'd try this pasta thing he might like. Maybe brownies for later?"

"Oh, I bet he'll like brownies. Good idea," said Dean. "And I picked up a couple more movies. The first Indiana Jones, and Ghostbusters. Think he'll like those?"

"Absolutely," said Sam, shutting the laptop. "He'll love 'em."

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So November continued on. Unofficially it had become Take-Care-Of-Castiel Month.

Feeding him was a major priority. Cas was still way too thin and seemed only just able to maintain his weight if he ate more-or-less constantly. Dean tried to chip in, contributing his best burgers, and fajitas, and steaks - and then of course Cas got curious and Dean had to show him how to use a grill. Sam, meanwhile, was turning into practically a chef, turning out an impressive series of stir-fries and interesting salads and elaborate pesto things and smoothies and "all that healthy crap", as Dean called it.

Though Sam also seemed to have time, in between making all the healthy crap, to also produce a pretty steady stream of both devil's-food cakes and angel-food cakes. And then, of course, inevitably, Cas demanded that Sam show him how to bake. One thing led to another and suddenly the bunker was perpetually full of the aroma of cakes baking, and then cookies, then scones and muffins, and then cupcakes. And then, perhaps inevitably, pies.

The first few baking efforts included some seriously flawed chemistry experiments, several of which set off the smoke alarm and a few of which actually burst into flame. Cas learned (slowly) that salt shouldn't be swapped for sugar, or protein powder for flour, or baking soda for baking powder, or soy sauce for maple syrup. Dean got into gales of laughter over some of the failures, but Cas was undaunted and pretty soon he'd actually got a decent handle on it. "Dean, it turns out it's really just chemistry," he announced one evening, unveiling a pretty damn respectable cherry pie. "You just have to use the correct ingredients and keep the ratios consistent and use a timer."
After that it was Pie Bonanza every day.

Dean had no objections.

At night, though, Cas was still creeping out to do his night-time patrols. Finally Dean had a word with Sam and between the two of them they managed to take over most of the patrols and convince Cas to stay in bed for most of the night.

Cas was clearly losing energy. He slept increasingly late into the morning, and began taking naps once or twice a day. Yet still he insisted on making the pies, and he kept trailing after both Dean and Sam, as well, in the bunker. They kept chasing him back to bed to rest, or to the library sofa to doze in front of the fire, yet inevitably Cas kept turning up again. He'd appear in the laundry room to watch Sam folding the sheets, or he'd offer to help Dean with some errand outside, or he'd try to make some more pies even when they were both telling him to rest.

Often he came limping out to the garage where Dean often was, usually working on the Impala. Dean would roll out from under the car to find Cas sitting there on the stairs by the garage workbench, just watching Dean work.

Sometimes Dean woke at night to find Cas sitting by his bed.

It reminded Dean, sometimes, of the year when they'd first met. Back then, Cas had had a habit of appearing unexpectedly. Dean would walk around a corner and there was Cas, staring at him; Dean would wake up in bed and there was Cas, the mysterious angel Castiel, just sitting there on the edge of his bed. Maybe watching Dean, maybe just staring at the wall.

Often with a sort of a remote, sad look on his face that Dean had never quite been able to interpret.

Back then Cas had seemed so mysterious. Frightening, even. Invulnerable. Dean had been bewildered, then, by why Cas kept showing up. Was he studying Dean? Planning something? Up to something?

It occurred to him now that maybe Castiel had just wanted some company.

The company actually might have been kind of nice. But Cas was looking so tired, these days; so whenever Dean found Cas sitting there by the workbench, or offering to help Sam with his library research, or wanting to come with Dean to the grocery store, Dean always felt obliged to chase Cas right back to bed.

Cas also ended up on the sofa in the tv room pretty often. Dean got a little out of control with the movies. Pirated copies he'd downloaded, stuff off Netflix, dvd's from the town library, even old VHS tapes from the thrift store for fifty cents a pop, Dean collected it all. It started out as just occasional movie nights, with Sam, Cas and Dean— well, and Meg— squished side-by-side on the couch. Finally Sam dragged a couple of big easy chairs over to the tv so that Cas could stretch out on the sofa in comfort. Eventually it sorted out into a little routine: Sam made the popcorn, Dean got the beers, and then they watched a movie together, Cas flopped out on the sofa and Sam and Dean sitting in easy chairs on either side.

More and more often Cas fell asleep in the middle of a movie. Whenever this happened, without ever
really talking about it, Sam and Dean started taking turns sitting with him. One brother would go off to do the dinner dishes, while the other stayed with Cas.

Whenever it was Dean's turn to sit with Cas, he couldn't seem to stop watching Cas's breathing. Was it weaker? Slower? Was he definitely still breathing? Were the bruises on his face worse?

The days kept ticking by with no word from Crowley. So Dean kept coming up with more lists of movies Cas needed to see, and Sam kept coming up with elaborate meal plans, and Cas kept baking pies. And almost every night Cas fell asleep there on the sofa, and Dean or Sam sat there with him, watching over him while he slept.

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After a few occasions when Sam and Dean both had to leave the bunker for shopping trips - leaving Cas all alone - Dean realized he really had better teach Cas how to load and shoot a shotgun and pistol, and how to clean and care for the guns. Just in case. So one bright sunny day in mid-November, on an afternoon when Cas actually seemed to have a bit of energy, Dean gave Cas a little tutorial on basic gun safety. (It turned out certain little details like, oh, not waving a loaded gun around randomly, and not pointing it at your friend, didn't come all that naturally to someone who'd spent millennia being able to instantly heal any injury.)

Then Sam and Dean took him outside to try some target practice on the classic Kansas-backyard-shooting-range they'd set up in a field outside the bunker. The bunker also had an indoor shooting range, of course, but the weather was so nice, and also it was fun to be able to set up really distant targets, even if nobody had a chance of hitting them.

Dean set up six beer cans for Cas fairly close, and another six about thirty paces away away. And then, just for fun, another six that were impossibly far off at the very edge of the field.

"All right, bucko," said Dean, walking back to Cas and Sam. He handed Cas his pistol, and watched while Cas carefully clicked off the safety. Dean said, "Give that a try. And remember, don't worry when you don't hit the far ones — they're really pretty far, it's just for practice, and it's normal to miss those—"

**BLAM. BLAM. BLAM.** Cas started firing, using the two-handed grip Dean had shown him, and instantly the six close cans flew off their plank, one at a time, and then the six farther ones. And then the six distant ones. Eighteen shots, eighteen cans hit.

Cas put the safety back on and lowered the gun. "Like that?" he said.

Dean and Sam glanced at each other. Dean walked over to the furthest line of cans and picked one up. It'd been hit dead center. He found another can, and another; dead center shots, all of them.

He walked back and showed them to Sam, who just shook his head and laughed.

"Did I do poorly?" said Castiel, looking back and forth between them.

"Um... no," said Dean.

"You might be able to try out for the U.S. Olympic team, Cas," said Sam, still looking at one of the cans. "These were all perfect shots."

"Oh. Is that unusual?"
"Yes," said Dean and Sam simultaneously.

"I did hone my vessel's vision," said Cas. "Back when I was an angel. Could that be why? Oh and... also I improved some of the reflexes and the hand-eye coordination. Perhaps some of that has remained?"

"That is just no fair," said Dean, tossing the cans on the ground. Sam just laughed.

Cas added, "I wanted to add ultraviolet vision, and infrared, and polarized light, and a magnetic sense. But it turns out you can't really work those into a human eye. Really too bad, actually. Polarized light is so helpful. And a built-in magnetic compass would have been handy. Also I really miss infrared. And the extra colors you get with a UV receptor... the sunset really doesn't look the same. Actually I don't understand why you don't feel half-blind all the time."

"I hadn't been feeling half-blind till you mentioned any of this," said Sam.

Dean cleared his throat. "Let's go work on your driving, Cas, huh?" said Dean. "Because suddenly I really need to feel better than you at something."

Sam snorted, and said to Dean, "I've got a feeling you're only going to be better than him at driving for about two more days, so you'd better make the most of it."

So Dean took Castiel out for some driving lessons.

Even despite Cas's weakened condition, it only took one day.

A week later Cas drove the Impala all the way to the far-away grocery store in Hastings. With his own Kansas driver's license, in the name of Cas T.L. Winchester, tucked in his jacket pocket. He was driving far too perfectly, even going the actual speed limit, but just the same Dean got so antsy sitting in the passenger seat that Sam threatened to blindfold him and stick him in the trunk. But they did manage to get to the store.

Dean had thought they'd just pick up some miscellaneous stuff and head right back home, just a little outing for Cas to practice driving, but once in the store Sam made a beeline to the meat section, dragging Dean along with him while Cas vanished into the baking aisle.

"How many pounds, do you think?" said Sam. "How much are you gonna want?"

Dean slowly realized that Sam was standing in front of a big freezer bin of frozen turkeys.

Sam must have noticed Dean's baffled look, for he laughed and said, "Thanksgiving, Dean. It's this holiday that usually happens at the end of November? That holiday when people eat a turkey? You might have heard of it?"

Dean had forgotten.

Sam reached into the freezer bin, rolling the big round frozen turkeys around to check their weights, "I thought maybe we could do the whole thing, turkey and stuffing and everything— what do you think? Cas hasn't ever had a Thanksgiving. He doesn't really get the idea, actually, but I told him it's just a big meal with a turkey and pies, and now he has like three different pies he wants to try making. So, how about it? A real Thanksgiving dinner for once?"
For some reason Dean felt weirdly disturbed by this idea, but he nodded quietly, and then trailed along after Sam and Cas as they loaded a cart full of food.

Two days later, on Thanksgiving Day, Dean was sitting at the kitchen table with Cas and Sam, watching Sam carve up a ridiculously huge turkey. And all Dean could think, over and over, was This is very strange. This is really really strange. Not bad, of course—it was all good. Sam's turkey had come out great, and Cas's pies were ridiculously amazing (apple, pumpkin and mixed-berry). And they had also ended up with no less than ten side dishes—Cas had wanted to try all the classic ones and once again Sam had been totally unable to hold back.

It was good. It was all good. It was awesome, actually.

Or, it should have been awesome. The food was delicious, and they were all here sitting here together, and Dean had a couple more movies lined up. Cas had just said some weird thing about the latest Wizard of Oz book that had got Sam cracking up again. Cas wasn't doing too badly, really, and Sam actually looked really happy for once, and nobody had died in months now, and....

It ought to have felt great.

It ought to have felt like family.

And it did, actually. It does feel ilke family, thought Dean, it really does. Actually... it IS family. Abruptly he realized, sitting there in his chair, that this was exactly why it wasn't so great. For suddenly he was fighting down a sudden surge of panic. The thought If they're my family, they'll all die, came zinging unbidden into his mind, and Dean's mouth nearly went dry. He sat there, his hands tightening on his fork and knife as he looked at them both: Cas next to him explaining something about his pie crust, Sam standing up now cutting up the pies—and Dean felt completely certain that Sam and Cas were both going to die. Because that was what always happened. Always.

They'll be taken away, thought Dean. They'll die, like Kevin and Bobby, or they'll leave, like Charlie, or they'll forget me, like Lisa. Even Sam... I barely got him back. That was so damn friggin' close... and I'm not going to be able to save him like that again. I promised him I wouldn't. And Cas... I lost my MEMORY of him! And he nearly died, so many times, with the orb, and then in the lake, and now Cas is—Cas is... Crowley still hasn't gotten in touch, and Cas is... probably going to... By Christmas, will Cas be...

Dean could only cut off the thought by chugging a huge swig of his whiskey. Sam shot him a questioning look, but Dean looked away.

Well, at least they hadn't gone around the table and said thanks, or any of that crap. Or said grace.

In fact nobody had even mentioned the word "grace" in a few weeks.

Dean eventually managed to calm himself down, by the tried-and-true method of swigging his way rapidly through a few more glassfuls of booze and then launching on a long, irrelevant story, which in this case turned out to be Dean making an impassioned case about whether or not Han Solo or Greedo had shot first in the original Star Wars movie. This necessarily involved some elaborate tangents about Indiana Jones and also the Die Hard series and then a long speech about Spiderman, which Dean felt sure was also highly relevant to his Han Solo case. Sam started laughing, but Cas just sat there staring at Dean, slowly eating forkful after forkful of pie, looking increasingly puzzled but perfectly content.
About fifteen minutes later Dean was wrapping up with an emphatic, "So, you see, Han *definitely* shot first or the entire basis of his character collapses," when Cas interrupted him out of the blue with:

"If I don't get my grace back..."

Dean stopped in mid-sentence. He and Sam both looked at Cas.

Cas looked a little embarrassed. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt. I just wanted to say that today has been a very nice day." He put his fork down, and said, "Last year on this night, I was sleeping on a concrete floor and I was hungry, and uncomfortable, and I was alone and I only had enough money for a burrito. I knew it was a holiday— I knew it was Thanksgiving— though I didn't really understand what that was exactly, but I knew it was a day to feel thankful, and I was trying to feel thankful for a couple of things. For one, I'd found the floor to sleep on— it was dry at least, and it's just awful being out in the rain when you're also cold, so I was thankful about being somewhere dry. Then of course, there was the burrito too and I felt thankful about that also. So I concluded then that the point of the holiday is to be thankful if you've got a floor to sleep on, out of the rain and snow, and a burrito. But I kept thinking about the two of you." Cas glanced down at his plate. "I wondered what you were doing. I was hoping you were both okay. Hoping you had had a nice meal together."

Sam and Dean were both silent.

"And now I've realized," went on Cas, "the floor and burrito were nice, back then; and the pies and turkey are extremely nice, now; but that's actually not the point, is it? The real point is to be with family, isn't it?" Cas looked up at Dean, and looked over at Sam too. "The point is to be with family. To feed them food you made. To listen to their stories." Cas added with a half-smile at Dean, "Even if the stories don't make any sense. Have I got it right?"

After a moment, Sam nodded and said, "Pretty much, Cas. Yeah."

Dean found he had gone entirely mute.

"So, if I don't get my grace back," Cas said again. "If next year if I'm not here, I just wanted to say that—"

"Stop right there," said Dean abruptly. "Stop." They both turned and looked at him, and Dean said, "No goodbyes. And please don't remind me what a bastard I was to you, he thought. Last year... I could have done something. Sent you some money. Paid for a motel room. Given you a call. Something. Anything."

Cas was looking at him again, and Dean stared down into his glass.

"I was just going to say," said Cas, gently but insistently, "that no matter what happens next, today was a very good day." Dean still didn't say anything, and Cas finally said, "Dean?" He reached out and touched Dean on the shoulder. "Have I said something wrong?"

"Dean," Sam said, in a kind of a low growl.

"No... nothing wrong." Dean managed to say, "Just... Cas, I'm... " He swallowed. "I'm sorry you weren't here last year. I really am."

"But I'm here now," said Castiel. "That was my point. I'm glad I'm here now."

He gave Dean a smile. A gentle, relaxed smile.
With no bitterness... and no blame.

That was Castiel, wasn't it?

Dean felt the clenched feeling around his heart ease a little. But only a little.

The very next day, the Friday after Thanksgiving, Dean did something he thought he would never do in all his life. Something of earth-shattering importance. Something that left Sam absolutely stunned:

Dean told Castiel to take the Impala out by himself. Anywhere he wanted.

Cas was so startled by this offer that he couldn't even seem to figure out where to go. He spent a while standing at the Impala holding the key, just staring at the car, till Sam suggested that maybe Cas could go to Lebanon's tiny community library to return some of Cas's books (baking books, predictably; and an astonishing number of Oz books). And maybe pick up the next Oz book and a few new movies.

Dean made sure Cas had his cell phone, checked it himself to be sure it was charged, made Cas recite Dean's cell number from memory just in case, gave him some cash just in case, told him what to do if he got a flat tire, just in case, and made him recite the route to and from the library several times, just in case. (The library was all of two miles away, on a dead straight road.) Dean was just in the middle of describing what to do if a rainstorm suddenly came up and the wipers broke, just in case, when Cas said, "Dean. DEAN."

Dean stopped.

Cas said, "Dean, I've walked on the surface of the sun. I watched Pangaea break apart. I can drive an automobile two miles to a library."

"Uh," said Dean. "Okay. Um. But, call if anything comes up, okay?"

Sam was chuckling by now, but Cas just nodded and got in the Impala, started it up smoothly, and steered it perfectly out of the garage and away down the driveway. Still Dean just couldn't take his eyes off the Impala. He followed the car out of the garage, and stood outside watching Cas heading down the long driveway, somehow fearing that the Impala would suddenly veer right into a tree, or maybe spontaneously flip over and burst into flames.

But the Impala just rolled neatly away, in a perfectly straight line down the long rutted bunker driveway. Dean could still make out the shape of Cas's head in the front seat. Dean watched till the car made a smooth turn onto the main road and went out of sight.

"They grow up so fast, don't they," said Sam, beside him. "Next thing you know he'll be heading off to college."

"Ah, stuff it," said Dean, still watching the empty driveway.

"Empty-nest syndrome really can hit you hard, you know," went on Sam. "Maybe you need a hobby to take your mind off it? Maybe you could take up knitting."

Dean was opening his mouth to say "I'll stick that knitting where the sun don't shine, Sam" when he felt a hand on his shoulder, and it wasn't Sam's hand. He didn't even have a split second to move or
shout or pull his gun or anything; instead there was a sudden, strangely queasy feeling like a rubber band pulling at his guts, and a sliding sensation across his skin as if he'd popped suddenly through a thin soap bubble, and abruptly the world went grey and misty. Dean had felt this before, and he knew immediately: It's an angel. An angel's flying me somewhere. And it's not Cas.

For a microsecond he still saw the bunker, and the trees, and the driveway, all looking as grey and filmy as if he were watching an old black-and-white movie. Then the grey, misty ground flew away from under him, hundreds of miles unspooling in a moment. Prairie rocketed past at blistering speed, hills appeared and flowed past in an instant, and then mountains went zooming past.

And suddenly they were back in the world of normal colors, and they were on a mountaintop. He and Sam. Side by side. Tied to a pair of trees.

Dean gasped for breath, still struggling to understand what had just happened. He heard Sam over to his left sputtering, "Dean— what— Dean— what the hell?"

There was a flicker of movement at the corner of Dean's eye, and he turned his head to see Crowley standing between the pair of trees. With a little old lady. A little old lady with her gray hair in a bun, and her reading-glasses propped up on her hair.

Ziphius, the angel who had chased and tortured and nearly killed Castiel, that terrible night in Nebraska. Ziphius, the angel who'd been assisting Calcariel with his plan to awaken the magma elemental underneath Yellowstone, to blow North America sky-high and "purify the Earth" of all life.

And now Dean suddenly remembered...

Ziphius and Calcariel had been working with demons.

They had been making deals with demons. Signing contracts that had lots of clauses. Crowley's specialty.

Crowley had said, I've got some associates...

... I've got some associates who can handle grace safely.

"Oh no," said Dean, his heart sinking.

"Oh yes," said Crowley, beaming. "And here I thought I was going to be introducing you all to each other! But as soon as I came to Ziphius with my proposal, imagine my surprise when he, or she — whatever, Ziphius, I can never keep my pronouns straight with you angels — imagine my surprise when she/he said you're all acquainted already! It sounds like you've already had quite the bonding experience together. Escaping from magma elementals at the last second! You must all feel like brothers in arms, I suppose? Or sisters. Whatever."

Ziphius seemed to be paying very little attention to Crowley's speech. The second he'd stopped talking she tilted her sweet grandmotherly face to the sky and spoke one word. One strange, long word, and a tremendous bolt of lightning split the sky with a thundering crack and shattered a nearby tree very close to Dean. The poor tree was nearly split in half, several great branches and half its trunk peeling away with an echoing crash. The remaining half of the tree began smoldering, little bursts of flame wisping up its bark.

"Holy shit," gasped Sam. Dean couldn't even speak; he was half deafened from the noise, his head ringing, his vision nearly whited out.
He had to blink a few times just to get his vision back, and then he saw Crowley backing away as Ziphius pulled something out of her pocket and held it up: a little vial of glass filled with a swirling bluish-white light. It was glowing with an eerie radiance. An angel's grace.

"I believe I have something that you want," said Ziphius. "And I believe you will negotiate with me."

"And I believe I'm done here," said Crowley, and he disappeared.

_A/N - Ah, you knew it wasn't going easy, right? (mwa ha ha ha ha...)_

_BTW - Sorry for the delay in posting this chapter - I was swamped with holidays and finishing up my holiday fic A Winter's Tale (another platonic SPN fic, if any of you are interested). So I had to table Broken till Winter's Tale was done. Winter's Tale is all finished now, and apart from a few Flight epilogues, Broken is now my main active fic and will update at least weekly through Jan-Feb-March-April._

_If you are enjoying this, please let me know! And if you had a favorite scene or favorite idea or favorite bit of dialogue, please let me know what it was!_
The Man From Corporate

A/N - I wrote this chapter originally for Flight while driving by the Gates Of The Arctic National Park. And it occurred to me: since Forgotten introduced us to Grand Teton National Park, Flight and its sister fic Broken ought to continue the national-parks theme! But with a new park. :)

Ziphius strolled between Sam and Dean's two trees and walked several paces in front of them, swinging the little glowing vial from one hand as she gazing quietly out at the landscape. Dean's vision finally cleared enough for him to take a real look around, and he realized there was a stunning view before them.

They were on a small grassy mountaintop that was dotted here and there with sparse, puffy-looking pines. Sam and Dean were tied to two side-by-side pine trees that were about fifteen feet apart, coils of rope wrapped tightly all around their arms, chests and legs. Ahead of them stood rank upon rank of mountains, almost every one of which had a picture-postcard red-colored butte rearing up out of the top of the mountain toward the sky. The base of each mountain was a patchwork of dark-green conifers interlaced with the last of the fall foliage, in vivid reds and yellows.

The dramatic red buttes, dusty-green conifers, and red-and-yellow fall leaves all seemed almost fantastically colorful against the crystal blue sky.

In fact... where the heck had that lightning come from? There weren't any clouds overhead. The sky was a seamless bowl of deep blue.

"Where are we?" said Sam, his voice tense as he looked around.

"Zion National Park," said Ziphius serenely, still looking at the view.

"Ziphius in Zion?" said Dean. He laughed. "Seriously? Shouldn't you be zooming around on a zebra, or something?"

Ziphius turned around, her pleasant grandmotherly face creased with a scowl. "Zion refers to the city of the righteous," she said, her voice icy. "And this state of yours that we're in, Utah, is one of the few places on this entire continent where the mice still believe in God."

"Oh, right," said Dean. "We're all 'mice' to you. Mice that outsmarted you, last time, if I remember right."

Sam shot a half-angry, half-desperate look at Dean — it meant Don't piss her off, Dean knew. But Ziphius didn't rise to the bait. She just kept swinging the vial of Cas's grace around with one hand, twirling it around her finger as she said, "This really is one of the few places on this entire continent where I feel even slightly at home. I thought it would be a more fitting base of operations than our last location."

Dean, unable to resist trying to needle her, said, "Yeah, the Tetons didn't really work out too well for Calcariel, huh?"

Dean's last glimpse of that moment was still vivid in his memory: the angel Calcariel pinned in a tentacle of molten lava, his flaming wings beating the air in desperation. A blinding flash of light had followed, so bright that Dean had been forced to close his eyes.
There'd been nothing left of Calcariel afterwards but a few bits of drifting feather-ash.

Ziphius looked away at the mention of Calcariel.

"So," she said, after a short pause, tucking a wisp of gray hair behind her reading-glasses, "Crowley told me you two were searching for Castiel's grace. The grace of a dead angel does have certain uses; I can imagine why you might want it."

Dean slapped a neutral expression onto his face as quick as he could.

**Ziphius still thought Castiel was dead.**

By a mighty force of will Dean managed to avoid looking at Sam. **Ziphius must still think Cas died of hypothermia,** he realized. Hypothermia, in that Nebraska lake, over a month ago now. Cas had disappeared in the lake, and shortly afterwards Sam and Dean had managed to blow Ziphius away with a banishing sigil. Ziphius must never have realized that they'd rescued Cas from the lake right afterwards.

Dean's thoughts were suddenly racing. If Ziphius thought Cas was dead, maybe Ziphius could be convinced to give up Cas's grace? Maybe Dean could pull off some kind of clever deal? Maybe they could even get back to bunker soon... before Cas got back, even?

And at that point Dean realized that Castiel was going to come home to the bunker in about fifteen minutes... and would find it empty. With Sam and Dean mysteriously gone.

Ever since Nebraska— well, ever since Wyoming, really— Cas had been having a lot of nightmares about Dean and Sam vanishing.

Dean groaned inwardly, thinking, **We've got to get that grace and get out of here and get home quick.**

As if she'd heard his thoughts, Ziphius held up the little glowing vial again. She said, "Crowley said you were looking for this, and he had a fairly good idea where it was; I must say, demonic associates do come in handy at times. And since I seem to be one of the few angels left with full power of flight, I managed to get there and get hold of it before anybody else put the puzzle pieces together. Though I don't know what Metatron was thinking, really; it was inside the Fukushima reactor core, of all places! Perhaps he assumed it wouldn't be noticed there." Sam and Dean both gave little gasps at this revelation, and Ziphius looked up at them in annoyance, saying, "Oh, don't worry, you simpletons, it's not radioactive. The grace is immune. The grace even protected the little vial it's encased in. An angel's grace is well known to be a potent source of healing, you know. You could heal any fatal illness with this, in fact. Or you could even resurrect somebody. Or, you could make quite a wide patch of land fertile and productive. You could have healthy herds, abundant crops, fabulous yields of fruit. Presumably you want the grace for some such reason?"

"Yeah, we had some plans to take up farming, actually," said Dean. "To be honest we've been getting tired of hunting. Thought we'd get some rangeland... run a few hundred head..."

"I was gonna plant some fruit trees," put in Sam.

"Maybe some honeybees," said Dean.

"This will work excellently," said Ziphius, holding up the grace again. "Abundant yields of honey, bumper crops of olives, and your camels and goats will be blessed with fertility."

"Perfect," said Dean. "I'd been kind of worrying about my camels' fertility, to be honest."
Sam nodded and added, "Yeah, the goats really need to get it on a bit more, too."

"Well, then, this is just what you need!" said Ziphius cheerfully. "And you'll find my terms quite reasonable. All I ask in return is that I and my superior take over your bodies." She smiled sweetly. "Quite a bargain, don't you think? We're even willing to give you control back for an hour a day, so as to make it worthwhile for you to be able to use the grace. An hour a day ought to be sufficient to milk your camels and goats, yes?"

"Uh... no," said Dean. "Actually, that isn't going to work."

"Really?" said Ziphius, looking surprised. "But... how much time per day do you need to milk your hoofstock?" She thought a moment and suggested, "We might be able to give you two hours per day."

"We kind of need twenty-four hours a day, actually," said Sam.

Ziphius frowned. "How many camels do you have, exactly?"

"We have ten thousand camels," said Dean.

"And five thousand goats," said Sam.

Ziphius's eyebrows raised. "You're rather wealthier than I'd realized," she said, glancing at the grace again. "Still, though, this one grace should be able to bless even that many hoofstock. Assuming you pack the animals together tightly and open the grace in the geometric center of the herd."

"Look, Ziff," said Dean, "Possession isn't an option here. But how about if we—"

Ziphius cut him off. "I'll be frank. This is the only option." She put her hands on her hips, the grace still dangling from one hand, and she stood there a moment, looking back and forth between Sam and Dean. A hawk screamed in the distance as if on cue, as she stood there with the amazing Zion mountain landscape spread out behind her.

Ziphius said, her voice suddenly cold, "Need I remind you: you are mice. And the tedious details of your camel-and-goat lives are indescribably boring. And the ONLY reason I ever bother to speak with mice at all, and the ONLY reason I'm willing to forgive your blatant insubordination last time we met, is that my superior and I need better vessels."

"Your superior?" said Dean.

"My superior was the one who negotiated with Crowley," said Ziphius. "My superior can't fly as well as I — her wings are damaged — so she let me do this on my own. We both have inadequate vessels and we must have two strong vessels, in order to re-impose some order on this pathetic planet. There must be some sense of order; angels and humans alike have been utterly ignoring the rules. And, to put it plainly, she has given me my orders, and I have to obey them. So. Your bodies, with two hours per day of camel-milking time allowed to each of you, in return for the grace."

"Absolutely not," snapped Sam.

Dean said, "Sorry to disappoint you, but we've both been down this path before and that's a big fat nope for both of us."

"Perhaps I haven't made myself clear," said Ziphius. She touched a little blue glass pendant that was hanging around her neck, glanced up at the sky and spoke that strange word again, twice; and this time two blasts of lightning came shattering down out of the clear blue sky, pulverizing two more
pines nearby. Again Dean and Sam couldn't help cringing at the tremendous crashing sound and and the blinding flash of light. As the echoing boom faded away into the hills, Ziphius said, "You are not free. You are my prisoners. I am willing to wait until you say yes. It's simple, really: you can live out your lives tied to these two trees being struck by lightning repeatedly, every day; or you can say yes. You'll come to see that I'm offering a fair deal."

With that, she disappeared.

And a moment later she reappeared. With one hand on a puffy upholstered lavender recliner that still had a price tag dangling from one corner. Swinging the chair around till it was facing the spectacular view, Ziphius settled herself comfortably in the chair, leaned back, extended the foot-rest, put her feet up and laced her hands in her lap. "The lightning-strikes won't start hitting you directly till tomorrow," she said pleasantly, "So you can take plenty of time to think about it. Food and drink will be provided." Here she waved one hand, and two little tables appeared, one by Sam's tree and one by Dean's. Each table had a neat white lace tablecloth, a bottle of wine, a wineglass, and a painted china plate with stacks of cheese-and-salami hors d'oeuvres. Dean found that one of his hands was miraculously free from the ropes all of a sudden, and that he could reach the hors d'oeuvres easily.

But try as he might, feeling around with his free hand, he couldn't get the other ropes free from around his chest, his other arm, or his legs.

He started feeling around the back of the tree, as inconspicuously as he could, hoping to be able to undo the knots. But he couldn't even seem to feel any knots — and finally Ziphius said, without even turning around from her lavender recliner, "There are no knots, mice. It's a continuous rope. You are permanently bound to the tree. Now, why don't you both have a glass of wine and enjoy the show?"

She began twirling Castiel's grace from one finger, idly, touched the blue pendant again and spoke a long sentence in that strange language she'd used earlier. Tremendous lightning bolts began to shower down from the clear blue sky in all directions, striking every red-rock butte in view.

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Castiel drove the Impala up the bunker driveway a half-hour after he'd left. He parked the car precisely where Dean had had it originally, gathered a little bundle of books and dvd's to his chest, and clambered out of the car. He'd gotten "Tiktok of Oz" for Sam, yet another book about pies, and the movie "Homeward Bound." (The title had caught Castiel's eye.)

Cas paused at the doorway, looking around for Dean. Surely Dean would have heard the Impala approaching? But there was no Dean in view. The bunker door was hanging open, though. This was a little unusual; Dean was usually pretty strict about keeping it locked, since the wards didn't work as well if the door were left open. Cas frowned at the open door, went inside and closed it behind him, calling, "Dean, the door was open."

No answer.

"Dean?" Castiel called again. "Sam?" He limped carefully down the little curved staircase (his feet were still battered from his Nebraska ordeal, and of course they had never healed; it always hurt a little more when going down stairs). Reaching the map table, Castiel set the books and dvd down and walked into the kitchen. Nobody was there.
He checked the library. Nobody there either— well, except little Meg the cat, who was curled up on the sofa like usual. Sam's laptop was still sitting on a side table where he'd been working earlier.

Castiel patted Meg on the head absently and glanced at the laptop. If the laptop was out and open like that, that meant Sam must be in the bunker somewhere. Sam always closed it when he went out on an errand.

Cas called again, "Sam? Dean?"

No answer.

He thought a moment and limped down the hall toward the bedrooms, moving a little faster now. He knocked on Sam's door, and on Dean's; no answer. He opened both doors cautiously, after knocking a few more times. The bedrooms were empty.

Limping even faster, Cas made his way back up the stairs and into the garage.

Nobody was in the garage either. Cas called both their names again, and looked around behind some of the larger vehicles. The garage was empty.

Cas stood a few moments in the garage, just turning in a little circle and looking around. "DEAN? SAM?" he called again, more loudly now. He waited a few moments, and then pulled out his phone and called them both. Dean first, then Sam.

No answer from either one of them.

Cas slowly put his phone back in his pocket, and thought a moment, his forehead creased with a frown now.

Then he went back into the bunker and began going through the entire bunker methodically. Room by room, even the rooms he'd already checked. The back file rooms, the front bathroom, the back bathroom, the extra dorm rooms, the lab, the cells in the basement, the indoor shooting range, all the dozens of strange little rooms; even the sub-basement and the sub-sub-basement and the great vaulted attic; everywhere. And he kept calling their names, and, now and then, trying their cell phones too.

But Sam and Dean weren't anywhere to be found. And they weren't answering their phones.

Cas tottered outside. He went out to the field where they'd been practicing the shooting; he looked around through the trees. He made his way all the way around the bunker, calling Sam's and Dean's names repeatedly, checking the side door near the kitchen, pushing his way through the brush and trees on the back side, till he got back all the way back around to the front door.

He went down to the map room again. Where he bowed his head, closed his eyes, and muttered "Wake up," to himself.

Castiel opened his eyes and looked around, and called, "Dean? Sam?" again.

No answer.

He sat down and put both hands over his eyes. He sat very quietly for a long moment, and then said again, to himself, "Wake up."

He opened his eyes. Looked around. Called Dean's and Sam's names one more time.

Castiel repeated this routine several times — closing his eyes and saying "Wake up" to himself, and
then looking around again.

He began to whisper "No," now and then, in between the "Wake up's".

After a while he gave up with the "Wake up" efforts and sat there for several minutes, staring at the map table, his mouth tight.

Then he searched all the rooms in the bunker a second time.

And a third.

An hour later Castiel was sitting in the library with Meg on his lap, petting her over and over. She was purring, and she didn't seem to mind the string of little questions that Cas was asking her. Just one question at a time, in a low, quiet voice, as he kept petting her:

The first question was, "Perhaps the pies weren't up to standard?"

He kept petting Meg; and Meg purred.

The second question: "Did I fall asleep too often during the movies? I could have tried harder to stay awake..."

More petting. Meg purred.

On the third question his voice dropped to a whisper: "Maybe I interrupted Dean too often at his work?" A pause; then, "Maybe I was annoying him..."

On and on. Had Castiel driven the Impala badly? Was Sam annoyed from having to make so many meals? Was it too much work to help Cas change the bandages on his feet? Had Cas been using too much hot water? Was Sam tired of reading the Oz books to Cas? Was Dean tired of having to stay up late with Cas on the couch?

Had they both just... gotten tired of him?

Meg had no answers. She just kept purring.

Castiel sat there a long time with Meg. He eventually ran out of questions and just sat there, petting his little fluffy cat and holding her close. At last he rose, gently setting Meg back on the couch. He gathered some ingredients from the Men of Letters herbarium, got a knife from the kitchen, and went down to Crowley's old cell. There, he knelt at the edge of the devil's trap that was already on the floor, lit the necessary herbs, cut his hand and let the blood drip into the bowl, and said an incantation.

Crowley appeared in a puff of smoke.

"Ah!" said Crowley. "Castiel! It's been so long! Just ages since we tried to take over the world together! And we hardly ever got to chat when we were housemates, here in the bunker. We just had such different schedules. How've you been? You know, we've really got to stay in touch more — are you on Facebook?"

"Where are they?" said Castiel, his trademark low growl even lower.

Crowley looked blank. "Where are who?"
"Sam and Dean. Tell me where they are." Cas took a step closer, his fists clenched. "Did you do something? Or... if you didn't... " His voice wavered. ".can you just... find out where they went?"

"I, personally, did not do a thing other than fulfill the contract that I signed," said Crowley stiffly. "Because I actually honor my agreements. My word actually means something. Unlike some people I could name. Now, what are you blathering about?"

"I came home and... they... weren't... here," said Cas unsteadily.

"Well, my dear lad, maybe they nipped out to the pub, did you consider that?"

"I have the car. And none of the other vehicles are gone."

"Hm. In that case they must have been forced to run cross-country in order to get away from you. Maybe they hitchhiked!"

Cas just looked at him.

Crowley gave a little snort of laughter at Cas's expression, glanced down at the floor and shook his head, muttering to himself, "It's like kicking a puppy. No challenge to it at all." He looked up at Cas and said, "I've advised those two boys often enough to ditch you, or better still, kill you. Can't imagine why they haven't taken my advice. But I just have one question for you: Is that Dean's car key in your pocket, or are you just happy to see me?"

Cas blinked. He stuck his hand into his pocket, pulled out the Impala key, and gazed at it blankly.

Cas said slowly, "It's... the car key. But... why would I be happy to see you?"

Crowley let out another little snort of laughter and shook his head again. "Even a puppy would figure this out faster. Do try to keep up, Castiel: I really don't know if Dean would leave YOU, but would he leave that car?"

Castiel drew in a soft breath and stared down at the key again. His fist closed around the key, and his face brightened, as Crowley went on, "Though I guess he could find another car he liked as much... but... it seems like lightning never strikes twice! Heh heh!" Crowley was suddenly speaking in strangely over-enunciated, exaggerated voice. "Anyway, you shouldn't worry too much; you shouldn't make a mountain out of a molehill!"

Cas tore his eyes off the key and looked up at Crowley, puzzled.

Crowley added, raising his eyebrows a little and leaning toward Cas, "I know it must seem like a... bolt from the blue... for them to vanish like this, but wherever they are I'm sure they're having a positively... electrifying... time."

Cas scowled at him. "What are you talking about, Crowley?"

Crowley rolled his eyes. "Castiel," he said. He gave a big sigh, and said, "Casti-el, Casti-el, Casti-el," as if Cas were a slightly annoying toddler who had tried his patience one time too many. "Lightning! Bolt from the blue! Electrifying! Mountains! Are you with me?"

Cas frowned at him again.

Crowley stared back for a moment, and then spread his arms and snapped, "How can I accidentally drop some unintentional clues if you're not paying attention? Do I have to draw you a map?"
"You're giving me... clues?" said Cas hesitantly.

"Trying to, yes. Though you're not making it easy."

"But... why would you help me?" said Cas, narrowing his eyes. "That doesn't make sense."

Crowley dropped his arms and said bluntly, "Look, Cas dear, let's just say the Weather Channel was getting more and more interesting over the last few months. I had an opportunity to get free and I took it, but, truth be told, I'd really rather not have another high-powered angel trying to take over the planet. Last time that didn't really go so well, did it?"

"Another... high-powered angel?"

"Whenever any of you angels get the least bit of power in your hands, you always seem to get this obsession for either killing half of Creation or just plain wiping the planet clean, and how can I make deals for people's souls if there are no people left?" Crowley stuck his hands in his pockets and gave a big shrug, saying, "You're definitely not my favorite pony but it appears you're the only other horse in the race at the moment. Better the devil you know than the devil you don't, right?" He burst out in laughter for a moment, and then finally wiped his eyes and continued, "Anyway, you should just sit down and relax and maybe watch some tv. Have you ever watched the Weather Channel? It's quite entertaining. Channel 44, just by the way. Now if you'll excuse me I've got a Hell to run."

Cas thought a moment, and then turned to Crowley's TV — which was still sitting against the wall of the dungeon cell — and flipped to the Weather Channel. He had to settle down in Crowley's leather swivel chair and wait patiently through a half-hour special on the freakish hurricane season before the weather update finally rolled around. Then a well-groomed weather newscaster was saying "And if the hurricanes weren't enough, for tonight's visual, let's take you to Utah. Get a load of this footage, folks!" The screen switched to a scene of mountains illuminated by a stunning display of lightning that seemed to be happening in broad daylight with no clouds at all - dozens of different lightning bolts spearing down through the sky all at once. The newscaster said, "We seem to have an intense lightning storm parked right over Zion National Park. This is really quite unusual - lightning with no visible clouds! Just look at the spectacle!"

The perky blond newscaster sitting next to him added, "Maybe somebody up there doesn't like national parks?"

Both newscasters broke up into peals of merry laughter.

Castiel stared at the little map on the screen for a moment, and turned the tv off.

Cas didn't bother to clean up the runes and ashes from the summoning spell. He just limped hurriedly upstairs and to his room, where he opened his closet door and pulled out the little cardboard cat-carrier. Meg was sleeping on the library sofa again; he scooped her up gently and tucked her into the little carrier before she was even fully awake, saying, "I'm sorry, Meg. Hopefully this won't be for long."

Next Cas limped to Dean's room, and Sam's room, and the library, accumulating a little pile of assorted objects that he dumped hastily into a duffel bag. Spare clothes (his own, and some of Sam's,
and some of Dean's, and a few extra FBI suits just in case); Sam's laptop; some extra guns and ammo; and the first aid supplies. Last, Cas checked his pocket, counted the money Dean had given him earlier in the day, and looked at his "Cas T.L. Winchester" Kansas driver's license for a long moment.

Finally he picked up the duffel and the cat carrier (with Meg inside) and limped out of the bunker, closing and locking the door behind him.

He used all the cash Dean had given him to pre-pay for a week's boarding for Meg at Lebanon's little veterinary clinic. The next stop was the library, where Cas checked out a road atlas of the western United States, and a guide to Zion National Park.

Soon he was on his way to I-70.

An hour later Cas finally remembered to glance at the gas gauge, and he flinched; the needle was right on "E". He'd learned, nearly a year ago now, when he'd first been working at that Gas-n-Sip in Idaho, that "E" stood for Empty.

And he'd spent all his cash on Meg.

He pulled the car over at the next exit and bowed his head, his eyes closed, frowning. Thinking.

"What would Sam and Dean do?" he muttered to himself.

Freddy, the young teenage attendant at the Gas-n-Sip by I-70 in Colby, Kansas, didn't even notice the man in the suit at first. Just some guy. Some corporate type in a suit, walking a little slowly. But the man began making his way through the store staring at everything in a rather intense way that was a bit worrisome. He also had some rough-looking bruises on his face, and was limping a bit. Freddy was just starting to wonder if the guy could be bad news when the man walked right up to the counter and said, in an intimidating gravelly voice:

"The bathrooms are filthy. The women's is out of toilet paper and both are out of hand soap. The rotating hot dogs look like they've been there since yesterday — you absolutely must discard them, and put out fresh ones — and the blue slushee machine is empty. And just look at that counter!" He gestured over to the coffee-and-muffin area. "It's completely covered in crumbs and stains. And look at this floor! When's the last time you even mopped it? And why hasn't that burned-out light bulb been replaced? Do you really expect to be considered for a promotion to Regional Sales Associate if this is the way you run your store?"

"W-what?" said Freddy, a little rattled.

The man flipped a little id card at him rapidly— too rapidly for Freddy to get a clear look— and said, "I'm from corporate. Surprise inspection. Let's take the problems one at a time: You know perfectly well that all Gas-n-Sip attendants are required to check the bathrooms every hour. Let me see the hourly checklist." He held out a hand.

"Oh... damn," muttered Freddy, fumbling for the checklist clipboard under the counter. "Um, I was just about to do that, but, it's been busy, and—"

"It's not busy at all," snapped the man, grabbing the checklist clipboard from him. He flicked briskly through the papers with the air of someone who knew Gas-n-Sip paperwork inside and out, immediately found the bathroom hourly checklist and scanned it with a frown. "Look at this," he
said, flipping the clipboard around and pointing out the offending page to Freddy. "You only checked the bathrooms once this morning. You know you have to check those rooms hourly at a minimum."

"Yes, sir," said Freddy, "I'm sorry, sir, I was going to, but, the slushee machine broke and I couldn't get it running again and—"

"You have the valve setting wrong."

"But it spills all over me if I put it in the way it says in the manual—"

"You have to fill it halfway, THEN put the main container in, THEN fill it the rest of the way. Here, I'll show you."

The man from corporate showed Freddy how to refill the blue slushee machine, and how to adjust the hot-dog roller temperature, and stood over him while Freddy wiped the counters clean.

Then the man from corporate sent him to clean both bathrooms. By the time Freddy emerged, the man from corporate was just finishing taking a sample of gas from each one of the four tanks, filling a series of 5-gallon containers. "We need several samples. We have to test the octane levels periodically," the man from corporate explained. "Here, I'll sign off for the number of gallons I'm taking." He scribbled a completely illegible scrawl on the gas-sales checksheet.

"And one more thing," the man from corporate added balefully, and Freddy cringed as he realized the man from corporate was starting to fill out one of the dreaded "inspection" forms at the back of the clipboard. The man from corporate said, his voice getting even more gravelly and even more intimidating, "I checked your till and inventories. The till's short a hundred dollars, and you're also off on your food and drink inventory. Looks like somebody's walked off with a whole trunkful of food. And the missing hundred dollars is quite serious."

"Oh, no, really? Seriously?" said Freddy, feeling panicky now, for he'd thought the till and inventory were both correct. "I swear I didn't know! I swear I didn't take anything. Look, I might not have been cleaning every hour but I'm not a thief, I swear I'm not!"

The man from corporate just looked at him. It turned out he had a pretty intimidating stare, and Freddy suddenly found himself begging, "Please, sir. I really need this job. I really do."

Freddy saw him blink, and saw his blue eyes soften. "I'll let it pass just this one time," said the man from corporate. "Here, I'll sign off on the discrepancies." He added some illegible scrawls to the day-end till tally, and the day-end inventory sheet. "There you go," he said. "But just know we'll be keeping an eye on you."

"Oh jeez, thanks, man! I mean, thank you, sir," said Freddy, feeling incredibly relieved. "Thank you so much. I swear I won't let you down."

"Life as a sales associate is quite a serious responsibility, you know," said the man from corporate, still filling out the inspection form. "The entire store is in your care. Thousands of people eat the food that you prepare."

"I know. I know. I got it. I'll do better, I promise."

The man from corporate glanced up at him for a moment, and finally gave him a little smile.

Freddy said, feeling a little bolder now, "Hey, are those bruises on your face okay? You need any
"Oh, I just... fought off an attacker recently. Just part of the life," said the man from corporate, waving a hand casually. He turned his attention back to the inspection form, signed it with another completely illegible flourish and handed the clipboard back to Freddy, saying, "The Gas-n-Sip life can be a hard one, son. Not everybody's cut out for it. But human society depends on places like this all doing their part. You're providing sustenance and respite for travelers, and that's an honorable role, and don't let anybody ever tell you different."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir," said Freddy, a little awed now, for now he was picturing how the man from corporate must have fought off a gang of Gas-n-Sip thieves all by himself, to end up with all those bruises and cuts on his face. The man from corporate gave him one last nod, and strode outside. Freddy followed him out and watched as the man from corporate loaded the gas canisters into his snappy-looking black car. He paused at the car door, looked back at Freddy and said, "Change that light bulb, son. We're counting on you."

Freddy nodded mutely, and the man from corporate got into his gleaming black car and drove west, into the sunset.

_A/N - I hadn't planned that last bit at all. I had Cas drop off Meg but then realized, while writing the next paragraph, that he now had no cash and no way to buy any gas. Cas suddenly came up with the solution on his own._

_If you are liking this or have comments, please let me know! I really really love to hear from you!_
Ziphius in Zion

A/N - Sorry for the late update - had to work late at work every day last week. WARNING: Nastiness ahead. Those of you who read Forgotten may remember it had some disturbing torture scenes and several scenes of heavy-duty physical suffering. That miserable theme continues here.

The lightning storm in Zion National Park went on all night in a relentless barrage of noise and light. At first it was terrifying, then just impressive, and then gradually it just got annoying. Eventually the endless blasts of light and thunder started to give Dean a headache. As the sun set and the long night began to settle in, Dean started to shiver with cold.

It was late November, after all; winter wasn't all that far away. He glanced at Sam — they'd been trading unhappy glances periodically — and saw that Sam was looking pretty cold too, his shoulders hunched and his free arm wrapped tight around his chest.

This may get unpleasant, Dean realized.

And finally he allowed himself to consider praying to Cas.

They'd learned, in Wyoming, that though Cas was human he still could sometimes hear prayers. But poor Cas was so weak right now. Dean hated to call on him — because, what could Cas even do, realistically? Ziphius had nearly killed Cas last time they'd met. A mortal human, like Cas was now, going up against a full-powered angel was very poor odds no matter how you cut it. Even if the mortal human had once been an angel himself.

But as the hours dragged on Dean realized they had few other options.

Finally Dean took a breath and thought, All right. Prayer time. Sam glanced over at him; Dean shot him a hard glance, hoping Sam would be able to guess what Dean was doing just from his expression. And maybe take some hope from it.

Dean closed his eyes, trying to clear his mind enough to be able to pray.

But just then, as he stood there with his eyes closed about to start praying to Cas, he heard Ziphius snap her fingers. There was a little whoosh of fire, and a surge of warm air all around him. Dean's eyes snapped open and he saw that two neat circles of short yellow flames had sprung up around him and Sam, a perfect circle of flame around Dean (and Dean's tree), and another perfect circle of flame around Sam too (and Sam's tree).

"Um..." said Sam, from the other tree, "Is that holy fire? Because, I hate to break it to you, but we're not angels."

"Yeah, holy fire's kind of unnecessary," said Dean. Regular fire hurts us just fine, he almost said— but, hm, maybe it was better not to give Ziphius any ideas.

The back of Ziphius's lavender recliner was dimly illuminated now by the little flames, and her profile was flickering into view now and then whenever she was backlit against a flash of lightning in the distance. She said, in between rolls of thunder, "Holy fire will keep you both warm. After that episode with Castiel, I realized I've got to keep a bit closer track of the temperature requirements of those fragile little bodies of yours. Also, true consent cannot be obtained from a vessel by torture, and I've been informed that losing limbs to frostbite might count as torture."
"Gee," said Dean. "I could have sworn that tying us permanently to trees and striking us with lightning counted as torture too."

"No, that's not torture," said Ziphius calmly, her face still flickering in and out of view as lightning crackled on distant buttes. "Your bodies are well within their normal temperature bounds, as best I can determine. You're standing upright, and humans are designed to stand upright. The ropes may be preventing you from leaving, but they are soft cotton and they're not cutting off circulation or causing sores. And as for being struck by lightning, rest assured you won't feel a thing. You'll be dead before you know what hit you— literally. Although—" Ziphius's voice got a little uncertain here— "... it's occurred to me, I guess you'll have to see each other charred to a smoldering, stinking corpse. Repeatedly. Many times. However, I've been assured that doesn't count as direct torture."

"How about indirect torture?" pointed out Sam. "Doesn't emotional torture count?"

"Psychological torture?" suggested Dean.

Sam suggested, "You know, just to be on the safe side, why don't we pause this whole experiment and consult with Amnesty International?"

"Consider this," said Ziphius, as calm as if they were discussing all this in a college ethics class. She craned her head around over the edge of the lavender recliner to look at them, the flickering lightning show still dancing on in the distance. Distant booms of thunder punctuated every sentence as she said, "All of human existence consists of suffering anyway. In fact, every time a vessel gives consent to an angel, that's virtually always because there's some unpleasant other existence the vessel is trying to escape from. Your short little pointless lives seem full to the brim with misery. So, being tied to a tree really isn't so bad." She turned back around to look at the lightning show again, adding, "It's kind of a gray area, I suppose, but my superior and I believe that consent obtained in this way will work. Let's test it, shall we?"

A moment later she added, "Oh, and," as if she'd just remembered something. She craned around again to look at them both. "Also. Holy fire blocks all angelic modes of communication. Including prayers. Just so you know. Not that there would be anybody you'd be trying to reach, of course... Just thought you'd find that interesting."

She smiled sweetly and turned back to the lightning show, and Dean and Sam exchanged a miserable glance.

"After-dinner mint?" said Ziphius, over her shoulder. "I'm told I should keep providing you with calories." Dean looked at his little table; it now had (in addition to the wine and hors d'oeuvres) two dark-chocolate mints wrapped together in a little red ribbon, tied neatly with a tiny bow on top.

By dawn the whole thing had gotten so tedious that Dean had actually found himself dozing off now and then, coming awake repeatedly to find himself sagging in the ropes with his head hanging down. *It might not be the worst torture ever,* Dean thought, *but it sucks just the same.*

He glanced over at Sam and saw, in the flickering lightning flashes, that Sam was chugging some of the wine.

Sam shrugged at him. "Got thirsty," he explained.

Dean sighed. Truth was he was damn thirsty too, but he always felt skittish when angels offered food or drink. Especially angels that wanted to claim his body.

But what were he and Sam supposed to do? Just die of thirst and starvation?
Soon he found himself glancing every couple of minutes at the cheese-and-salami hors d'oeuvres and the little chocolate mints. And the wine... In fact, he realized, he was just about dying of thirst. He held out as long as he could, trying to focus on escaping, trying to come up with some kind of a plan. And wriggling around now and then and trying to work the ropes down his chest. But no plan came to mind at all, and the ropes simply weren't budging.

A seemingly infinite amount of time later, the sky began to lighten, and when the sun broke over the horizon, Ziphius said brightly, "Good morning, vessels! Coffee? Water? I'm told you have to imbibe these beverages periodically?" Dean looked down at the little table and saw that it now held, in addition to the wine and the hors d'oeuvres and the little chocolate mints, a big steaming mug of coffee and a glass of sparkling water. At the sight of the glass of water Dean folded; he suddenly he found he'd picked up the water glass and was chugging the whole thing down in one huge desperate swallow. And then having some coffee. And some hors d'oeuvres.

And a mint.

Okay, so he'd eaten. And drunk. He'd accepted food and drink offered by an evil angel. Did that commit him to anything? Could it have been poisoned somehow?

No way to know. Dean sighed.

Well, at least he didn't have to take a leak or anything. Sam and Dean had both experienced quite an appalling variety of kidnappings-and-imprisonments over their lives, and the realities of bathroom needs, when you were tied up like this, could get very depressing. At least that didn't seem to be a problem this time. Though... as Dean thought about it, and added up the hours mentally, he realized Ziphius must somehow be magically taking care of that too. Which actually was depressing.

Not to mention creepy and gross, when you thought about it.

Dean decided not to think about it.

"So, mice," said Ziphius, once they'd both eaten and drunk a little. "Now that you've had the night to think about it, what do you say? The grace in exchange for your bodies?"

"Nope," said Dean. "No deal."

He saw Ziphius raise one hand, and heard her start to say something.

Dean blinked, and raised his head, startled to find that his head was suddenly hanging down — and that Ziphius was suddenly standing right in front of him with her hand on his cheek. The sun had somehow jumped a little higher in the sky. There was a nauseating smell of roasting meat in the air, a little like barbecued pork, and a smoking tree branch was lying just a few feet away that hadn't been there before. And Sam was calling desperately, his voice ragged and hoarse, "DEAN? DEAN?"

Dean looked over at Sam, and was shocked to see that Sam's face was ashen and streaked with tears. Damn, it looked like he was shaking. What the hell had happened? Sam said, "Oh, god, Dean, are you okay?"

"Yeah, sure," said Dean. He felt a little disoriented; it seemed like maybe he'd fallen asleep for a moment. "I'm fine. Did... did something happen?"

"Oh, nothing much," said Ziphius. "Just five direct lightning strikes while your body burned to a cinder. Though your fellow vessel here, your brother, seemed to get more distressed than seems reasonable. Would you like to see what it was like?"
"Uh. No. No," said Dean. But Ziphius was turning toward Sam and raising one hand. Sam cringed and shut his eyes, and Dean yelled, "NO! I SAID NO! PLEASE!" But Ziphius spoke that awful word again, that weird word that seemed to somehow summon lightning, and a terrifyingly bright blaze of lightning shattered the air and shot right down onto Sam's tree.

Ziphius didn't resurrect Sam till quite a few minutes later. By then Dean had closed his eyes and was just shaking there in the ropes, just as Sam had been earlier, his hands clenched, waiting desperately to hear Sam's voice again. And trying to breathe through his mouth to avoid the smell. Dean was certain he'd never be able to eat barbecued pork again in his life.

And with that, it was officially no longer bearable. It had officially turned hideous. Yes, *this counts as torture*, Dean thought, over and over, trying to get the hideous image out of his head of what had just happened to Sam. Sam was fine now, and at least Ziphius had told the truth about it not hurting, but for the next hour Dean couldn't help watching Sam almost nonstop, just to reassure himself that Sam was really okay. And Sam kept watching him too, likely for the same reason.

All afternoon, they kept struggling with the ropes fruitlessly, and exchanging their limited array of code words. "Is that a spider on me? Do you see a spider?" Dean said at one point— this was code for "Do you see anything within my reach that could help me get free?"

He was hoping Sam would say "Yeah, near your left hand" or "By your knee" or something helpful.

But Sam just shook his head and said quietly, "I don't see any spider."

Code for, *I don't see anything you can reach that would help.*

Later they started telling quiet little jokes and stories to each other till Ziphius barked at them to shut up. So finally they resorted to just exchanging meaningful glances: one would raise his eyebrows a little, with a tiny shrug: *Do you want to consider saying yes?* And the other would shake his head firmly: *Never.*

They seemed to be agreed.

*Never.*

Dean was beginning to realize that they might even end up hanging here on the tree forever. Dean might have to watch Sam die over, and over, and over again. And Sam would have to watch Dean die too.

He found himself thinking of Castiel.

Cas was probably the only person on the planet who would truly miss them, after all.

The thought of Cas left alone again made Dean's chest hurt.

Cas must have realized hours ago that they were gone. And Cas wouldn't know what had happened. What would he think? Would he know to search for them? Would he have any idea *where* to search for them? Not likely; Cas would really have no way of knowing that he should be looking for a lightning storm in the Utah mountains. So, Sam and Dean would never come back... and Cas would live maybe a few more months, his health decaying... and that would be that.

*Just like I thought at Thanksgiving*, Dean realized. All of two goddam days ago.
If they're my family, then they'll die.

For a moment the whole Thanksgiving scene seemed to come to life again before him: Dean talking on and on about his ridiculous Han Solo theory, squirting so much whipped cream onto his slice of pumpkin pie that the pie slice had disappeared completely under a huge mound of white; Sam grinning and shaking his head, cutting up some berry pie; and Cas, just sitting there gazing at Dean, slowly eating his own slice of pumpkin pie, forkful by forkful. And looking totally blank about the Han Solo thing, which must have made no sense at all to him. But Cas had just let Dean go on and on, just listening to him ramble, watching him peacefully.

If I ever did get to Heaven, maybe that's what my Heaven would be, Dean thought. Sitting there at that table with Sam and Cas. Sam looking so happy... And Cas there too...

And working on the Impala and then looking up to find that Cas has limped in and he's sitting by that workbench just to keep me company.

Keeping me company, and watching over me. And everything's okay.

Ziphius killed them both again at noon; and again four hours later.

Now and then they heard cars going by, not far below their hilltop.

Ziphius noticed Dean looking around once, at the sound of a not-so-distant car, and said, "It's just employees vacating the visitor's center. This is the best viewpoint, you know, so there's a whole visitor's center just down the hill. But there's really no reason to let the mice have the best view, so I took over this little area and sent several lightning bolts onto the path that leads up here. Now even the employees are leaving. I suppose the park has probably closed. It's almost like mice are afraid of a little lightning." She gave a chipper little laugh.

For hours now she'd been just sitting in the recliner with apparently infinite patience, twirling Castiel's grace around in one hand, fiddling with a little blue-glass pendant around her neck occasionally, and sipping from a glass of white wine that had appeared in mid-afternoon on a little wicker table by her recliner. But now, as the sun began to sink toward the horizon, Ziphius stood from her recliner, and took a few steps away from Sam and Dean, gazing out at the view again. The lightning display was continuing unabated.

And then, in between the cracks of thunder, Dean heard the Impala.

Sam and Dean looked at each other instantly, and then just-as-instantly looked away from each other again, trying to pretend they hadn't recognized the Impala's distinctive throaty growl. But Dean knew there there couldn't be many other cars on the road these days with that unique rough rumble. It had to be the Impala, didn't it? And if it's really the Impala it's got to be Cas, Dean thought, hoping it wasn't obvious to Ziphius how hard his heart was suddenly pounding, how much his breathing had sped up. Maybe Cas figured out where we were, somehow. We're, what, a day's drive from Kansas? If he figured it out last night... and started driving right away... It fits. It fits.

Then Dean thought, But what the hell can he possibly do?

"It's going to be a spectacular sunset, don't you think?" Ziphius said, watching the sun sink toward the horizon. "In fact... let's just enjoy the sunset a moment, shall we?" She spoke a long, complicated sentence in the lightning-language, and all the lightning stopped completely as Ziphius gazed out at the western horizon. The last rolls of thunder faded away into a weirdly deafening silence. In the sudden quiet Dean heard the cheeps of a nearby sparrow, and the sound of a soft breeze sighing
through the bushy, gnarled pines. The sky seemed bizarrely empty, just clear blue sky overhead, with a soft band of orange where the sun was sinking toward the horizon.

Dean could no longer hear the Impala. Maybe Cas had parked it?

Or had it not been the Impala at all?

But several minutes later, a tiny motion in Dean's peripheral vision drew his attention. He risked a glance to the side, looking at the trees at the edge of the meadow to his right, and there was Castiel.

He was just visible at the edge of the clearing, peering at Ziphius from behind a broad, gnarled pine tree.

Dean didn't dare move a muscle, and didn't dare turn his head to look at Sam. He watched Cas intently, hardly daring to breathe. Cas, for his part, didn't even glance at Sam or Dean; he was completely focused on Ziphius. He slowly lifted one hand, and Dean saw that he had an angel-blade in one hand, and was preparing for a throw.

*He's got to be more than fifty yards away, thought Dean. Too far. And Ziphius has stopped angel-blades before. But she's looking away this time— Cas has a chance at taking her by surprise— getting her in the back—*

Cas aimed.

He paused.

He threw.

The blade whipped through the air right at Ziphius's back. It was a perfect throw, clean and straight, the blade just a spinning blur in the air —

And the blade stopped in mid-air, the point one inch from Ziphius's back, just hovering there. Ziphius turned around, smiled at the hovering blade, plucked it out of the air, and tucked it into the waistband of her polyester slacks. "Well, well," she said, smiling broadly at Castiel. She flickered out of view, and reappeared in a flash directly behind Cas, clapping a hand on his shoulder as he flinched and jerked around to look at her. A moment later and Ziphius was again standing exactly where she’d been before, gazing out at the setting sun. Cas was gone. Dean looked all around the part of the meadow where Cas had been, and then heard a soft gasp and looked to his left. There was Cas, tied between two other trees on Sam's far side. Oddly, Cas wasn't tied up like Sam and Dean were, to a single tree; instead he'd been put between two trees, his arms outstretched, one wrist tied to each tree.

Dean's heart sank, and he heard Sam sigh.

"Hey, Cas," said Dean softly. Cas raised his head and looked at Dean.

"Hello, Dean. Sam," Castiel said. He looked very tired, and sad, and yet also strangely calm. He seemed completely unsurprised to have ended up tied between the two trees.

Cas said, looking both of them over carefully, "Are you both okay?"

"So far, yeah," said Dean. "Aside from being fried by lightning now and then."

"Castiel," said Ziphius, turning around to look at him, "So nice of you to join us."
Cas looked at her, and said, his voice even darker than usual, "You knew I was coming."

"Crowley told me you'd survived. I suggested it would be to his benefit if he dropped a few hints to you about where to come."

Castiel closed his eyes with a sigh.

Sam burst out with, "Crowley! Are you serious?"

Dean said to Cas, "Cas, really? Crowley led you here? Didn't you suspect anything?"

Cas shrugged. "Yes, actually, but it's not like I had much choice." He looked at Dean. "I couldn't find you. At first I thought you'd both just left, but Crowley explained you wouldn't have left your car voluntarily."

You thought I'd leave YOU but not the CAR? Dean thought.

All he could say was a soft, "Cas..."

Ziphius took a few steps toward Cas. "Castiel," she said, "I've got to ask. What on earth were you thinking? You must have known you couldn't possibly defeat me. You're mortal, Castiel. Even if I hadn't already known you were very likely on your way, I can sense all mortals who are anywhere near me. What kind of shoddy plan was that, anyway?"

Cas still looked strangely calm. "It was Plan Z," he said, with a casual little shrug. "It seemed better than nothing."

"Well, no, Castiel," said Ziphius, laughing now. "It was worse than nothing. Worse for you, at least. Because you already did this exact same Plan Z in the Tetons. These two vessels here were tied up, back there, and you came to rescue them, a couple months ago, didn't you? I thought perhaps it might work again, and I was right." She smiled, and added, "Except this time you won't be getting away."

Cas changed the topic abruptly with, "Why have you enslaved an air elemental?"

Dean's eyes widened and he exchanged a glance with Sam. An air elemental?

"That's none of your concern," said Ziphius with a sniff.

Castiel said, "You have more than one, don't you? I was watching the Weather Channel. You've got one in the Caribbean too, right? And a couple others?"

"The hurricanes?" Sam said. Cas glanced at him and nodded.

The hurricanes, thought Dean. Hurricanes, tornadoes, lightning. Of course. It's all air. Air elementals.

Was Ziphius trying to destroy the world again? Ziphius and Calcariel had tried this before. They'd been trying to "purify" the planet by coaxing the infinitely old, infinitely dangerous "elementals", the wild entities from the dawn of time that controlled natural forces, to wipe the planet clean. The magma-elemental that lived under Yellowstone hadn't taken too kindly to Calcariel's attempts to control it, but it seemed Ziphius had found another type of elemental to work with.

"Oh jeez," Dean burst out, despite himself, "Do we have to save the friggin' world again?" Sam actually snorted with laughter, and even Cas managed a twisted little smile.
Ziphius scowled at him. "That is NONE OF YOUR CONCERN. The elementals have nothing to do with you. With any of you."

Castiel said, "Then what do you want with us?"

Ziphius held up the grace, and Cas's eyes widened.

"What do I want?" said Ziphius. She began to pace back and forth in front of all three of them — past Dean, then Sam, then Cas; back and forth, back and forth. She said, "I want... a better vessel, partly. But mostly, I just want... ORDER. I want the rules back. I want a return to order. Nobody is following the rules anymore! Nobody is following orders! Honestly I just want things to make sense again, and I just want to have clear orders and I want to follow my orders. And, finally, I've been given orders." She stopped, just a few steps away from Castiel now, and she said, "I was ordered to enslave an air elemental, and I figured out how, and I did it. Never mind why. And I was also given orders regarding you, Castiel. So as soon as Crowley told me you were alive, I knew what I had to do. I took these two humans of yours primarily to lure you out of hiding, thinking you might behave as usually do, with your bizarre attachment to your little ducks and little mice and all. Though also I really DO want a pair of vessels, but, first, I need to carry out my orders regarding you, Castiel." She stopped pacing and turned to face Cas directly, saying, "Castiel, you know you have committed many crimes against Heaven. Do you deny this?"

Cas just looked at her.

Dean thought with sudden alarm, Oh yeah. Ziphius was kind of obsessed with this idea of punishing Cas, back in Nebraska, wasn't she.

"I do not deny it," said Castiel.

"Indeed," said Ziphius, beginning to pace back and forth again, "Last month, I tried to enact my own punishment on you. But I'll confess now, I felt considerable unease at the time, knowing that I was acting on my own, with no supervision. However, since then, my superior has taken a more reasoned, law-abiding approach. She has carefully considered all your crimes and considered all the possible sentences. She has consulted the decisions of old regarding rebellious angels, and she has arrived at a decision." Ziphius paused, turned to face Cas, and said, "She has decreed that you are to be broken."

Dean happened to be watching Cas's face as Ziphius said this, and he saw Cas's face go slack with shock for a moment, his eyes widening and his jaw actually dropping open slightly. Whatever "being broken" meant, clearly it wasn't good.

Cas said, his voice suddenly uneven, "No angel has been broken since Lucifer's fall."

"No angel since then has deserved it," replied Ziphius. She paused, studying Castiel with an almost clinical expression. Her voice went quiet as she said, "I'm sorry."

Cas shook his head slowly.

He said to Ziphius, "You don't know the feeling."

Dean blinked, suddenly remembering the angel Anna saying that exact sentence once... to Castiel. Back when Castiel had been just another an obedient angel. An obedient soldier of God, who always followed his orders.
"And," added Cas, "I have no wings anyway. I'm already broken."

"No, Castiel," said Ziphius, "You're human. That's different. You must be truly broken, in the traditional way. Those are my orders," and in one smooth motion she tossed the little glowing vial into the air—the vial that held Cas's grace. It flew in a gentle smooth arc right at Castiel. Cas's face was suddenly bright with such an astonished, hopeful, fierce expression that Dean's heart nearly broke for him, for whatever was coming next, it couldn't be good. Sure enough, a fraction of a second before the vial hit the ground, Ziphius gestured and the ropes holding Cas's wrists erupted in flames. Holy-fire, Dean knew immediately; it just had that look.

A half-second later the vial shattered on the stony ground right at Cas's feet, and the little swirling light that had been caged inside seemed to boil up from the ground like a cobra. It shot toward Cas's mouth just as Cas yelled, "CLOSE YOUR EYES!" Dean just saw Cas fling his head back and his back arch involuntarily as the grace surged into him, before Dean squeezed his eyes shut, slapping his free hand over his eyes for good measure and turning his head away. Even with his eyes squinted shut and his hand over his eyes, even facing away, Dean's vision completely whited out with the blast of silver light that seemed to fill the whole clearing. There was a tremendous howl of wind, and Dean felt pine needles and dirt pelting his skin.

Several long moments afterwards Dean was finally able to open his eyes. At first all he could see was dizzying black spots, and he was briefly worried he'd gone blind after all, but then the bushy pine trees and the little clearing gradually came back into focus. Dean squinted toward Sam and Cas. Sam looked okay—he was blinking, and rubbing his eyes with his one free hand, but he seemed to be able to see, for he was looking right at Cas. And Cas...

Cas was still bound in those fiery shackles, but his face was fully healed. Dean hadn't seen Castiel angel'd up and fully healed in over a year now, and he was stunned at how, well, how damn healthy Castiel looked. Cas was standing straight and tall now, suddenly looking ridiculously fit and strong. His face was unblemished, the whipmarks and bruises completely erased as if they'd never been there at all. The haunted, thin look was gone, too; he seemed to have magically put on several pounds of muscle, and was back to that lean-but-strong look he'd always had in the past. He seemed practically glowing with health, his blue eyes bright, his head held high.

But his wrists were still bound. The ropes that were holding his hands were still laced with flickers of holy fire, and from the way Cas was gritting his teeth now, Dean guessed that it must hurt.

"Now, Castiel," said Ziphius, "Bring your wings over."

"Why on earth would I do that?" growled Cas, still gritting his teeth.

"Why in Heaven would you not? Bring your wings over. That is an order."

"No," said Cas, his gaze steady. "You do not command me. You can't order me."

"Bring your wings over from the etheric plane immediately or I kill your two little friends here and take their vessels right now." Dean couldn't help gasping at this, and Ziphius shot him a bored look. "Oh, did I forget to explain that?" she said offhandedly, glancing at Sam and then back at Dean. "It's more convenient if you give consent, but I can also just plain kill your brain and then take over the brain-dead body. It's a little uncomfortable squeezing into a brain that's been damaged that particular way, but it can be done." She turned back to Cas. "Bring your wings over or I'll kill them both."

Cas looked at Sam, and looked at Dean. It was that strange, remote, sad look again, the look that Dean remembered from all those years ago. That look that Cas used to get when he sat on Dean's
bed and watched Dean sleep...

"No!" Dean cried out, and Sam said, "Cas, DON'T DO IT—" and Ziphius spun toward Sam, saying, "Mice, be quiet. You're getting annoying." She made a tiny gesture, and Dean found he couldn't speak at all. He could breathe, and he could move his mouth, but when he tried to speak, not a single sound emerged.

"Bring your wings over," growled Ziphius to Cas.

Castiel said, "You promise you'll let them both go?"

"I promise," said Ziphius.

No, Cas, NO, don't do it, Cas, NO! Dean tried to say; but no words came out.

Cas closed his eyes.

An eerie flare of light illuminated the whole mountaintop. Yet the light wasn't coming from the sun, which was sitting right on the horizon now between two shadowy buttes ahead of them. The new light, instead, was pearly white and seemed to be from somewhere else entirely, from an indefinable, bizarrely other direction, slanting across the meadow somehow from several different angles at once. The trees all around them stood out strangely, their edges glowing in silver, shadows extending in several directions. A rumble of thunder rolled across the sky.

... and there, suddenly, were Cas's wings.

Cas had wings. His shirt had poofed away to nothingness somehow and Cas was bare to the waist, just wearing his jeans and sneakers. Jeans and sneakers that Dean had bought him at Target a few weeks back. Cas was wearing jeans and sneakers from Target and... wings... he had... wings... he had... wings...

Dean just gaped, staring at his friend. His poor little wounded friend, who had been limping so slowly and pathetically around Target just a few weeks ago, and who was standing there now looking vibrant with health, with... wings. Actual feathered wings. Great, huge, impossible, unbelievable, wings.

Cas had them mostly tucked behind his back, but even so Dean could see a few details. Gleaming black and white feathers were visible along the folded bends of the wings, which stuck up above Cas's shoulders a couple inches; incredibly long black flight feathers that extended down past his goddam knees. There seemed to be a mix of white and black that Dean couldn't quite figure out from here, not with the wings folded, but one thing was clear: the wings were just huge. And despite the horror of the situation, Dean just lost his breath with awe for a moment. For his "poor little wounded friend" looked... just.... amazing.

Flawless.

Magnificent.

And impressive as hell.

Cas was simply awe-inspiring. His face fully healed, his blue eyes bright and fierce, the magnificent wings shining behind him. Fit and lean and strong, standing tall and proud, his shoulders back, his head up. Glaring at Ziphius ferociously.

"Extend your wings," said Ziphius. She was suddenly holding something in her hand. Something large.
It was a sledgehammer.

\textit{A/N - Uh-oh.}
Ziphius was holding a goddamn terrifying sledgehammer. And the head of the sledgehammer was flickering with eerie fire. It looked like the same kind of little flames that were coiling around Cas's wrists, and that were flickering in the circles at Sam's and Dean's feet. Holy fire.

No, no, no, no, Dean cried wordlessly, still unable to make a single sound, as he looked back and forth from the wings to the sledgehammer. For it had started to become terribly, awfully, horribly clear what it meant for an angel to be "broken."

Cas again asked for a promise, saying, "Give me your word that you'll let them go, and that you'll never bother them again. Swear it in God's name. And in Heaven's."

"You have my word," said Ziphius. "I swear, in God's name, and in Heaven's name."

No, no, no, no —

Cas nodded, and the wings began unfolding. Very slowly.

Despite the terror of the situation, for a moment the only thought in Dean's head was: Holy crap. Those are friggin' awesome.

Awesome didn't remotely cover it. Dean had never, in all the years they'd known each other, seen Cas's wings physically before; he'd only seen their shadows. Now at last he was seeing them fully spread, physically present, and they were simply magnificent. He'd never even known what color they were, before. It turned out they had different bands of color; the inner part of the wings was mostly a gleaming pearly white, laced with tiny flecks of gold here and there; there were hints of grey closer to Cas's shoulders; and the outermost flight feathers, which were tremendously long, were a startling deep black that glittered like opal, shining with sparkles of iridescent color.

The wings reached their full extent, spread all the way. The snowy-white undersides looking almost golden now in the light of the setting sun, shimmering like silk; and the black flight feathers, which were lifted now toward the sky, flared out fully, were glittering almost like a night sky full of stars.

Dean didn't know whether to cry or cheer at the sight. For Cas just looked so magnificent, so terrifically awesome, and yet so doomed and so helpless, simultaneously.

Cas stood there bare to the waist, his arms outstretched and bound in shackles of holy-fire, the magnificent wings spread wide. He was gazing stone-faced at Ziphius.

Ziphius stepped around to Cas's side. She took one step further, till she was standing behind him. Ziphius raised her sledgehammer.

Cas's face was still expressionless, but his wings began to tremble. Sam gave a weird, choked gasp; Dean felt sick.

"Oh, by the way" said Ziphius, lowering her sledgehammer. Cas flinched at the motion of the hammer, drawing in a ragged gasp, but Ziphius only glanced over at Sam and Dean and said, "I just
realized you might not know how this works. The saying is, 'One wing, mortal; two wings, dead.' Breaking one wing makes an angel mortal. Castiel was human before, of course, but it's just more traditional to do it this way, and also this way it's permanent and also it makes the wings mortal too, which just is sort of symbolically interesting. And then, of course, breaking the second wing kills the angel. Though actually," she said, putting one hand on her hip and frowning as if she'd just remembered something, "Angels with one broken wing always end up dying anyway. So I guess you don't even need to break the second wing, technically? Still, it's traditional to break the second wing and I suppose it's kinder, really, rather than just letting them suffer on for a couple weeks more. Anyway, one wing mortal, two wings dead, that's what it means to be broken, and that's Castiel's sentence and those are my orders and that's what I have to do." She turned her attention back to Castiel.

This can't happen, thought Dean. He just got his grace back one goddam minute ago. He just got healed! He just got his wings back! This can't happen. Something'll stop Ziphius at the last second. I'll come up with something — or Sam will — or Cas will —

Ziphius hefted the sledgehammer over one shoulder and positioned herself carefully.

NO! Dean tried to say. He tried to yell to Ziphius, Take me, just take me, I'll say yes!

But he still couldn't say anything at all. A squeaky little breath was all that came out. Cas must have heard the breath, for he looked at Dean.

For a brief, endless moment Castiel held Dean's eyes. Just staring at him; that level, steady Castiel stare that Dean had seen so many times.

This can't happen —

In one swift motion Ziphius whirled the sledgehammer in a huge arc through the air straight onto Cas's back, onto the left wing. Right where it met his body. Blindingly fast. There was a sickening CRACK, a flare of light, and Cas screamed. It was a desperate, hoarse, awful scream. The other wing flapped wildly, while the injured wing twisted down, falling so weirdly and so suddenly that Dean, watching in horror, was sure the wing had somehow been snapped clean off. But the wing just dangled there, all twisted. There was blood everywhere, streaming down Cas's side and all over his shoulder and arm.

And Cas was still screaming. He'd slumped down; his legs seemed to have buckled completely and he was hanging from the wrist-shackles now, nearly on his knees. His intact right wing was flapping in great, helpless, jerky movements, as if he were instinctively trying to fly away. Dean could see he was trying to reach his hands back to his terribly mangled left wing too, and he just couldn't, and he just couldn't seem to stop screaming, either. It seemed the most horrible sound Dean had ever heard in his life. Out of the corner of his eye Dean saw Sam squirming around, yanking helplessly at his ropes, trying to scream something too, silently trying to yell something to Cas, his mouth wide open. A moment later Dean's own throat started to feel weirdly sore, and his shoulders began to hurt; only then did he realize he was doing just the same as Sam: wrenching at his ropes desperately, trying to rip the damn tree out of the ground to get to Cas, and trying to yell, CAS, HOLD ON, CAS, CAS, CAS!

And also: I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU, ZIPHIUS.

But all Dean could do was mouth the words soundlessly.

At last Cas went silent, and the intact wing stopped its desperate flapping. Cas hung there from his shackles, gasping in ragged breaths, his head down. The mangled wing hung limp and crooked,
splayed on the ground, streaks of red blood starting to drip along the edges of the lovely white feathers. The intact wing was spread stiffly wide now, trembling crazily.

An eerie silence fell over the clearing. The sun was very close to the horizon, and the western sky was painted now in soft stripes of gold and pink, and the dark buttes were casting long shadows over the hills. The only sounds were Cas's ragged gasps, and the soft twittering of a sparrow in the nearby shrubs.

\textit{This isn't happening}, thought Dean. \textit{This isn't happening.}

But it was.

The little sparrow in the shrubs gave one last cheep. There was a fluttering sound from its little wings — its lovely, unbroken wings — as it flew off the hill. Easily, gracefully. It darted away into the distance.

---

Ziphius walked around in front of Cas, took his chin in her hand, and lifted his head. Cas's face was ash-white and slick with sweat. He was shaking like a leaf, his good wing vibrating so rapidly now that the longest feathers, the black ones, were actually blurring.

"I'm sorry, Castiel," said Ziphius. "You must understand, I had my orders."

Ziphius let go of Cas's chin. His head immediately drooped down again, and Ziphius reached out past his shoulder and touched the top edge of the intact wing, almost gently. "So strange," she said, her hand tracing along the edge of the shaking wing. "A mortal wing. It's simply flesh and bone now; not a reservoir of power anymore. Just flesh and bone, attached to a human body... so strange." She looked down at Cas and said, "But I suppose this is what you wanted, right? You wanted all along to be both angel, and human. You wanted your grace back, you wanted your wings back. All your wishes have come true, Castiel."

\textit{I WILL FUCKING KILL YOU, ZIPHIUS}, thought Dean.

Ziphius took hold of Cas's hair, pulled his head up again and turned his face toward Sam and Dean, saying, "And just look at your mice, Castiel. Your useless, useless little mice. Look at the expressions on their faces. Look how they are staring. Do you see that?"

Cas blinked hazily at Sam and Dean, his eyes unfocused.

"See how they are looking at you? See the shock? That's horror, Castiel. That's \textit{disgust}. For now they can see what you really are: You are a freak. You are neither human nor angel now; you are \textit{neither one}. You are an in-between \textit{thing}. They've never seen you clearly before, and now they realize you are a freak." She seemed very pleased with this idea, and she added with a little laugh, "You know, Castiel, I suppose you're the kind of thing they hunt!"

Dean felt such fury at this statement that he nearly pulled a muscle in his shoulder from pulling forward against the ropes, trying to attack Ziphius, consumed with a roaring desire to \textit{bite} her, \textit{shred} her, \textit{rip her head off}.

But Dean couldn't get free.

Ziphius dropped Cas's head and snapped her fingers. Cas's firey wrist shackles disappeared, and he crumpled to the ground. The intact wing shot out sideways as he fell, and the broken wing gave an awful twitch, as if he'd tried instinctively to spread both wings to break his fall. But he just crashed face-down in the dirt, the intact wing spread wide in all its glossy white-and-black beauty, and the
other wing flipped around at a very weird angle, a nauseating mess of white and black feathers sticking up in all the wrong directions. Dean was sickened to see the jagged end of a sharp white bone sticking out of the broken wing, and further horrified to see a tiny little speck of light visible at the center of the bone — all that was left of Cas's grace, he guessed.

He had no idea what happened to an angel's grace when a wing got broken, but the faintness of that tiny flickering spot of light, deep in the wing-bone, just couldn't be good.

And there was blood. Lots of blood. Getting all over the lovely white feathers, and dripping off of the black ones, and, now, starting spread out in a pool over Cas's back.

"I won't leave you long in this state," said Ziphius, standing over him. "I am not cruel, Castiel. None of this is my decision. I am only following orders. Though, I must say, I am looking forward to having a new vessel!"

Cas actually managed to lift his head slightly. He looked up at Ziphius.

Ziphius said, "I said I'd let them go, and I will. In a few years. Once my superior and I have completed our task and wiped the world of all life. We'll be sure and give your two little mice here a minute or so of freedom, at the end, once the planet has been scoured clean."

Castiel just closed his eyes.

Ziphius picked up the flaming sledgehammer and raised it high overhead...

... and Crowley, who was suddenly standing right behind her, plucked it lightly away with one hand. His other hand seemed to be fiddling with something at the back of Ziphius's neck.

"Ooo, nice," said Crowley, stepping back and examining the sledgehammer with curiosity, as Ziphius gaped in confusion at her empty hands. She spun to stare at him as Crowley went on, still studying the sledgehammer, "Nice weight. Nice balance. Bit marred by the sticky red paint on the end, though. Oh, is that blood?" He looked over at Cas. Ziphius just stared at him openmouthed, seemingly too confused to even do anything.

Crowley blinked at the sight of Castiel sprawled on the ground with his mangled wing. Crowley frowned. "Bit gruesome, Ziphius, I must say," he said, swinging the sledgehammer from one hand. "Was that really necessary?" He took a closer look and wrinkled his nose, saying, "Ew. Is that a bone? EW. ICK." He crouched and extended one hand gingerly toward Cas's head, his eyes squeezed shut in distaste and his head turned away. Crowley tapped Castiel on the head and the blood stopping dripping from the wing-feathers. The pool of blood on Cas's back stopped spreading as well. Crowley backed away hurriedly, shaking his head, and said to Ziphius, "Sorry, I just had to stop that dripping blood. Bit of a squeamish stomach; so sorry; honestly the sight of blood makes me go all dizzy. You know, my first time supervising torture in Hell, I passed out and fell right on top of the torture subject! Boy, was that embarrassing." He took one more look at Cas and turned away with an exaggerated grimace and a little shudder. Castiel lay unmoving now, face down on the ground.

"What are you doing?" snapped Ziphius. "What about our agreement?"

"Agreement?" said Crowley, raising his eyebrows innocently. "What agreement? Our contract was fully satisfied - I told you where the grace was and helped you coax little Castiel here out of hiding, and gave you two perfectly good vessels to boot, in return for which you generously refrained from blasting me to oblivion with that awful grace. Bit of a one-sided bargain actually. Not my best deal ever... did I mention I hate grace jobs? However, you no longer seem to have a bottled
grace to threaten me with. And you'll find I'm harder to smite than most." He glanced down at the fiery hammer, which still had flickers of holy-fire dancing around the edges. "How'd you get this thing, anyway? There's not that many hammers out there that can break angel-wings. Bet this'll fetch a pretty penny, huh?"

Ziphius seemed to finally realize that Crowley was working against her. She let out an inarticulate screech of rage, and howled, "GIVE ME THAT HAMMER!" But Crowley just grinned.

Ziphius spoke the lightning-summoning word.

And nothing happened.

"You seem to be missing your piece of sky," said Crowley, holding up Ziphius's little blue-glass pendant. "Is it valuable — oop!" The pendant slipped out of his hand and shattered on the ground.

"Whoops," said Crowley, looking down in dismay at the shattered bits of blue glass. He said, "You weren't controlling an air elemental with that, or anything, were you?" Overhead there was a tremendous rush of wind, much like an invisible jetliner suddenly taking off. The jetliner sound went roaring into the distance, and faded away.

"Sorry 'bout that," said Crowley, looking a little sheepish. "It just slipped out of my fingers somehow."

Ziphius flung out one hand, obviously planning to shoot some kind of angel-power blast at Crowley. But Crowley was already gone, leaving behind just a puff of red smoke. There was another puff of red smoke next to Dean, and Crowley was suddenly saying to Dean with a confidential air, "Triple-crosses are my absolute favorite form of betrayal, you know. It's just so entertaining when absolutely everybody gets completely bewildered and nobody can figure out whether to trust me or not." Dean was just about to try to arrange some kind of quick deal with him - save Cas's life and fix his wing in return for ... well, Dean's soul? Or something? But Dean still couldn't speak. And then he felt a wave of hot air shoot past him from Ziphius' open hand, some kind of power-blast that was headed right at Crowley. But again Crowley had vanished.

Only to appear again at the opposite side of the meadow now, where he waved the sledgehammer at Ziphius cheerfully, saying, "Don't take it personally - I betray everybody! It's kind of a code I have. It's been delightful doing business with you! Cas, just for the record, I didn't know she was going to do that, and it's simply disgusting, get it seen to, would you? And at least I tried to lead her away from the bunker, if you'll notice. I'm so glad this is finally all over! Did I mention I hate grace jobs?"

He disappeared for good.

With the sledgehammer.

A microsecond later, the tree behind him was pulverized to splinters by another of Ziphius's blasts of power.

Zaphius howled in rage and started sending gigantic, terrifying blasts of power in all directions, pulverizing tree after tree after tree. She began slowly turning in a circle, taking out one tree after another at random, pines exploding with great booming explosions, showering needles and splinters and branches everywhere.

Cas, several yards behind her, still just lay face-down, unmoving, in the dirt. He hadn't moved at all in some minutes.
A few minutes later Ziphius had annihilated at least forty trees, working her way slowly around the clearing. Blasted tree trunks stood everywhere, branches and needles heaped messily all over the ground. Ziphius's fit of rage seemed to be having an unintended side effect: her vessel's face and hands seemed to have broken out in red blisters. Her hair even seemed to be starting to smoke a little bit.

She put her hand up to do another tree-pulverization blast, turning around to select another random tree, and Dean cringed when he realized she was aiming at his tree this time.

Ziphius blinked. She seemed surprised to discover that Dean was still there.

"I need a better vessel NOW," she spat at Dean, glancing at her blistered hand. She began to stalk toward him slowly.

Just then a flicker of motion beyond Ziphius caught Dean's attention.

*Cas was moving.*

*Cas was crawling toward Ziphius. From behind her.*

Well, dragging himself, rather. He'd got himself half hitched up on his arms and was dragging himself slowly closer. He didn't seem able to use his legs at all, which was kind of alarming. And... he wasn't exactly moving very fast.

Ziphius looked at Dean for a long moment, studying him thoughtfully, muttering, "I need a better vessel immediately... this one's about to pop... then I can go get another hammer and finish the job." She began to look back and forth between Sam and Dean, saying, "These are really both quite good vessels... but let's see... you, here—" (she pointed at Dean) "—you definitely have that sweet aura of a vessel who's never been possessed. I remember that from last time we met. However; I kind of like the height on you—" (she glanced over at Sam) "— that would work nicely for intimidating other humans. That's been a problem with my current vessel; it's just not intimidating enough." She walked a little closer to Dean and studied him from close up, saying, "But it's hard to resist a virginal vessel. Good face, too... hm... decent height but I really would have liked the extra couple of inches... I like the hair on the other one, but I suppose I could make your hair longer?"

She seemed to have totally forgotten about Cas, and all the while Cas was getting slowly closer, creeping up behind her back, one painful inch at a time. The broken wing, his left wing, was dragging uselessly on one side. The other wing, his right one, was half-folded, lifted slightly up above his back.

*But what on earth can he even do?* thought Dean. Cas obviously couldn't even stand. He had no weapons; Ziphius even had his angel-blade. And he was clearly in no condition to fight.

But a moment later Dean saw his plan. Cas wasn't actually dragging himself toward Ziphius, exactly. Rather, he was dragging himself toward a flat patch of rock. A patch of ground between him and Ziphius, where the dirt and scrubby grasses thinned out to reveal the rock underneath. Cas reached it, and he began, shakily, to paint something on the rock, with the blood from his own wing.

A banishing-sigil.

If Dean managed not to look toward Cas— if he didn't give it away to Ziphius— if Ziphius didn't look back— if Cas could just *speed up*, goddammit— then maybe— maybe—

Ziphius laughed, and slowly turned around.
She walked a few steps over to Cas, and looked down at him with her hands on her hips. "Look at you," she said. A flicker of motion, and Cas was suddenly far away from the patch of rock, in a big grassy patch in front of Sam—grass where Cas couldn't possibly draw a sigil. Dean saw Cas look down at his own chest and realized Cas must be thinking of drawing a sigil on himself, but poor Cas was so streaked with blood already that he didn't seem to have any un-bloody patch of skin large enough to draw the sigil on. Dean started fumbling around frantically for some way to draw a sigil himself; he'd already tried this last night, but he tried again now, desperate. But the tree bark was too soft to cut his hand on, and the damn wineglasses had turned out to be unbreakable.

Ziphius pulled the angel-blade out of the back of her polyester pants, leaned over and cut a big mark through Cas's half-finished sigil on the rocky ground. It smoked and faded away completely.

Then she walked over to Cas, crouched down next to him, and took his chin in her hand again, looking at him with something like pity. Though Ziphius still just looked like nothing more a sweet little gray-haired grandmother, Cas seemed utterly helpless before her, like a trembling, frail kitten pinned under the paw of a lion.

Ziphius said, studying his face, "Amazing. You actually thought you could pull that off? You thought I wasn't aware of what you were doing? What was that, Plan Double-Z? And what are you going to do now, Castiel? Fight me?" She laughed. "Tell me, Castiel. What good is an angel with only one wing?"

Cas just looked at her for a moment. He drew a breath.

Then his right wing lashed out.

It was suddenly apparent that an angel with only one good wing, if that wing were flesh-and-blood, had a nine-foot-long weapon at his disposal.

Cas caught Ziphius right in the face with the big bony joint at the bend of the wing. Which, it was suddenly clear, worked very well as a club. It was a terrific blow, and it actually sent Ziphius flying through the air. She slammed to the ground near her lavender recliner, all of twelve yards away from Cas, and lay in the grass stunned, her nose bleeding profusely where Cas had struck her.

The angel-blade fell into a clump of dried yellow grasses almost exactly between them.

Sam and Dean were both suddenly screaming at the top of their lungs, Dean roaring, "CAS! GET THE BLADE!" and Sam yelling "CAS, QUICK, QUICK, MOVE!" The silencing spell seemed to have broken. The circles of holy-fire were gone as well; had Ziphius been knocked out? Oh my god, Dean thought, one angel can knock another angel out with a wing-punch? Seriously? Maybe it's because Ziphius's vessel is failing?

Whatever the reason, it seemed Cas had indeed actually managed to knock Ziphius unconscious. Ziphius was lying flat on her back with her eyes closed, completely limp. But Cas had crumpled down again too, his face down in the grass, apparently worn out.

Sam and Dean kept yelling.

"MOVE, CAS, MOVE!"

"CAS, GET THE BLADE!"

"CAS, WAKE UP, YOU HAVE TO MOVE!"

"GET OVER THERE, CAS! YOU'VE GOT TO! SHE'S GONNA WAKE UP!"
Now that the muting spell had broken, they were absolutely screaming at the top of their lungs. Eventually their shouts seemed to break through to Cas, for he slowly lifted his head again and tried to drag himself toward the blade. It was only about six yards away, but he still seemed to not have real control of any of his limbs. His arms were shaking and his legs didn’t seem to be usable at all. Dean couldn’t tell if the awful blow from the sledgehammer had broken his back (no no no, Dean thought, putting that thought out his head immediately). Or maybe Cas was just stunned, or maybe it was some effect of the grace having leaked out? Whatever the reason, Cas was still having to just hitch himself forward just with his arms, a few inches at a time. His teeth were gritted now, his breath coming in rough painful gasps. The intact wing started to reach down to the ground and sort of pull him along, as if he were trying to row himself along the ground with his one good wing. The other wing just dragged sadly at his left side, leaving a gruesome long trail of blood through the grasses behind him.

Slowly Cas dragged himself closer to the blade, moving at approximately the speed of molasses. Ziphius still seemed to be out cold. Dean and Sam kept yelling encouragement to him:

"YOU’RE ALMOST THERE!"

"KEEP GOING, YOU CAN DO IT!"

"YOU’RE DOING GREAT, CAS! KEEP GOING!"

Then Ziphius started to wake.

But slowly. She still seemed stunned, but she began moving her head a little bit and scrabbling at the ground with her hands. Dean's and Sam's screams picked up a notch:

"CAS, SHE'S WAKING UP!"

"CAS, HURRY!"

"CAS, CAS, CAS, YOU GOTTA MOVE FASTER!"

Ziphius sat up and looked around. She looked very disoriented and her nose was absolutely pouring blood. Ziphius spotted the blade and began to crawl toward the blade on her hands and knees — clumsily, slowly. But unfortunately even Ziphius's slow crawl was faster than what Cas was doing. Cas was only two yards away from the blade now, Ziphius five, and Dean and Sam nearly screamed themselves hoarse, like spectators at the world's slowest Olympic race, trying to yell encouragement to Cas as the terrifying race-to-the-blade unfolded at an absolute snail's pace. Ziphius would actually have reached the blade first, but Cas's wing shot forward at the last second and scraped the blade right out from under her nose, sweeping it back along the ground toward one of Cas's hands. Cas had the blade! Cas was right at Ziphius now! But Ziphius grabbed his arm with one hand and lifted her other hand, clearly about to do one of those angelic hand-gestures.

Dean braced himself to see Cas flung right off the mountain or something — but just in time Cas punched her again in the face with his good wing.

Very hard. Right in the nose again.

There was a nasty crunch, Ziphius's head snapped back, and more blood poured from her nose. Dean and Sam cheered themselves silly, and again Ziphius seemed dazed into near immobility. But she had held onto Cas's wrist somehow, and for a few moments they just scuffled weakly on the ground.

It turned into the slowest, clumsiest, and most excruciatingly terrifying angel-battle Dean had ever
seen. Cas was trying now (weakly) to hold Ziphius down, on her back, using his good wing to pin her in place, while he lifted the blade with one hand and braced himself against the ground with the other hand. While meanwhile Ziphius clumsily tried to push his wing away, saying, "Whaa?... what?" Every time Ziphius seemed about to get her wits back, Cas managed to slug her in the head again with his bended wing. Slowly, slowly Cas managed to maneuver around closer to Ziphius and to get the blade up off the ground.

He got it up to her chest. And then seemed to have no energy left to actually stab her.

He just lay there right next to her, gasping. Ziphius was lying face up, Cas face down right next to her, one of his hands actually ON Ziphius's chest holding the angel-blade. But the blade was only lying flat on her chest, nestled on her cardigan sweater. Cas seemed unable to lift his hand to orient the blade point-down.

Ziphius was waking again. She started to feebly grab at his wrist again.

Cas's good wing moved. It seemed to grab hold of Ziphius's hand, snaring it in some little black feathers somehow, and it wrestled Ziphius's arm down by her side.

Slowly Cas managed to lift his hand and turn the blade point-down... and then he had no leverage to actually push it in. He lay there gasping for a moment, drew a deep, shaky breath, and dragged himself a few inches closer, and pulled himself right up on top of Ziphius so he could lean right on the blade's haft with his collarbone.

For a moment they seemed frozen, like a still-frame from a movie, as if time had stopped. The blade was suspended right over Ziphius's heart, Cas just leaning on it.

Ziphius said, her voice slurred, "I was only... followin' orders..."

Cas whispered "I know," as the blade sank into her heart.

There was a roar of thunder and a blast of light and wind. Dean and Sam both had to shut their eyes. When Dean opened his eyes a moment later, Ziphius was lying dead on the ground, that unmistakable imprint of carbonized wing-ashes spread out around her. And Castiel was slumped right over her, his head and one arm flopped across her stomach. Cas's wings were fully spread, the intact wing glittering and beautiful, with its stunning pattern of white-and-black-and-grey bands of feathers; the other wing battered and bloody and gruesomely twisted. His wings were spread at almost perfect right angles to Ziphius's carbonized wing-ash-marks, in an eerie tableau.

Cas was completely still.

Dean had to make himself take a breath. "Cas!" he called hoarsely. He'd almost lost his voice from all the yelling earlier. "Cas? Are you awake? Cas? Can you hear me? Cas?"

Cas didn't answer.

The sun had set; the twilight began to deepen.

_A/N -_

_I have sinned. I have sinned terribly._

_I'm so sorry, Cas, I really don't know how this happened... I'm so sorry..._
AO3 readers - so in case it wasn't already clear, the "hurt Castiel" tag on this fic, and the whump tag, was actually NOT about the mild injuries Cas already had in chapters 1-3. It's about Z zipfile breaking Cas's wing here in chapter 5. Remember the fic description? "Things do not go as intended, and Cas faces a difficult road"? Yeah. That. (FF readers - come over to Archive Of Our Own, the fics can have many more tags and are much easier to sort!)

What do you think? Are you still on board to see what happens next? Or do you hate me forever?

PS - after the last chapter I realized most of the original set of Broken readers had already gone ahead and read Flight, so it turns out there's relatively few people who were still waiting to read this version. If you do want me to continue with the platonic version, please send me some encouragement! (It turns out it takes more time than I had expected to do the rewrite, so I guess I have found out that I need some feedback & motivation to continue) I am still really fond of gen fics myself, but I've also gone and somehow got myself tangled up in a new Dadstiel+Destiel fic which is sucking up some time. So if you really love gen fics and platonic-TFW, let me know to keep going. Thank you!
A Slightly Vague Plan

A/N - Thanks so much for all your comments. I'll keep Broken going! But hey, I need to tell you guys something: The reason I was considering giving up on this fic wasn't really the workload - it was primarily because I thought it had almost no readers! And the reason I thought it had no readers was that I got almost no comments on the previous couple chapters. So... this has got me thinking... ever wondered why there aren't more platonic fics? (I used to wonder this, when I started writing fics.) Soooo, the platonic version of this fic was getting about 4 comments per chapter. The Destiel version gets 60-70! (For the exact same chapter with identical text!) Fic writers live for comments - it's the only reward and the only feedback. Anyway, if you want to encourage me, or any gen fic writer, to keep writing gen fics, consider getting in the habit of putting in a comment for every chapter, whenever you have a moment to spare. We love the feedback so so much! It's what we live for! :D

Okay, that said, here goes with chapter 6. Hope you like it!

Cas lay there sprawled across Zephius. And didn't move. And Dean and Sam were still tied very securely to the damn trees.

"Cas? Are you okay?" called Dean.

Well, that was a stupid question, wasn't it. Dean amended it to "CAS! Can you move?"

Sam yelled, "Cas! Can you hear us? Cas?"

They both yelled his name for a few more minutes. But Cas still didn't move.

Dean finally said, "Sam, can you see him breathing at all?" Sam was a bit closer, and had a slightly better view.

Sam was peering at Castiel intently. "I think so," he said. "The feathers on his back are kind of moving a bit." He added, "The feathers at the base of the wings, I mean. Between the wings. On his back." His voice got a little slower as he added, "Uh, the feathers in the pool of blood."

The feathers on his back, in the pool of blood. Right. Dean gritted his teeth, straining at his ropes one more time. It was just too friggin' surreal... and too friggin' awful.

"I can't believe this," Dean said. "We were gonna get him healed up from all that other stuff... I was gonna get his grace back for him and it was gonna fix him all up, and, this— it— it's not— Sam, it's just— this isn't— He—"

Dean's throat was suddenly so tight he had to stop talking.

"I know, Dean," said Sam, his voice gruff. "I know."
Dean glanced up at the sky; there was still a broad band of orange on the western horizon, but the sky overhead was deepening to midnight blue. Soon the stars would be out.

And it was getting cold.

Sam was watching Dean look around, and he said quietly, "Ziphius said the visitor center's closed."

Dean knew exactly what Sam was getting at. If the visitor's center had been closed, how long would it be till anybody happened to come up to this hill? What if it were several days till anybody even drove by on the road nearby? Was the road even in shouting distance? Was there any chance anybody would find them here?

How cold was it going to get tonight?

Sam was saying, "We gotta get out of here, Dean." But a faint little scrap of a plan was emerging in Dean's head, and he grabbed onto it for dear life. A plan! Everything was better if you had a plan.

He said to Sam eagerly, "I got a plan!"

"What?"

Dean said, "Well, step 1, get free of these damn ropes." Perhaps this was not the most detailed plan ever? But it was a start. Then... "Step 2," Dean said, and lost all his focus for a moment, looking at poor Cas on the ground with his broken wing and his lost grace and he wasn't moving and his wing was broken and Cas had screamed...

Get it together, Dean told himself sternly.

He had to make himself look away from Cas. What's Step 2?

Dean said to Sam, "Step 2 is... splint the wing." Yeah. Definitely. That was Step 2. He went on, "Step 3 is... we'll get Cas to the Impala. He must've parked it near here. And Step 4, we get him some help. Step 5, we take him back to the bunker and he'll heal up and he'll be fine and we can all get some rest."

Dean felt heartened already, but Sam was giving him a funny look.

Sam finally said, "That's... a slightly vague plan, you know, Dean."

"Well, yeah," Dean confessed. "Yeah, there's some details missing but we'll fill those in as we go. But... c'mon, work with me here. Let's work on Step 1. Now that Ziphius is gone we can really work on these ropes."

Sam was almost smiling now. (Almost.) He nodded, and they both started "working" on the ropes.

Years of being tied up by various bad guys had given both Winchester brothers plenty of practice in all the standard Houdini tricks for getting out of ropes. Usually they tensed their muscles and inhaled while they were being tied up, to give them some slack to work with later; but unfortunately Ziphius had whisked them into the ropes instantaneously, with no time to do any of that. But, at least they each had a hand free — that was a major help, actually — and they could try some other tricks now: exhaling repeatedly, squirming around a little on each exhalation, tugging at the rope coils to try to get one coil to loosen, and then working the one loose coil further down. Trying to get one coil at a time down over the hips, and then working the slack up to another coil. And always trying to work the knot around toward the front. But without a knot to focus on... well, it would be difficult.
Dean did succeed in rolling a few coils of rope a bit further down his midsection, but couldn't seem to actually loosen any of them. Actually, now it was more difficult to breathe. And his usual way of working a bit of slack down the coils wasn't working at all.

Finally he realized the coils of rope were actually separate little loops. Each one was a seamless circle that just barely fit around Dean and the tree. it wasn't one long continuous coil that could be loosened in the way he was used to. The wriggling and exhaling and fidgeting weren't helping at all. Dean had to stop at last, gasping for breath.

Sam swore suddenly, spitting out a heartfelt "Dammit!" He added, "They're little separate pieces! It's not one rope!"

Dean sighed, and said, "Yeah, I just realized that too. I think I'm only tying myself up tighter."

It was a terribly disheartening discovery, and they both fell silent for a long moment.

Step 1, thought Dean, trying to regroup. Step 1, get free of the damn ropes. What's another way to do Step 1?

He looked around. The wineglasses wouldn't break and couldn't be used as knives. The tree bark was too soft to abrade the ropes. There weren't any handy sharp pieces of rock lying near his feet. (Not that he could have reached them anyway.)

Then he glanced at Cas— who was still sprawled across Ziphius's body— and Dean caught a glint of reflected light off the haft of the angel-blade. It was still buried in Ziphius's chest.

"The blade! We have to wake up Cas!" Dean said to Sam. "We just have to wake up Cas and get him to bring us the blade!" Now that was a workable Step 1.

... maybe.

"CAS!" Dean yelled, even louder than before. "CAS, we're TRAPPED, you gotta cut us free! Cas, we NEED YOU TO BRING US THE BLADE! WAKE UP!"

Sam screamed at him too; but Cas was silent and still. Dean reverted to Cas's full name, just in case that might catch Cas's attention somehow. "CASTIEL!" he yelled. "CASTIEL!"

"Oh! Dean!" Sam said suddenly. "Pray to him!" Dean usually only used Cas's full name during prayer.

"What? Why?" said Dean, confused. "He's right here," he added, waving a hand toward Cas.

Sam explained, "It just occurred to me, maybe prayer might sound different to him than talking. I mean, maybe prayer might wake him up. Maybe it's, like... loud to him, inside his head or something? You know how he sometimes flinches when he gets stuff on angel-radio?"

Dean considered that. "Huh. Worth a try."

"I know prayer isn't angel-radio, exactly," said Sam, "It's just an idea, but, let's try it. You do it — you've prayed to him more often and I think he hears you better."

Dean nodded, already trying to focus his thoughts to send out a prayer.

And then he suddenly couldn't seem to remember at all how to pray, not with Cas lying right there in front of him, distracting him with that awful broken wing. And, hell... what did Dean even do when
he was praying, anyway? How was prayer to Cas any different than just shouting to Cas verbally?

Dean had often wondered how it was that Castiel, or any angel, could hear targeted "prayers" only, without ever seeming to hear the million other random times when their names were mentioned in casual conversation. Dean had asked Cas about it once, and Cas had replied, a bit cryptically, "If you have the focused intent of communication with me, it automatically comes to my channel." This hadn't exactly been illuminating, and Dean had been left with a fuzzy mental image of some kind of angelic voicemail ("Think 2 for Castiel") and had given up on trying to understand it.

But maybe Cas had meant that it was the mental effort that made prayer different than regular speech. It was the "focused intent" that mattered.

Dean took a few deep breaths to try to settle down, searching for that state of "focused intent." That feeling of... reaching out. Of extending a hand. Of calling. Like those dreams he'd had in the Tetons.

It flooded back on him for a moment: the Tetons dreams. The man in the coat, standing apart from him, always behind him out of view, always in shadows. Faceless, unknown, unnamed; yet still, somehow, appearing in his dreams nonetheless, whenever Dean had truly needed help. Somehow he and Castiel had kept that one fragile link, even when Cas had been nearly lost to him.

I'm not going to lose you again, Cas, thought Dean. I'm NOT. I refuse.

And with that memory fresh in his head, the "focused intent" was suddenly there. HEAR ME, CASTIEL, Dean thought. He muttered aloud, with his eyes still closed, "Castiel, you got your ears on? This is Dean. Castiel, we need you to wake up. You gotta wake up, Cas. I need your help, Cas."

"It's working," said Sam. Dean's eyes snapped open.

Cas looked exactly the same.

Sam said urgently, "He moved. I swear he did. Those little black feathers on the edge moved, on the good wing. Try it again."

"You too," said Dean.

"What?"

"You pray too," said Dean. "He hears you too. You know he does. You've prayed to him sometimes. Maybe if we both try it'll be stronger."

Sam looked at him and nodded.

They both fell silent, gathering their thoughts. Sam stared at Cas with his brow furrowed, as if he could make Cas hear his prayer by sheer force of will if he just stared hard enough. Dean closed his eyes again.

Dean whispered, "Castiel, LISTEN TO ME. I need you. Sam needs you too. We both need you. We need you to wake up. Please. WAKE UP, CAS."

A rustling sound in front of him broke his concentration, and Dean opened his eyes to see that Cas's good wing, the great wing which had been splayed far out to his right side, was slowly folding in toward his body. Then Cas's hands stirred.

Cas's head lifted up slightly. He blinked, his chin resting now on Zhiphius's sweater, right on her stomach.
"Cas, get the blade!" called Sam. Dean joined in, saying, "Cas, we need the blade. Get the blade!"

Cas looked around jerkily, his head wobbling. Sam hissed, "Semi-conscious," under his breath to Dean. Dean nodded; Cas was obviously pretty out of it. From blood loss? Lack of grace? The injuries? The pain? Or was it some weird angel thing about breaking a wing? Who knew. All of the above, maybe.

But at last Cas seemed to focus on the haft of the angel-blade. It was still sticking up, right there in Ziphius's chest, just a few inches away from his face. Dean saw Cas's hand come up and pull half-heartedly at the haft. The blade seemed to slide free easily.

And then Cas just lay there, still sprawled across Ziphius, looking around blankly at the distant dark buttes.

He looked very confused.

Dean thought, *He's disoriented. He doesn't know where to go.*

Dean called out, "Cas. Look around. Find Sam. Go to Sam. Go to Sam." Cas was only about fifteen feet from Sam, but maybe twenty feet from Dean. Sam caught on, and started saying, "Come to me, Cas, come on, come over here! Come here!" Sam sounded rather like he was calling a shy stray dog toward him.

Slowly, very slowly, Cas turned his head toward the sound of Sam's voice. Then he pulled himself off Ziphius, and dragged himself a few inches toward Sam.

"Come here, Cas!" called Sam, now lapsing totally into a ridiculous sort of goo-goo baby voice, as if Cas were a wobbly little toddler taking his first steps. "Come to me, Cas! Come on! You can do it!" And Cas started dragging himself painfully and slowly toward Sam. Dean chimed in, "Go to Sam, Cas!" and Cas kept going... but extremely slowly. Pausing now and then, with his head sagging down into the grass repeatedly, as if he were on the verge of passing out once more. But he kept hold of the blade, and Sam and Dean kept calling, and Cas kept slowly inching closer to Sam, dragging himself painfully along with both arms and one wing.

Finally, what seemed like at least three geological ages later, Cas arrived at Sam's feet. Sam reached down as far as he could with his free hand (which wasn't very far) and Cas tried to hold the blade up as high as he could (which was only a couple inches)... and it was immediately clear that Cas just wasn't going to be able to get the blade up high enough to reach Sam's hand. Their hands were only a couple feet apart, but the "couple feet apart" might as well have been a mile. Sam was practically begging him now, calling out "Just a little farther, Cas, c'mon, c'mon! You can do it!"

But Castiel couldn't do it.

In fact he seemed to have reached the very limit of his strength, for his arm dropped back down to the ground, out at his side, the blade still clutched in his hand. His head turned to the side too, and he seemed to be looking at the blade, but he just lay there panting.

Dean nearly groaned with frustration. So close, *so damn close!* But Cas was simply too weak. Whatever this breaking-a-wing thing had done to him, it was clear it had knocked him just about completely out of action.

Then Castiel's right wing began unfolding. The unbroken wing. The good wing. It began opening, and *it moved toward the blade.*

That beautiful wing spread slowly out, till it was half-open. The sky was nearly dark now, and the
white inner part of the wing almost seemed to glow in the dimness, the black outer feathers catching a faint shine of starlight as they moved. Cas moved the bend of the wing very carefully over to his hand, right to the blade. His hand moved a little, slowly; and he tucked the blade right into his own feathers.

Cas closed his eyes for a moment, and took another slow, ragged breath. He opened his eyes, twisting his head to try to look up at Sam.

Slowly the huge wing lifted up — carrying the blade, which was now wedged tightly into those little black feathers along the leading edge of the wing. The wing stretched up toward Sam, the little silver handle gleaming brightly in the midst of the black. Cas seemed to be having some trouble maneuvering the wing— it was veering around sideways, and shaking a little — but eventually the wing pushed gently against Sam's hand and — yes! Sam had hold of the silver haft!

"Got it!" Sam cried triumphantly. A second later Sam was slicing through his ropes. Dean cried out, exultant, "You did it, Cas! You did it!" Cas's eyes closed and the great wing fell limply to the ground, automatically folding up again along Cas's side.

In just moments Sam was free. He took one quick look at Cas, checking his pulse, and then tottered over to Dean, looking surprisingly wobbly. But he got to Dean, and with a few careful strokes of the blade, Dean was free too.

Step 1, accomplished! Time for Step 2.

Dean soon discovered why Sam had been tottering like that— it turned out to be weirdly difficult to keep his balance on his own, after so long being held upright with the tree to lean on for support. They both staggered back over to Cas, hanging to each other's arms, and crouched next to him. Cas seemed out cold now.

"We gotta splint the wing," Dean said, clinging to his plan. (Because the plan had ended with "and he'll be okay." That made it a good plan.) Dean said, "Step 2 is, splint the wing. Or wrap it up or something. Okay. We gotta splint the wing. Okay... so..."

They both stared at the wings.

Dean knew they should be springing into action, but for a long moment they both just knelt there at Cas's head, glancing back and forth from the good wing to the broken one. Suspended between jaw-dropping awe, complete disbelief... and grim horror.

First off, it was just too damn surreal. The wings were real. They were actually attached to Cas's back somehow. It was hard to see the exact details in the fading twilight, but the wings seemed to be attached just below his shoulder-blades. Almost as if they were a second set of arms, feathered arms, that were mounted just behind, and just below, his "first" set of arms.

The good wing was... it was amazing. It was huge, for one thing. Even folded up, as it was now, it was nearly as long as Cas was tall. Right now it was draped slightly down over his right shoulder to
the ground, hiding his right arm. The black flight feathers were just friggin' enormous, stretching from the bend of the wing — which was up at Cas's shoulder — practically all the way down to his calf, where the pointed black feather tips were fanned out slightly by his leg. The black flight feathers were so long and so wide that they looked like a set of gleaming ebony swords.

The rest of the wing seemed to be a very complicated, tidy, folded-up assemblage of shining whites and soft greys. Dean couldn't even see clearly how it was all put together, but... it was simply incredible. A wing. A real wing. A real, mortal, physical, gorgeous, wing.

The good wing seemed truly miraculous. But the bad wing, the left one... Dean could barely stand to look at it. There was a horrible mess of bone and blood and muscle at the base of that wing, a few inches away from where it joined Cas's back. Bloodied feathers were sticking out sadly in all sorts of wrong-looking directions, and that awful white shattered stump of bone was jutting out at an angle, looking completely hideous, bloody feathers sticking to it damply. The rest of that wing had gotten horrifically twisted during the struggle with Ziphius. It seemed to have flopped over completely, so that the lovely white underside, now grotesquely spattered with blood, was facing upwards.

"That... does not look good," said Sam.

Dean found he simply could not stand the way the wing was twisted. It just looked too damn wrong. "I have to put it right way up," he said at last. He moved over to Cas's left side and looked at the mangled wing in trepidation, unsure if he should even touch it.

He had to make himself think of it just as a puzzle. Just a puzzle piece that could be put back together. Like... like when he'd glued that little ceramic angel back together in his dream, back in the Tetons. He'd glued the wings back on the angel. He'd concentrated, and he'd gotten the wings back on, hadn't he?

That was practice for this, Dean said to himself. Practice for the real thing.

I can do this.

He studied the wing for a moment, till he was sure he had figured out which way it had gotten flipped. Then he found the long black flight feathers and took hold of them gently (they were sticky with blood) and lifted the wing a tiny bit. It was more than a little disturbing to discover that the entire wing felt loose in his hands, not attached to Cas's body by bone anymore, but only (apparently) by a strip of badly injured muscle and skin. Dean felt that he could just stroll right off with it— as if he might tear it off completely if he were too rough.

Dean swallowed, and started to turn the wing around.

Cas groaned.

Dean froze. He craned his head a bit to get a glimpse of Cas's face — but Cas's eyes were still closed. Dean glanced at Sam.

"Gotta do it," said Sam, nodding. "You gotta do it. We can't splint it or anything otherwise."

Dean nodded grimly.

Put the wing back on the angel, he thought to himself. Just put it back on.

As gently and slowly as he could, terrified he was going to tear the wing off, Dean turned the whole wing around, the huge feathers rotating through the air as the entire thing flipped over.
Cas made a truly piteous sound as he did this, a breathless sort of whimper that sounded exactly like a kicked puppy.

"Sorry, Cas, dammit, I'm sorry," Dean said, his stomach clenching. But once he got the wing all the way around, immediately it looked better. Most of the feathers that had been sticking up all weirdly were suddenly looking normal again, oriented the right way and pointing backwards like all the other feathers. There was still a seriously messed-up area near Cas's back, and that damn bone was still sticking out, but it seemed an improvement.

Sam helped him fold the wing up. And immediately they both realized that they no idea how to splint it.

"I don't even know where the bones ARE," Dean confessed. "Like, where they are normally. How do we splint it if we don't know how it's supposed to fit together in the first place?"

"How about we just tie it to his body?" suggested Sam. "Just get it stabilized?"

"Yeah, good idea," said Dean. And then, brightening as an idea struck him, he said, "Hey, we can use the ropes! Go grab some!"

Sam nodded and zipped back over to his tree to grab several of the rope pieces. Together they bound the folded wing to Cas's body with several of the stretches of rope, Dean holding the wing in place as best he could while Sam worked the ropes under Cas's body. They secured the long flight feathers first, with a rope around Cas's waist that hugged the ebony-black feathers to his body. Then Dean figured out a way to tie the other end of the wing to Cas's left shoulder, looping the rope through some strangely tough little black feathers at the bend of the wing (Cas had this group of "tough little feathers" on both wings, Dean realized; they were the feathers he'd used to carry the blade earlier). Then he tied that rope around Cas's shoulder.

"I think that's the best we can do," said Dean, stepping back and trying to get a look at what he'd done. They were about to lose the last light; the western sky was just a dim stripe of crimson now, and stars were bright overhead. He said firmly, trying to sound confident, "Step 3. Get him to the car."

But what on earth were they going to do for Step 4? Where could they possibly take him?

Focus on Step 3, Dean thought. Get him to the Impala. Step 3.

Sam rummaged around in Cas's pockets and managed to find the Impala key, and then darted off to look for the car, vanishing into the trees where Cas had showed up originally. Dean stayed with Castiel.

Not knowing what else to do, Dean sat at Cas's head.

Long minutes slid by, and Dean just sat there watching Cas breathe.

Dean started talking to him, too, just in case Cas could hear. He said, over and over, "Cas, you're gonna be okay. You just hang in there. You're gonna be okay."
Castiel didn't respond.

Dean kept talking to him. And he watched the bloody feathers on Cas's back moving slowly, with Cas's shallow breaths.

*Dean, how do you deal with it? Falling asleep? How can you trust that your body will somehow know to keep breathing?*

*Your body'll keep breathing, Cas. It knows what to do.*

But now it seemed it was only Dean's gaze that was keeping those bloody feathers moving. Dean found he didn't dare take his eyes off Cas for even a second, for fear Cas would instantly stop breathing. He knew it was illogical, but he didn't dare look away.

It was very dark now. A sea of stars was glittering overhead; almost everything else had faded away into seamless darkness. The ground, the trees, Ziphius's body, the lavender recliner, the fallen branches, everything was dark, blending together into chilly blackness. The distant buttes were only visible now as black shadows outlined against the stars. But Dean could still see Cas's wings. The white parts shone like silver in the starlight, and the long black feathers glittered like dark water.

The little bloody feathers on Cas's back, the ones in the pool of blood, were actually the hardest ones to see. So Dean leaned even closer, so that he could keep watching them moving. He put on hand on Cas's head, too, hoping to comfort him a little, and he kept talking to him.

"You're gonna be okay, Cas," he kept saying. Over and over. Watching him breathe.

Eventually Dean saw a light flickering through the trees. It was Sam— holding a flashlight this time, which meant he must've found the Impala! Sam came trotting back over to Cas and Dean, tripping a few times on all the fallen branches, and he said, "It's really close! Took me a while but finally I found a little trail, and the car's actually just down the hill in a parking lot. Super close, maybe a quarter of a mile at most."

"First good news all day," said Dean in relief.

"Yeah," said Sam, "Rest of the day was really not good news, was it?" Sam crouched down by Cas, training the flashlight on him. The bright red of the bloody feathers jumped out vividly in the sudden pool of light. Sam asked, "How is he?"

"Same," said Dean briefly. "Look, Sam, I just realized, we can't carry him by the shoulders and feet like normal — that damn bone might catch on the ground. Think you could carry him like you did last month? Fireman's carry? Across your shoulders?" (Sam had once managed to carry Cas in this way after they'd found Cas half-frozen in Nebraska.)

"I'll try," said Sam, looking a little worried. "It's a ways though, for a fireman's carry. Maybe if I carry, and you help brace him or something? But, yeah. Fireman's carry. Ready?"

After some discussion, Dean knelt at Cas's head, took hold of both shoulders, and managed to haul his upper body off the ground about a foot, while Sam got down on his stomach on Cas's left side
and wriggled under Cas, at right angles to him. This wasn't really the ideal way to get a fireman's carry going, but the wings were making things complicated. After some tugging and pulling, Dean got Cas arranged across Sam's shoulders so that Cas's head and torso were hanging over Sam's left shoulder, and his legs over Sam's right shoulder. The broken wing hung down slightly onto Sam's back; the good wing was tucked just behind Sam's head.

Sam managed to get to his hands and knees fairly smoothly. He got one foot under him, and then had to make a mighty effort to struggle to his feet. Dean tried to help, standing right in front of Sam to help stabilize Cas. They managed, but there was a big lurch when Sam got his other foot under him and got fully upright, and all of a sudden the good wing started flapping. It somehow popped free over the top of Sam's head and then the huge, huge, wing was suddenly wide open, a gigantic wall of feathers, flapping wildly.

And beating Sam and Dean on the head.

It was the first time they'd seen the wing fully extended and beating the air freely from close up, and Dean's jaw dropped as he realized how friggin' huge the thing was. It seemed to be blotting out every star in the sky! Dean instinctively jumped back, totally abandoning Sam, who seemed to vanish completely behind a wall of wildly flailing silver-and-black that was pummeling Sam now, right on top of his head, thump thump thump thump.

"Ow! Ah! Stop it! Get hold of it!" Sam cried out, hunching his head down and nearly buckling to his knees again. Dean finally managed to jump back into the fray and grab hold of the great black feathers. But the feather-tips somehow whipped out of his grip instantly and the wing kept beating Sam, and Dean had to try again. This time he grabbed closer to the bend of the wing and got hold of some kind of strong bony part, right at the roots of the long black feathers, and he hung on.

The wing was amazingly powerful, and Dean had to fight hard to keep hold of it. Then the wing seemed to change tactics suddenly; it stopped flapping and leaned on Dean instead, bracing hard down on him. Dean staggered under the pressure, but the wing finally stopped flapping.

"I got it stopped," Dean reported. It. Dean realized a second later that he was thinking of "it" as a separate entity: "The Wing." Not Cas. It seemed "The Wing" had been flapping on its own, as if The Wing had a mind of its own.

But, of course, it was Castiel who had been flapping.

"This is too damn surreal," said Dean, folding "The Wing" back up.

Sam shakily, "Okay, that's better. Okay."

"That was interesting," said Dean, tucking The Wing behind Sam's head.

"You got that thing under control?" said Sam.

"Not remotely," said Dean. "Sucker's strong as a mule's kick."

"That's about what it felt like on my head."

"Should we tie it up?"

"We're losing too much time already," said Sam, his voice tense with effort. "I can't hold him for long — gotta go for it. But, Cas, if you can hear me," —Sam was angling his head to the left now, toward Cas's ear — "please don't do that again. Okay, let's move."
Sam started tottering along, Dean holding the flashlight with one hand, bracing Cas with the other, and trying to guide Sam around obstacles.

They made their way slowly across the meadow, across all the pulverized branches that Ziphius had blown apart, and into the trees. Sam was working his way toward a certain spot, and he muttered to Dean, his breath coming heavily, "Trail... is this way." Sure enough, Dean soon found a little trail that led down the hill. Sam inched carefully down the slope, one tiny step at a time, Dean shining the flashlight just ahead of him. It actually went fairly smoothly. Soon they arrived at a steep part at the end that had some little wooden steps leading down into a parking lot. And there was the Impala, right ahead of them!

Sam got down the stairs okay, but he was getting tired, and he nearly tripped on the last step — and suddenly "The Wing" went into another wild burst of flapping. Which again was beating up poor Sam, and totally blocking his vision with a huge flailing wall of feathers, and also throwing him off balance. Sam froze, hunching his head and cringing, while Dean jumped in front of him to grab hold of the great wing and wrestle it to a standstill, yelling, "CAS! STOP FLAPPING!"

The Wing finally stopped.

"I think," gasped Sam, as Dean tucked The Wing behind Sam's head again, "... he flaps when he gets tilted. When I stood up he got tilted, and right now I almost tripped and he got tilted."

"Oh. Like a reflex or something?"

"Yeah," said Sam, staggering along the parking lot toward the car.

"How about, don't tilt him," suggested Dean.

"Gee Dean," said Sam, gasping a little, "What a brilliant idea. I never would have thought of that on my own."

"At least it's a sign of life, right?" said Dean.

"Least helpful sign of life ever," muttered Sam.

Dean snorted. But Sam did seem to have figured it out; he was shuffling along now in a gliding sort of crab-like walk toward the Impala, Cas was finally getting a steady ride, and there was no more flapping.

They even managed to get Cas into the Impala without much "tilting". Sam lowered himself down carefully, to his knees, and Dean, who'd climbed into the Impala's back seat from the other side, grabbed Cas's arms and slid him carefully off of Sam and onto the back seat, keeping a careful eye on the broken wing. Sam and Dean both tried mightily to keep Cas steady and move him slowly, and the intact wing only gave a few faint flutters.

It was a little disturbing that Cas still seemed to be out cold, but Dean tried to focus on the fact that at least he was still breathing. And at least they'd gotten him to the car.

But then it turned out the wings didn't fit.

"Dammit. He used to fit just fine with no wings," said Dean as they stood looking at the problem. They'd gotten Cas into the back seat as far as he would go; he was lying on his stomach on the back seat, as far into the car as they could get him, his head bumping up against the far door and his legs tucked up into the footwell. The broken left wing was up against the back of the seat (Dean was hoping the broken wing would stay more stable if Cas were oriented like that), and the right wing
was drooping loosely down into the foot-wells. But the ends of both wings were still sticking a foot out of the car.

After a lot of fiddling around, they realized they could stick the ends of both wings out the window of the door, if they rolled the window down a few inches. It took a little doing, but finally Cas was settled and the door was closed — though with a foot-long length of dramatic black feather tips sticking right out of the window.

Sam and Dean got into the front seats and at last Dean started the car, thinking, Step 3, accomplished!

He was trying to ignore the fact that he didn't really have a Step 4.

Dean said to Sam, revving the car up, "I'm thinking to head to the nearest big city." He took a sharp turn onto the main road... and, of course, as soon as he whipped the car around the turn, suddenly there was something pounding Dean's head ferociously, and a wall of great long black feathers completely obscuring his view. The Wing had somehow popped free of the window and had opened right over the front seat, right over Sam and Dean's heads, curled over them both like a gigantic curtain. And it was flapping again. Flapping and flapping, drumming against the car roof noisily and pounding on their heads, the feathers completely covering both their faces and even scraping against the inside of the windshield.

Dean couldn't see a damn thing and the Impala swerved wildly as he tried to beat Cas's wing back with one hand. "CAS, STOP FLAPPING!" Sam and Dean both roared simultaneously. Dean braked hard, totally blind, and felt the car shudder to a stop. Sam got his seatbelt off and twisted around entirely to tackle the wing full-on, pushing it back off Dean's face and finally pinning it across the seatback by lying his full body weight onto the long black flight feathers.

They sat there a moment panting. Dean looked up and realized they were askew on the road; the Impala's front tires had nearly gone right into a ditch.

Dean checked the rearview mirror, but all he could see was feathers. He said, hoping maybe Cas might be able to hear somehow, "Cas — I know it hurts. I know it hurts like hell. I know you're scared, I know it feels awful, but you have to stop flapping, Cas, you have to."

A very faint whisper from the back seat said, "Sorry."

"Cas! You're awake?" said Dean. A surprisingly strong flood of relief rushed through him: Cas was awake!

And Cas was able to talk! It was the first words they'd heard from him at all since that horrible moment when the hammer had struck.

Sam lifted The Wing to peer under it carefully at Cas's face, and said, "Cas, can you hear me?"

A very weak, soft, "Y-yes."

Sam said, "Cas, listen to me. You're gonna be okay. But you HAVE to stop flapping. We nearly crashed the car."

"Sorry," said the faint, hoarse whisper again from the back. Then: "Feels... like... I'm... falling."

Dean and Sam glanced at each other.

He feels like he's falling, thought Dean. Oh, hell.
In one way, Cas had already "fallen", of course. Long ago. But there were other ways to fall...

And Dean was also suddenly certain that it wasn't a pleasant sensation at all, for a flying creature to feel like he was falling, with a broken wing.

Dean straightened the Impala out (very slowly), saying to Cas, "Cas, you're not falling. We're not going to let you fall. You gotta trust us, okay? If you feel like you're falling, you just have to stay really still anyway. I promise you, you won't fall. I promise. We won't let you fall. Okay, Cas?"

A little pause. Then:

"'Kay," said a very, very faint whisper.

Sam managed to squirm back around and get his seatbelt back on, but kept his left arm hooked over the back seat, in order to keep hold of The Wing.

"We're gonna take care of you, Cas," said Dean. "And we're gonna fix your wing up. It'll be good as new. You're gonna be okay. You hang in there. But don't flap, okay?" He traded one more skeptical, worried glance with Sam, and then just drove.

He slowed very far down for every turn.

After a few minutes they finally left the park and got onto a straighter state road, and Dean finally was able to speed up a little.

Sam whispered to Dean, very quietly, "He's holding my hand."

Dean glanced in the rearview mirror. Sam still just had his hand on the intact wing.

"What?" whispered Dean back. "What do you mean?"

"The wing. It's holding my hand," Sam whispered. He explained further, "It's kind of clamped on. It's holding onto my fingers."

Dean peered into the mirror again. This time he could see a couple of smaller black feathers—those same black feathers he'd noticed earlier, at the bend of the wing, the ones that had held the angel-blade. And... yup, looked like they were sort of clamped onto Sam's hand.

*Cas can hold onto things with his feathers*, though Dean. Huh.

And he was clinging on to Sam's hand.

Hanging on for dear life, looked like.

"Dean..." said Sam, whispering again, "Where the hell do we take him? What's Step 4?"

Step 4 was supposed to be "We get him some help." But try as he might, Dean couldn't think of anyone out there who knew how to fix angel wings. *Glue's not going to do it this time, obviously*, he thought, remembering the little ceramic angel from his dreams. And they couldn't just take him to a hospital. Leaving aside the rather major problem that the doctors would totally freak out, the real issue was...

Well, the real issue was...

The real issue was that thing Ziphius had said. That thing Dean had been trying his best to ignore,
ever since he'd heard it:

*Angels with one broken wing always end up dying anyway.*

"Dean, what's Step 4?" said Sam again, as the Impala sped along, through the black night.

Dean had no answer.

A/N - If you are enjoying this, please let me know! As explained previously... *I LIVE FOR YOUR REVIEWS!!!* (um... that's not pathetic or anything, is it?)
Step Four

A/N - omg thank you so much for all the comments! Such great feedback! It really keeps me going, thanks so much. Onward:

---

Step 4, thought Dean. What's Step 4?

The Impala purred along through the dark night, both brothers quiet now as they tried to think of what the next step was. Sam kept his hand on Cas's wing, Cas's wing kept its strange feathery hold on Sam's hand, and Dean just drove. Thinking, Where on earth do we take him? Who can fix an angel wing?

A thought struck him, and he said to Sam, "Maybe Gadreel? He healed Cas before."

Another whisper from the back: "Not... wings," said Castiel softly.

Sam craned his head around toward the back seat. "What's that, Cas?"

"He can't... fix... a wing," said Cas, each word slow and faint. "Nobody... can."

The effort of speaking seemed to wear him out, and he said nothing more.

Dean found he simply refused to believe that. He said, toward the back seat, "Cas, don't try to talk. Just stay still, and hang in there, okay?"

And then Dean leaned over toward Sam, and hissed, very quietly, "Angels aren't always right, you know. Like... angels thought free will was impossible, and they were wrong about that."

"Yeah," said Sam.

Dean added, still whispering, "They've been wrong about other things too. They were wrong about —" He stopped short. He'd been about to say "they were wrong about God caring about anything, and they were wrong about how only an angel can kill another angel. Cause it turns out God doesn't care at all, and there are lots of ways to kill an angel!"

But it occurred to him that maybe those weren't the most encouraging examples to bring up at the moment.

After an awkward pause, Dean finally finished, "... They've been wrong about lots of stuff."

*There HAS to be a way to fix a wing, he thought. There HAS to be.*

"Crowley?" whispered Sam.

"Last resort," whispered Dean back. "Probably he'd just quadruple-cross us." Not Gadreel, not Crowley.

Then who? Where should they go?
Dean was so lost in thought that he was taken by surprise when the little road they'd been on came to an abrupt end, in a T-intersection with another, wider road. Dean tried to brake gently, but even so Cas's wing gave a big twitch and lifted up ominously, carrying Sam's hand up with it. Sam immediately twisted around, patting the wing and saying, "Shh, shh, Cas, you're not falling—I got you. I got you."

The wing gradually lowered.

Dean managed to bring the Impala to a relatively smooth stop, right at the intersection, without any further wing-twitches from Cas. It turned out they'd arrived at Utah State Route 15. Route 15 headed off in both directions, to the left and the right, straight as an arrow. There was a clump of little tourist shops here, along with some restaurants, a bar, and a brightly lit gas station. A man and woman were walking into the bar, and a few other people were heading into one of the restaurants, laughing and chattering as they went in. It seemed astonishing to see people just walking around like normal. Dean checked his phone and was amazed to find it was only seven-thirty at night.

He'd felt like they were on another planet entirely, up there in the clearing with Ziphius. But down here it was just a regular night; just another evening, in late fall, on Thanksgiving weekend.

A few cars were even zooming back and forth on Route 15. And there was a big green sign right across the road from the Impala that read, in white letters that glowed in the Impala's headlights:

<-- LAS VEGAS 155 MILES
SALT LAKE CITY 270 MILES -->

Dean and Sam both looked at the sign for a moment.

"Vegas?" whispered Sam. "Two hours instead of almost four, basically."

Dean bit his lip. He gave the Impala a little gas and pulled into the gas station, saying loudly, "We gotta gas up first, Sam." He cut the motor and caught Sam's eye, nodding toward Cas. Sam got his meaning and reluctantly pulled his hand away from the wing, giving it a quick pat and saying, "Back in a sec, Cas. We're just getting some gas. Hang in there."

They both hopped out and closed the doors quietly. Dean started gassing up the car and then pulled Sam a little bit further away for a quick discussion.

Dean whispered, "He really needs a hospital, but we can't take him to a hospital. They'd completely freak. They'd take him away or study him or something, you know they would." Sam nodded, and Dean dropped his voice even lower, so low that Sam had to lean close to hear, whispering, "They might even try to amputate the wing or some goddamn thing. Or both wings, even. We just can't let that kind of thing happen. And we can't let them take him away from us."

Sam nodded again, whispering back, "A hospital's way too public. Too many people would see. Too many people would freak. We need some place smaller."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "Maybe a little clinic? Somewhere where there's just a few people. But, Sam, it's gotta be somebody who has some clue about angels. Or about wings. You know... there's got to
be somebody we know who'll have some idea what to do."

They were both silent a moment, thinking.

Then both brothers spoke at the exact same moment. Dean said, suddenly excited, "Sarah!" And Sam said, in a much quieter voice, "Amelia."

They looked at each other.

Sarah was the ICU nurse they'd met recently in Wyoming— and she actually knew that Cas was an angel. Just a month ago she'd helped treat Cas's most recent round of injuries. (Though she'd never seen his wings.)

And Amelia, the veterinarian! How on earth had Dean forgotten about this? Sam had once had a girlfriend who was a veterinarian! (And therefore she probably knew something about wings.) She was the girlfriend Sam had been with for practically a solid year, back when Dean and Cas had both been stuck in Purgatory.

The girlfriend Sam had cut all ties with, and had never talked to since.

And Sam was suddenly looking pretty grim about it.

"Right. You try Amelia, I'll try Sarah," said Dean, as matter-of-factly as he could. Sam nodded, his mouth tight, and they both pulled out their phones.

Though, Dean noticed, Sam didn't seem all that eager to actually place the call. Instead Sam flipped through the phone numbers on his phone, and hesitated a long moment. Before placing the call he walked away from the Impala, toward the edge of the gas station's little parking lot, staring down at the screen of his phone.

Dean sighed, and hit Sarah's number on his own phone, turning his back on Sam to try to give him a little bit of privacy.

Dean's phone was blinking "Low Battery"— apparently twenty-four hours on a mountaintop in Zion National Park, with the poor phone probably searching endlessly for a cell tower, hadn't really done it any good. But it was hanging in there at 10%, and a few moments later Sarah's number was ringing. And, hallelujah, Sarah actually answered! She must have had Dean's name in her phone contact list, for she answered with a puzzled "Dean? Dean Winchester?"

A huge rush of relief washed through Dean the moment he heard her intelligent, alert voice. He'd reached Sarah! Sarah would know what to do! Dean said rapidly, "Yeah, Sarah, hi, how you been, look, Sam and I got a situation here, um, Cas broke a wing."

Sarah said nothing. Dean could hear some sort of hospital-type beeps in the background.

Dean said, "Sarah? You there?"

"Yes..." said Sarah.

"Cas broke a wing, did you hear me? He broke his left wing and it's bad, Sarah, there's this, ah, big wing bone sticking out and all this blood and the wing was all twisted, but I straightened it out, but,
he's really messed up and we don't know what to do."

Another long pause.

Dean said helpfully, "You remember Cas, don't you? Castiel? The angel?" Belatedly he thought of adding, "Buddy?" — the name Cas had been using in Wyoming.

"Yes... I remember Buddy," said Sarah faintly. "But he didn't... have... wings." Another little pause, and she added, "I would have noticed that."

"Yeah, well—"

"I definitely would have noticed that," added Sarah firmly.

"Yeah, he didn't have his grace then," Dean explained, "so, no, he didn't have wings then, but he does now. Actually... usually they're in this other wing-dimension place anyway, this, like, other plane of existence or something, but anyway, he has them now and they're BIG, Sarah. Like, great big wings with feathers. Anyway, this crazy angel hit him with a big flaming sledgehammer and broke his wing. It's his left wing and he's seriously messed up, Sarah, do you know how to set wing-bones?"

Yet another pause.

"Um..." said Sarah, "Crazy... angel?"

"The crazy angel's dead, don't worry about her. So, we're near Zion National Park and it's a hundred fifty-five miles to Vegas and two hundred seventy to Salt Lake, you got any ideas where we could go?"

"What about... the... flaming... sledgehammer?"

"A demon took it. I think he's going to sell it on the black market in Hell. Look, Sarah, anyway, we're near Zion—"

"A demon... took it?" she said. Dean was finally starting to remember that even though Sarah knew Cas was an angel, she didn't really know the whole story. About, well... anything, actually.

Another little pause, and Sarah said, "Zion was having that lightning storm, right?"

"Yeah, that was the crazy angel but she's dead, look, never mind about the crazy angel, or the demon or the sledgehammer or the lightning," Dean said rapidly, starting to feel a little desperate. He went on, "The point is, do you know how to set wing-bones? Or where we should go? Vegas or Salt Lake? Seriously, Sarah, Cas is really in trouble. He keeps passing out, he lost all this blood, he looks like he's really hurting, and, and, we, please, we're kind of desperate here."

"Salt Lake," she said suddenly, her voice sharpening. "Go to Salt Lake."

"Why Salt Lake?"

"Because I can meet you in Salt Lake. It's only four hours from here. Vegas would take me seven. Start driving and I'll meet you in Salt Lake."

Sarah was coming to meet them again! Like she had in Kansas last month! This was completely awesome news, and news that Dean had not really been expecting. He heaved a huge sigh, saying, "Oh, man, Sarah, thanks so much, that's great, you totally rock! You get off from work soon, then?"
"No," she said shortly, "But I think I can get Lydia to cover. It's a slow night anyway and I'll tell them it's an emergency." She paused. Dean heard the beeps in the background again; she was still at work.

"You sure you can come?" Dean said, already getting worried again.

Sarah said, "I'm thinking. I'll... I'll tell admin that my weird Kansas cousins — that would be you guys — have had a relapse of pneumonia. Or maybe TB. You all had TB last time, in case you didn't know. That also gives me a reason to not come back to work till I get TB-tested. But..." she paused a moment, and then said, "Dean, do you mean he has literal wings? With literal feathers? Like a bird?"

"Literally. Really. Truly," said Dean, glancing back over at the Impala, where Cas's black feather tips were still sticking out of the window. "Shaped just like bird wings, feathers and everything. Except about fifty times bigger. But otherwise he's still human — totally human body like you saw last time. Just with wings added now."

Sarah gave a shaky laugh. "Right. Human but with wings added. Simple!" She paused a moment, and added, "Dean, I'm trying to get my head around this. I've gotta think of this as purely a medical problem... give me a second." Another pause. Dean drummed his fingers impatiently on the gas pump. The Impala had finished gassing, and he hung up the nozzle. Sarah finally said, "Here's what I'm thinking. If he's got an exposed bone he's going to need surgery, Dean... and..." She paused, and said, "You know, this really could be tricky."

"Tell me about it."

"No, I mean, it's tricky medically. The anatomy's going to be different, so you probably need a veterinarian, for the wing itself, but —"

"We're on that already. Sam's talking to a vet." Dean glanced over at Sam, who was staring at the ground, his phone to his ear, his other hand pressed to his forehead. Hm... it didn't really look like that conversation was going all that great.

"But," continued Sarah ominously, "If the rest of him's human, then you'll need a human doctor also. Because the anesthesia and meds are probably going to need to be for a human body and those things are very different for different species. So... you need a veterinary surgeon who knows wings, and a doctor who knows human anesthesia, I'm thinking. Difficult combination to find in the middle of the night."

Dean's heart sank. Somehow he'd thought Sarah would have the miracle cure - not that she'd be pointing out insurmountable problems.

Sarah said, "Dean, can't he do that miracle-healing thing again?"

"It was another angel that did that," Dean said, feeling even lower now, "and apparently that angel can't help this time. Since, it turns out, broken angel wings are... Impossible to heal. "... kinda hard to heal."

"Don't lose heart," said Sarah, somehow detecting Dean's discouragement. She said, her voice suddenly bright and firm, "An angel with a broken wing—we can't give up on this one, can we? Look, meet me in Salt Lake and we'll figure something out. Worst come to worst, we'll do it pioneer-style— stick the bone ends together, sew it up, pump him full of fluids and antibiotics. Ranch-doctoring. My dad used to do that kind of stuff on his cattle, and I used to help and it actually worked pretty well. But, try to find a vet, and a doctor, as a first plan, since that'd be best of all. So, you start
heading for Salt Lake, I'll set out from here, we'll meet there and we'll come up with something.
Okay now, tell me some more details. Is he awake or talking? How's his pulse and resp?"

Dean told her everything he could, and Sarah began to give her usual crisp list of instructions. By the
time Dean hung up he felt much better.

He knew, of course, that Sarah had probably just been acting confident to try to give him hope, yet
somehow it had worked. He had a little list of things to do now, Sarah was coming to meet them, and
he knew which direction to drive.

And he knew what they needed to look for: a vet and a people doctor.

Or, worst come to worst... Ranch-doctoring. That didn't sound half-bad, actually.

Dean hurried into the gas station's mini-mart to buy some water and food (on Sarah's instructions).
By the time he got out, Sam was standing by the Impala with a grim expression on his face.

"Cas okay?" Dean said, his stomach suddenly knotted.

"Yeah, yeah, just checked, he's the same. Kinda half-passed-out, but still breathing."

Dean took a breath. What was Sam looking so grim about, then? "You reach Amelia?" he asked.

"Yeah," Sam replied quietly, not meeting Dean's eyes. He walked around to the back and popped
the trunk, and started rummaging around. "She said, if we have any first-aid supplies, we should —
Oh, look, Dean, there's a whole change of clothes in here. For both of us. Jeez... Cas must have
brought these for us... Look, he brought my laptop... " Sam paused a moment while they both looked
at the supplies in the big duffel.

Supplies Cas must have brought for them. When he was trying to rescue them.

Well, he had rescued them, in the end, hadn't he? He'd killed Ziphius, and he'd brought them the
angel-blade. He'd saved them both. Yet again.

They were both looking at the clothes and laptop in kind of a trance. Sam finally started poking
around in the duffel, saying, "I just wondered if we might still have the first-aid bag — Hey! Oh
wow, Cas actually brought it! The first-aid bag! Awesome. LOOK! It's still got the saline in it from
last month! This is perfect."

Sam pulled the bag of sterile saline and a box of gauze out of the first-aid bag, saying, "So I told
Amelia we'd found an eagle with a broken wing by the side of the road. She said, call Fish and
Wildlife, which obviously we're not going to do; then she said it's a federal crime to keep an eagle,
can you believe that? Not just a little ol' state crime but a federal crime! Obviously we can just ignore
that."

Dean nodded and said, "We can just add that to our federal rap sheet. Unlawful possession of an
eagle."

"Yup," said Sam, fiddling with the saline bag now. "But then she said, get some saline on the
exposed bone, if we have any. She was thrilled to hear we might have saline."
"Awesome," said Dean. "Sarah said the same, actually. Saline over gauze?"

"Yeah, saline poured over sterile gauze. But, Dean, she said we really need to find a bird vet. An exotic-animal vet. She said most vets will be absolute crap at setting a serious wing break. I guess birds are a specialty. And she's too far away herself - she's in Texas. So she said, best bet is to get to a major city and look for a bird vet. But the thing is, Dean..." He paused, stopped trying to open the saline bag, and dropped his voice very low, whispering, "She also said, um, she said... she also said..."

"What'd she say, Sam," said Dean, putting his hands on his hips.

Sam's glance flickered to the back seat. And the open window, where the black tips of the damaged wing were still sticking out.

Sam leaned right over to Dean's ear and whispered, extremely quietly, right into Dean's ear:

"She said a bird with a broken wing will never fly again. And..."

He paused, leaned close again, and added in an even fainter whisper, "she said... she said, when she was in vet school... if they got a bird with a wing break with a compound fracture like this, with the the bone sticking out?... She said they almost always put the bird down."

Sam stood back upright. And then just stood there staring down into the open trunk.

Dean slammed the trunk and hissed back into Sam's ear, "So we'll just have to break the rules again. We'll make up our own damn rules. And he's not a bird anyway, you know that. He's gonna be different. You'll see. Plus, Sarah says we just need to find a combo of a vet and a doctor and he'll be fine." Which wasn't really what Sarah had said, but, close enough. Dean straightened back up and said, "C'mon, let's get that damn bone wrapped up and Sarah said we should get him to drink some water and then we'll hit the road to Salt Lake."

"Not Vegas?" said Sam.

"Nope. Salt Lake," said Dean with a grin. "Sarah's going to meet us."

"Oh, thank GOD," said Sam, with the first glimmer of a smile he'd shown in a while. "Or, thank Sarah, I mean."

But first they had to get the gauze and saline onto the broken bone. Dean instantly discovered that he had a much weaker stomach than he'd thought. He'd been able to deal with the thought of the broken bone (barely) as long as he didn't have to actually look at it directly, but the second he tried to lean in over Cas's head and put some gauze on it, suddenly Dean got so light-headed he felt like the car was tipping around him. He hurriedly backed out and shoved the box of gauze at Sam, saying, "Hey... how about you do it and I'll hold the other wing?" Sam took the box with a little half-smile, while Dean scrambled into the driver's seat and leaned over it to hold Cas's good wing, while carefully not looking at the bone.

Cas had seemed unconscious, but as soon as Sam started dripping some sterile saline right onto the
exposed bone, Cas stirred, the other wing shuddering and his hands scrabbling at the seat. Dean just kept saying, "Stay still Cas, stay still, don't move," trying to hold the good wing still. Sam managed to get a nice big wad of gauze wrapped all over the injury site and all around the bone, and then dripped a healthy several cups of sterile saline all over the whole area, completely drenching the gauze. Last of all Sam set a plastic bag gently over the whole thing. "Amelia said to do this," he whispered to Dean. "I guess the point is to keep it from drying out."

They then ran rapidly through Sarah's list: checking Cas's pulse and respiration, tucking a blanket over his legs, loosening the rope that was holding the hurt wing to his shoulder (this was so he didn't lose circulation to his arm), and finally offering him some water. Cas seemed out cold again and Dean was certain he wouldn't be able to drink anything, but the second Dean held a water bottle to Cas's lips, Cas snapped awake, clutching at the water bottle almost desperately with one hand, his good wing even coming forward to press at the bottle too. Dean had to get Sam to hold the wing back before he could get a drinking straw in place and get the bottle positioned so Cas could drink out of the straw. And then Cas sucked the entire bottle down in about ten seconds. Goddam. Sarah was right, thought Dean. All that blood he lost — he's about dying of thirst and I didn't even realize. Sam ran into the mini-mart for a couple more bottles, and Cas drank down almost an entire second bottle before he finally stopped drinking. Then his head sank back down onto the Impala seat and his eyes drifted closed again.

Dean gave him a little pat on the head— and then a little stroke on the forehead, too, like he'd done a few weeks back when Cas had been suffering from nightmares. Just in case it might comfort him. Cas didn't show any reaction, but Dean said, "You just hang in there, Cas. Sarah's gonna meet us and she'll take care of you."

"Sarah," muttered Cas, his eyes closed.

"Yeah, Sarah! Remember Sarah? She'll take care of you. And you'll be fine. You just hang in there."

Sam and Dean clambered back in their own seats in the front and buckled in. "Next stop, bird vet in Salt Lake?" said Sam.

Dean nodded, and then found himself giving a little huff of laughter.

"What?" said Sam, frowning, as Dean pulled out of the gas station and turned toward Salt Lake.

Dean whispered, "I know I shouldn't be laughing. But I was just picturing a vet who mostly deals with budgies or something— canaries and parakeets— and we walk in with Cas here. Six-foot-tall Cas and his eight-foot-long wings, or however long those things are."

Dean snorted again. But Sam just nodded absently. Dean snuck a glance at Sam, and realized that Sam's expression looked very blank.

"You okay?" Dean asked.

He was expecting the customary "I'm fine," (which of course, was always code for "I'm not fine, but I don't want to talk about it"). But instead Sam said, "I didn't even have her number anymore. I had to call her clinic in Texas and get her emergency number."

Oh, right. The ex-girlfriend thing. Well, at least it was a distraction from Cas's situation, maybe? Maybe it would be a good distraction to talk about it?

Dean said, "Well, at least you reached her! And don't worry about... about what she said. We'll find a way."
"She couldn't talk long. She had to go feed her kid."

And instantly memories of Lisa and Ben were flooding back. Surprisingly vivid memories.

Surprisingly painful.

Dean said, "Uh... kid?" thinking rapidly, *Okay, which kind of crisis is this? How old is this kid exactly?*

"Couple-months-old baby I guess," said Sam, resolving that question instantly. (Sam hadn't seen her for a couple years.) "Her husband was there too. So... she couldn't talk long." With that, Sam abruptly shut up, turning to stare out the window, folding his arms tightly around his chest.

Okay, so at least it was "just" *that* kind of crisis. The I-wish-I-had-a-normal-life kind. The what-would-it-be-like-to-have-a-family kind. (Not the is-the-kid-mine kind.)

But... still not that great a feeling, really, Dean knew.

And all Dean could come up with was a totally lame, "Huh... well... Yeah."

Sam didn't say anything further.

They drove on for a minute, Dean trying to kick himself into gear to say something more coherent. Some cheery brotherly advice was what Sam needed. Maybe something like: "Well, at least you got us! The messed-up, mostly-alcoholic brother and the messed-up, broken-winged angel who's your only other friend and who's probably going to die! And a life where you get tied up by insane angels now and then and killed by lightning repeatedly. That's way better than having a girlfriend and a kid, right?"

No, *that* wasn't going to help at all, was it? But Dean actually couldn't think of any other way to phrase it.

He cast around for something better to say, and thought of: "There's a faint chance Cas might survive! If we pull off a miracle!"

No, that wouldn't really be that good either, was it? How about: "I bet Ziphius and Amelia are both wrong about broken wings never healing!" No, no, that wouldn't help, but how about: "Maybe by Christmas none of us will be in imminent danger of death!"

Nooo... that wasn't going to do it either.

While Dean was floundering around trying to thinking of something even slightly encouraging to say, Sam reached back over the seat again, and put his hand back on Cas's wing. Dean glanced in the mirror and saw the little black feathers fold over Sam's fingers again. And saw them sort of tighten down. And he heard Sam gave a quiet little sigh. He looked over, and realized Sam had relaxed, a bit, somehow.

Dean knew Cas must still be disoriented and in awful pain, and that he was probably just hanging on to Sam out of desperation. But nonetheless Dean was certain that it was Cas who was comforting Sam, right now, and not the other way around.

"We gotta stick together," was what Dean finally said. "All three of us."

Sam nodded, and he kept his hand on the wing.
The miles ticked by. Periodically they passed signs showing the distance to Salt Lake City, which began to decrease, slowly. First "SALT LAKE CITY - 250 MILES" and then, a while later, "SALT LAKE CITY - 235 MILES." Slowly, but steadily, mile by mile, they were getting closer.

Sam actually drifted off to sleep. Dean was relieved to see Sam's eyes shut; last night hadn't really been the most relaxing night, and Dean had already been starting to worry about how they'd keep their energy up enough to get through the brand-new crisis tonight with Cas. Every little bit of sleep would help.

So when Sam woke an hour later and insisted on taking a driving shift. Dean agreed, for once. He checked Cas quickly while they were stopped. Cas was semi-awake again, his eyes flickering open briefly when Dean spoke to him, but he really didn't look that good. Pale and wan, taking short, rapid breaths.

Dean offered him a little more water, but could do nothing for the pain. All he could do was give Cas another pat on the head and whisper, "Not long now." And hope like hell it was true.

When Dean settled himself in the passenger seat, he tentatively reached back and felt for Cas's wing. He was relieved to feel the soft, cool little feathers grab on immediately.

"Hang in there, Cas," he said over his shoulder. Cas said nothing, but Dean felt the little feathers actually tighten their grip. Good to know Cas still had enough strength to be able to do that at all. And... it really did feel sort of like holding hands. Sorta. Kinda. If the fingers of the other hand were covered with feathers, that is. It was a little strange, sure. But kinda cool.

And it was damn reassuring. As long as Cas' feathers were tight on Dean's fingers, Dean knew Cas was still alive. And still breathing.

Dean let his head sink back on the seat, keeping hold of Cas's wing, and feeling those cool, soft little feathers holding on. Just as he was thinking, *There's no way I'm going to get any sleep*, he dropped asleep.

He woke an hour later feeling only slightly refreshed. Cas was, somehow, still holding on. Dean swapped again with Sam for the final drive into Salt Lake City.

Soon they began to see the city lights ahead of them. Sam broke the silence to say, quietly, "Hey Dean, we're finally back in cell range. I'll start googling bird vets."

"Right," said Dean. "But, Sam — " He dropped his voice again, whispering, "Remember what Sarah said." *About how we also need a human doctor.*

"One step at a time," muttered Sam, fiddling with his phone.

*A vet and a doctor,* Dean thought. *A vet and a doctor.* Maybe some small medical clinic that didn't have a big staff? That was... conveniently next door to a bird vet?
It was just past midnight. Most clinics and hospitals'll be closed, thought Dean. Soon they were driving through increasingly dense suburbs, and Dean still had no idea what to do. A vet and a doctor, a vet and a doctor. Wings and human. Wings and human... We need someone who can deal with a combination of wings and human.

"Any luck?" he asked Sam.

Sam snorted. "Not unless Cas needs a beak trim," he said.

"No," said a hoarse whisper from the back seat. Dean had to stifle a little snort of laughter. He knew it wasn't funny, but... well, it was kind of funny, actually.

"We shouldn't be laughing," hissed Sam under his breath to Dean. "Honestly that's all I'm turning up. Clinics that do beak trims on parakeets. And sell Pretty-Bird Bird Chow. And... let's see... claw trims too. And DNA sexing tests for unknown-sex birds."

Suddenly they were both quietly, desperately stifling another helpless fit of giggles at the thought of trying to do a DNA-sexing test on an angel.

"I don't even know what the answer would be," hissed Dean. He hadn't even meant it as a joke — he truly didn't know — but they both buckled up in another guilty, silent fit of giggles.

But the silent-giggle-fit died out a second later when Sam finished scanning all the results on his phone, and reported tensely "No dice, Dean. No hits." They were both trying to keep their sentences short and cryptic, knowing that Cas might be listening. But Dean knew Sam must mean that none of the twenty-four emergency-vet-clinics in Salt Lake City had a bird vet on staff.

"None?" Dean asked, just to be sure.

"None," whispered Sam back.

Dean muttered, very very quietly, "Find something."

"Trying," hissed Sam back.

They'd crossed the city limits now, and they were starting to see signs to some of the local attractions. And all of a sudden Dean spotted one sign in particular that read:

SALT LAKE CITY ZOO - NEXT EXIT

Dean veered off into the right lane, and took the next exit.

"Dean, what the hell?" hissed Sam. "They won't even be open! A zoo isn't a vet clinic! Or a hospital! It's neither one!"

"It's both," said Dean. "At least, I'm hoping it's both. Hold on a sec." He steered the Impala through a complicated series of ramps and turns, following the "SALT LAKE CITY ZOO" signs at every intersection, and finally emerged into a large, empty parking lot with brightly colored animal banners marking the different parking aisles. It was deserted, faintly illuminated just by a few rows of dim yellow streetlights. Up ahead there were big rolling gates pulled shut across the main zoo entrance, which was completely dark.
"It's closed, Dean, see?" hissed Sam, gesturing at the gates.

"Listen, Sam," hissed Dean back. "They've got gorillas and monkeys here, right?"

"Yeah?" said Sam uncertainly.

"GORILLAS, Sam. MONKEYS."

"Oh," said Sam, his eyes widening. "Primates. Like humans."

"Exactly! AND they have big birds here, right? Eagles and stuff. They've got primates, AND big birds. Wouldn't the zoo vets have to know how to deal with both?"

Sam blinked. "Oh man. I see what you mean. Huh." He considered that, looking around the parking lot. "Actually... Dean, you're right, maybe a zoo vet is exactly what we need. But... it's the middle of the night. There won't be anybody here."

"But what if a gorilla or an eagle gets sick in the middle of the night?" said Dean, peering at the closed zoo entrance... which, granted, was looking a lot more firmly closed, and a lot darker, than he had been hoping. "They're endangered species, aren't they? There must be somebody who sticks around. What if there's, like, a pregnant elephant giving birth or something, don't they gotta have a night vet or something? Or somebody on call."

Dean looked all around the parking lot, but all the zoo buildings looked dark. The Impala's grumbling idle seemed the only sound in the quiet parking lot.

Then a pair of headlights appeared in the distance, cruising slowly through the lot.

"Damn. Security," said Dean. He hastily put the Impala in gear and pulled out of the main lot, saying "Hopefully they'll just think we were lost." He spotted a little side driveway that headed out of the main lot down a little hill, and on impulse he turned onto it, saying, "Let's just duck down this driveway for a sec and figure out a plan. If we could just find the name of the vet or something — Whoa." Dean had spotted a little sign up ahead. "Holy hell. Sam. Look!"

For the little driveway he had just snuck into turned out to lead directly to a low, modern-looking building with a neatly lettered sign out front that said:

ANIMAL HEALTH DEPARTMENT

"Ha!" said Dean. "See? I totally knew what I was doing."

"Why the hell is their animal health department outside the main fence?" said Sam.

"Dunno. Maybe we've actually caught a break for once." He snorted. "Caught a break... for a break... get it?"

"Not funny, Dean," said Sam. "Not even slightly."

"Sorry," said Dean, feeling instantly guilty. "Anyway, look, there's a little driveway going around back, behind that gate. Can you see if we can get through that gate?"

Sam grabbed his lockpick set out of the glove compartment— and grabbed his pistol, too, for good measure— and ran up to the gate, which was chained shut with a little padlock holding the chain in place. In less than a minute Sam had picked the padlock, and a moment later he was swinging the gate wide open. Dean steered the Impala through and pulled it around the corner of the building
(slowly, so Cas wouldn't flap). There turned out to be a tiny employee parking lot here, which Dean could only hope was out of view of any security cameras. Sam, meanwhile, had trotted over to the little building and was peering into a window. He looked over at Dean a moment later and gave him a thumbs-up (“all's well”), a zero sign (“nobody in sight”), put his palm up toward Dean (“stay put, you don't need to come with me, I got this”), and finally he pointed to himself and drew a little circle in the air (“I'm gonna do a perimeter recon around the building.”). Dean nodded, Sam darted around the corner of the building, and Dean finally had a chance to check on Cas.

He cut the motor, popped his seatbelt off and twisted around in his seat, getting up on his knees. He couldn't even see Cas's face now — the "good wing" was folded in so tightly now that the bend of the wing was totally hiding his face. Dean gently touched the wing, saying, "Cas? How you doing?"

Dean put his hand on it tentatively, touching the big black flight feathers this time. He was surprised at how soft, yet strong, the gleaming feathers felt.

The wing nudged Dean's hand, pressing up at him slightly.

This really is so friggin' surreal, Dean thought.

"Cas, we're getting you some help," he said, "You're gonna be fine. We're gonna get a vet who can fix up wings."

To his surprise (and relief), it turned out Cas was awake. But what Cas said, his voice slow and faint, was:

"This... can't... be... fixed."

Dean said, faking a certainty he did not at all feel, "Sure it can."

Cas said, one word at a time between ragged breaths, "A... broken... wing... cannot... be... repaired." He paused, and added, every word coming with difficulty, "Ziphius... told... the truth."

Dean opened his mouth and took a breath, to try to say something reassuring, but he realized he had no idea what to say.

Because... what if Cas were right?

While Dean was crouching there, trying to come up with something to say, Cas said, "Dean." Cas turned his head slightly and opened his eyes, looking up at Dean for the first time all evening.

Dean was shocked at how weak Cas looked— how ashen his face was, how hard it seemed for him to even hold his eyes open. Dean rested his hand on Cas's good wing, a little uncertainly, hoping to comfort him somehow, but a wing-pat hardly seemed like it was going to help.

Cas took an uneven breath, and said, "Thank you for... trying... to help. But. Please... don't let... this... go on... too long." He took another breath and added, with effort, "Please Dean."

Dean's hand tightened slightly on the edge of the wing. What exactly was Cas saying?

"Give us a chance, here, Cas," said Dean. He wasn't totally sure what they were talking about... and wasn't sure he wanted to know. He repeated, "Please, just, give us a chance. We've pulled off some unlikely wins before, haven't we? You and me, and Sam?"
Cas gave a tiny nod.

"We've done it before. We'll do it again. So you just hang in there, okay?"

*Promise me you won't just give up and stop breathing,* Dean thought. *We just got you back. We just got our memories back, we just got YOU back. We can't lose you again.*

"Promise me you'll hang in there," Dean pleaded. "Promise?"

Another tiny nod, and the wing pushed up into his hand again. Dean put both hands on Cas then: one hand still patting the wing, and the other gently stroking his dark hair back from his face. Just as Dean had done a few times before, when Cas had been nearly dying, and when Cas had had his awful nightmares later; and just as Cas had to both Dean and Sam, too, when they'd both been gravely ill themselves. *An affectionate stroke-of-the-head, for special circumstances,* Dean thought, remembering Cas trying to figure out what the gesture had meant.

"You're family, Cas. And we're not gonna give up on you," Dean whispered to him. For that, in fact, was what it meant. "We're not gonna give up on you," Dean repeated. "We're just not."

Dean was so intent on Castiel that he flinched when Sam rapped on the window. Dean cracked his door open and Sam said, "Gimme the wirecutters."

Sam dashed off with the wirecutters, and soon he'd disabled the Animal Health Department's ridiculously-basic alarm system and had broken inside. Just minutes later he was back again— this time with a pink post-it note in his hand.

"Name and number of the vet on call!" Sam said, waving the little pink post-it triumphantly. "Looks like there's nobody here right now, but there's this 'vet on call tonight' sign on this big whiteboard in the lobby and this name and number was written right underneath. It says, Dr. MacElroy—— and here Dean snatched the post-it right out of Sam's hand before he'd even finished talking. Dean was scrambling out of the car and dialing the number while Sam was still grabbing for the post-it, saying "Hey, wait, I was gonna call!"

Dean waved him into silence, for someone was answering the phone.

A gruff, sleepy man's voice answered the phone, saying, "Yeah, what's up?"

"Dr. MacElroy?" said Dean, reading the name from the post-it as Sam leaned in close to listen. "You're on call tonight?"

"Yeah, this is Mac. Who is this?" Dr. "Mac" cleared his throat sleepily.

"This is, ah, Jake from the zoo. I'm the new night-security guy," improvised Dean. "Sorry to wake you, but we, uh, we've got a situation here. I think you need to come in right away."

"Tell me it's not the snow leopard cubs," said Dr. Mac, suddenly sounding much more alert.

"It's not the snow leopard cubs!" said Dean. "No, no, actually it's, uh, one of the birds broke a wing. One of the big birds. It looks like a pretty bad break. I think you gotta come in."

"Oh, classic," said Dr. Mac with a big sigh. "Midnight. Never fails. Who broke a wing?"
Dean almost said, "Castiel." He swallowed, and said, "I... uh... don't know its name... It's... one of
the big birds. A really big bird."

There was a short pause.

"Who is this again? Where's Roger?"

"This is Jake. Uh, Roger's busy with the bird. He asked me to call," said Dean. "Like I said, I'm the
new guy. I just started. It's my first night, actually. Sorry, I don't know all the types of the birds yet.
But like I said, it's one of the big birds. An eagle, I think he said?"

"Which eagle?"

Dean hesitated, and Dr. Mac, sounding kind of impatient, said, "White head or kind of gold
speckled?"

Dean actually found himself glancing over at Cas and thinking, *He does have some gold
speckles. "Gold speckles, definitely," he said. Mac said, "Dammit. That's the imperial eagle then. It's
really big? Gigantic wings? Kind of a cool wing pattern, black outer feathers?"

Sam, who was overhearing all this from about six inches away, gave a quiet little huff of a laugh and
glanced at Dean.

Dean said, "Yeah, that's definitely the one. The imperial eagle."

"Damn. They're endangered. How bad a break?"

"Pretty bad. Bone's sticking out. The wing was sort of flopped over. Lot of blood."

"Well, fuck a duck," said Dr. Mack calmly. "Is Tom there yet? Is he bringing it to AHD?"

Tom? AHD? Dean went blank for a moment, till Sam hissed under his breath, "Animal Health
Department." *Oh, right.*

"It's already at AHD," said Dean. "We're there now. Tom says, how soon can you get here?"

"On my way," said Dr. Mack. "Be there in twenty minutes. Bring him, the eagle, around to the
surgery doors if you can. The big bay doors. Get him inside if you can; if you can't, just keep him
quiet in the zoo truck. Oh and— don't move him around any more than you have to. If his wing is
broken he might start flapping, 'cause he'll be feeling really unbalanced. And with a big bird like that,
flapping's bad."

Sam was totally unable to restrain a laugh, and Dean almost laughed himself. "Yeah, we kind of
found that out," he said.

"Okay, if he's trying to flap at all, just try to keep him calm; cover his eyes if you need to; and leave
him in the vehicle if you just don't dare move him. I can help move him when I get there."

"Um, by the way," asked Dean, "Do you also know about primates? Like, gorillas? Like, how to
anesthetize them?"

*Please* don't tell me there's something wrong with the gorillas," said Dr. Mac.

"No, I was just kind of wondering... do you really take care of all the animals? Birds... and primates?
Y'know, all of them?"
“Yep. Gorillas, leopards, birds, elephants. Jack of all trades. That's what makes it fun. Actually we just did a cataract surgery on one of the gorillas last week. She came out fine.”

"Awesome," said Dean, truly meaning it, and he gave a thumbs-up to Sam, who'd overheard the exchange and had a big relieved smile on his face.

"That's why they pay me the tiny bucks," said Dr. Mac cheerfully. "Not that I actually know what I'm doing. But we learn to wing it. HA HA!" This was really not that reassuring, but Dr. Mac continued blithely, "Just kidding. We fake like we know it, and that's half the battle. Oh, by the way, you're not squeamish or anything, are you?"

"Uh...not usually," said Dean, suddenly feeling a little unsure about this.

"Good. Cause you're gonna run anesthesia."

"Uh," Dean said, "Um... Don't you need... like... a license for that? Don't you need to know... about anesthesia?"

"I'll tell you what to do and I'll set up the machine. You just need to watch the numbers."

"But don't... I ... need a license?"

"This ain't Mass General Hospital, kid. And you signed on as a night keeper, didn't you? Well, this is what night keepers do: any damn thing that has to be done. Don't worry, you'll be fine, we'll get by... on a wing and a prayer! HA HA HA! Heh. Anyway, bring it around to surgery, keep it calm, don't let it flap and I'll meet you there. Oh and— watch out for the talons. But I'm sure Tom's told you all about that. See ya. And— welcome to the zoo." He hung up, and Sam and Dean looked at each other.

Dean was speechless, but Sam said, cool as a cucumber, "Right, Jake. I'll call Sarah and tell her where to come. And then let's get that imperial eagle into surgery."

A/N -

So those of you who suggested that Step 4 should involve Sarah, Amelia, a vet, or a wildlife ranger... spot on! I figured, a zoo veterinarian is basically all those things wrapped up in one, right? And I figured Dean would be sharp enough to put that together — and also that he would be able to think of a way to actually get a zoo vet to come check out Cas.

BTW the layout of the "Salt Lake City Zoo" here is actually based on the zoo in Seattle, which indeed has its animal health department OUTSIDE the main perimeter fence for some odd reason. (the real Salt Lake zoo is actually called the Hogle Zoo)

But what is Dr. Mac going to think - and do - when he sees the "imperial eagle"? This may not be as easy as they're hoping. Stay tuned! And as always, please drop me a note if you liked this. And if you had a favorite part— an idea or a setting or character or bit of dialogue that you liked— let me know what it was. :)
PS - Private message to Cruelest Sea, ME, Pips and Lisa - in case you didn't know, you all either have private messaging turned off or did not log in, otherwise I would've replied to your comments. Thanks so much for commenting!
A/N - So sorry for the long delay. I have a really crazy job schedule right now (I'm doing fieldwork and am working 12 hr days nonstop - we only get a day off if the weather is bad). So, I have realized I can't always update this fic weekly right now. But never fear, I have NOT abandoned it! :) Fieldwork ends the first week of May so till then updates will be erratic, but after that I'll be able to return to a weekly update schedule.

Here's the next chapter. Hope you like it. :)

Sam went running back into the AHD building to open the bay doors from the inside, while Dean carefully maneuvered the Impala around to get Cas a little closer to the bay doors. He managed to get the Impala lined up pretty well, with the left rear door (where Cas's head was) facing the bay doors. Just as Dean was cutting the motor, one of the bay doors swung open, and there was Sam. Dean hopped out of the Impala to check out the situation inside.

The bay doors were pretty big— substantially wider and taller than regular doors. Almost like barn doors. They turned out to lead directly into a vast room that had a big stainless-steel exam table sitting in the exact center of a huge empty expanse of tiled floor. Neatly labeled cabinets and drawers lined the walls, bins bolted to the walls held blue exam gloves and gauze pads and alcohol swabs, and big cantilevered lights were suspended from the ceiling overhead. A little door labeled "X-RAY / IMAGING" was off to the side. Another door led off into a darkened hallway.

"This has got to be the surgery room, don't you think?" Sam said, appearing next to Dean. He gestured overhead. "Don't those look like surgery lights?"

But Dean was puzzled. It all seemed too exposed— and too big. He said, "Who the hell builds a surgery room that leads straight out to a parking lot?"

"People who have to haul in rhinos, maybe?" suggested Sam.

"Oh," said Dean, "Oh. Right. And that's also why it's so friggin' huge. I guess if you've got a rhino you don't want to be bothered wheeling it down a hallway, huh?" He walked over to check out the exam table, thinking he could roll it out to Cas, but it didn't seem to roll. "There must be stretchers or something," he said, looking around. But he couldn't find anything. "Well. Let's see if we can carry him in."

"We also need a plan for when the vet arrives," Sam said as they walked back out to the Impala. "Step Four-and-a-Half."

Dean said, pausing at the bay doors, "I was kinda thinking Step Four-And-A-Half could be: Beg the vet to help and hope he doesn't freak out. That's kind of all I've come up with."

"And if he won't help, force him to help," said Sam. He added quietly, "And. Dean. We gotta be sure he doesn't use his phone."

Dean nodded. It was going to be essential to keep the vet from calling anyone. The last thing they needed were cops, or media, or ambulances, or whatever security guards the zoo had, or more people
of any sort. And if the vet really freaked... and really wouldn't help... well, Sam was right, they might have to force him.

Meaning they might have to use the guns.

Meaning this could get tense.

A wave of exhaustion rolled over Dean just at the thought of another confrontation. He sighed, looking out at the Impala where poor Cas was still lying, and said, "Sam, why can't we ever catch a break?"

Sam said, "Well, we have caught a break, Dean, or at least Cas has, that's exactly the problem," and suddenly they were both laughing again.

It was just a few moments of uneven, exhausted, weirdly sad, laughter. But laughter nonetheless. And the thing was, Dean was just too damn tired to even feel guilty about it anymore.

Sam's last laugh turned into a hollow sigh. He put a hand up and rubbed his eyes, saying, "We really shouldn't be laughing."

"We really shouldn't," agreed Dean. "But at least it woke me up a little. Got a long night ahead, I think. Well, let's get the guns and see if we can get that imperial eagle onto that table."

They prepped a couple guns first—loading a pistol and shotgun for Sam, and just a pistol for Dean, who was going to try to play "good guy" to Sam's "scary guy waiting in the shadows with a big gun." That was as much of a plan as they seemed able to come up with, for Step Four-and-a-Half.

And then they turned their attention to Castiel.

It turned out to be harder than they'd expected to get Cas back out of the car. He'd somehow gotten one of his feet wedged deeply under the front seat during the drive, and his good wing had also gone all diagonal, the feather tips bent back in an arc so that they'd gotten stuck way back in the corner of the back window. Sam crawled in by Cas's feet and managed to snap the big feathers free of the back window, and got Cas's foot free—and, encouragingly, Cas stirred a little bit, his hands and the good wing twitching. And when Dean started dragging him out of the Impala by his shoulders (very gingerly), while Sam watched the broken wing, Cas woke.

Or, he sort of woke. Cas raised his head a little and muttered, "Dean?" He even tried to stand—but he definitely wasn't at his most alert and seemed pretty feeble. Dean tried to encourage him, saying "C'mon, Cas, think you could you stand up?" (It would be a lot easier to get Cas out of the car if he could get to his feet for a second.) Cas did actually manage to get one foot under himself, though Sam had to guide Cas's foot out the door with his hands. Then Cas even started to get his body weight up on it and get almost vertical, while Dean steadied him from the front.

But as soon Cas got almost upright, the broken wing shifted position. It was still tied to Cas's shoulder, but only loosely now, and the feathertips were still dragging along the car seat. The entire thing suddenly rotated a few inches. Cas gave a choked groan that sounded like he'd been kicked in the gut, his leg buckled completely, and he collapsed forward right out of the door, pitching face-first toward the pavement like a felled tree. Of course the right wing immediately whipped out sideways in a burst of flapping, for Cas actually was falling now.

Dean and Sam managed to break Cas's fall just in time, Dean catching his shoulders from the front while Sam made a wild lunge from inside the Impala and managed to snatch hold of the back of Cas's jeans. Together they managed to catch him and then let him down fairly gently to the
pavement. Where Cas just went limp again, his right wing splayed far out now, doing faint flutters against the pavement.

Dean and Sam looked at each other, grim. It had been a close call, and they both knew it. Cas could easily have bashed his face pretty badly on the pavement— and a head wound right now, on top of everything else, was the last thing Cas needed.

And now Cas seemed to have passed out again. His eyes were closed, and the wing had gone still.

"We almost dropped him," said Dean, feeling pretty appalled. They’d almost let Castiel fall. He’d promised Cas that wouldn't happen.

"But we didn't," said Sam. "We caught him."

True. They’d caught him.

Dean whispered to Sam, right over Cas's head, "Well... at least I didn't smash his face into the ground this time." Referring to a rather regrettable incident in Wyoming, in another parking lot, not all that long ago.

Sam whispered back, "And you didn't slam a car door on him, either." That had been another rather regrettable incident in Wyoming.

"Or set an orb off and accidentally nearly kill him," whispered Dean back, wincing at the memory. Okay, so there'd been a few rather regrettable incidents in Wyoming. Dean added, "We're getting a little bit better. Maybe we'll actually manage to heal him up one of these days."

"Like maybe tonight, even," said Sam, giving Dean a real smile at last. He clambered carefully out of the car around Cas's feet and closed the car door. Sam crouched by Cas now, checking his pulse again and inspecting the wad of damp gauze, which had somehow stayed on the broken bone during the whole falling-out-the-car maneuver (though the plastic bag seemed to have come off). Sam looked up at Dean and said, "Seriously, though, we've got to wait for the vet before we move him any further. That was just too dicey. And his wing is too loose now and also the vet said not to let him flap."

Dean nodded, and had opened his mouth to reply when they heard a car approaching.

They both looked at each other, and both glanced down at Cas again. It really wasn't an ideal situation, with Cas laid out like that on the pavement, looking so terribly vulnerable. But it couldn't be helped.

"Showtime," whispered Dean. Sam nodded, sprang to his feet, and grabbed the shotgun from where it was leaning against the Impala.

Sam faded back into the surgery room with the shotgun, concealing himself just behind one of the bay doors. The plan, such as it was, was for Dean to act as harmless as possible and try to ease the vet into agreeing to treat Cas, ideally without any drama. While Sam stood ready in the shadows with the shotgun, in case the "no drama" option didn't quite work out.

And, of course, Dean also had his .45 tucked in the back of his own belt as well. And Sam had a
pistol too. And they both had angel-blades, as well. Just in case.

The car sound was getting louder; someone was definitely coming down the little driveway. Dean knelt by Cas for one last quick check. Cas was lying sprawled on his stomach with his head turned to the side, exactly where he'd fallen, both arms a little bit in front of his head. His face was alarmingly pale, and his eyes were closed. Dean patted him on the head one more time, saying, "Cas, just stay still. The vet's almost here. He's gonna fix your wing. I'll talk to him."

Cas didn't respond.

There was no time to check him further; headlights were wheeling around the corner of the building now, so Dean stood and waited by Cas, his hands knotted at his sides.

A little silver Miata, of all the damn things, swung around the corner, its headlights nearly blinding Dean. It pulled up several yards behind the Impala, so that the Impala was still shielding Cas from view. The engine cut, the door swung open, and out stepped a man dressed in green surgical scrubs. Dr. Mac, presumably. He was just a few inches shorter than Dean, about Cas's height; he was perhaps in his 30s, with brown hair just going gray at the temples, and with a mild, calm expression on his face.

Dr. Mac looked at the Impala. His eyebrows went up.

Dean waited for the usual "Cool car!" sort of comment, but Dr. Mac's first words were actually, "That is a horrible choice of vehicle to transport an imperial eagle in."

"And a Miata's so much better?" Dean couldn't help saying, instantly wanting to defend the Impala.

"I'm not transporting an imperial eagle in it," said Dr. Mac. "You're Jake?" Dean nodded. To Dean's dismay, Dr. Mac's very next words were, "Roger's right behind me. I ran into him at the West Gate and he seems totally confused — are you sure you were working with Roger tonight? You must have been working at the South Gate. Because Roger didn't seem to know about Mambo."

"Mambo?" said Dean.

Dr. Mac raised an eyebrow again and said, "Mambo the imperial eagle, obviously." He pulled a bag of supplies out of his Miata, saying, "Anyway, Roger's right behind me and we'll sort it out in a sec. Look, I know you're new here but, injured-animal response is pretty critical. Here's the deal, if you find an animal injured you've got to call the on-call vet, and tonight that's me, AND the night keeper, and tonight that's Roger. TWO people. Not just one. Oh, here comes Roger now." Dr. Mac turned around, and Dean's heart sank as another vehicle came wheeling around the corner, this one a blue pickup with "Salt Lake City Zoo" emblazoned on the sides.

Dean spread one hand slightly toward the bay doors. It was a signal to Sam, meaning, *Stay cool. Wait a bit. Don't jump out just yet.*

The pickup pulled up a few yards to Cas's left, and an older guy stepped out— Roger, presumably. Again Cas was shielded from view by a corner of the Impala, and, again, the pickup driver hadn't spotted him yet. Roger turned out to be a sturdy-looking, gray-haired guy with a neatly trimmed salt-and-pepper beard. He was wearing a fleece zip-up jacket that said "Salt Lake City Zoo", along with work jeans and a sturdy pair of rubber boots.

"Hey Roger," said Dr. Mac, "We've really gotta stop meeting like this."

Roger snorted, swung his pickup door shut and instantly started peppering Dean with complaints, snapping grumpily, "Okay, who the hell are you, are you that intern who was working late at
Elephants? Why the hell didn't you call me right away? What kind of idiot are you to try to handle Mambo on your own?" He started walking around the back of the pickup, Dr. Mac joining him with his bag of supplies. Dean tensed; they were about to catch sight of Cas. Roger was still talking to Dean, saying, "So was Mambo hung up in that new mews door? Because, I told Facilities, that door is a bad design—"

They got around the corner of the pickup and both Roger and Dr. Mac stopped short. They'd both just spotted Cas, lying at Dean's feet. The ruined bloody wing was still tied up at his side, on the side closer to them, with the clump of wet gauze still hiding the broken bone; the good wing was stretched out dramatically on Cas's farther side.

Roger and Dr. Mac both froze still, staring at Cas. Roger actually stopped speaking in mid-sentence, his mouth hanging open.

"That's not Mambo," said Dr. Mac, with surprising calm.

"No," said Dean. "He's not Mambo. But he is your patient." He gestured at the bloody wing and the clump of gauze, saying, "He's got a broken wing, and he needs your help."

Roger said slowly, "That's... not... an imperial eagle... at all."

Dr. Mac added, "What is this, a joke?"

"No joke," said Dean. "Look, the short version is, he's an angel. And before you get your panties all in a bunch, please just accept it: angels are real, and he's an angel, and he broke a wing and we really need your help."

Roger and Dr. Mac slid a glance at each other. Dean's heart sank. The "no drama" option wasn't going to work; he could just feel that it wasn't.

"Look," said Dr. Mac, "Halloween was a month ago. That's cute that your friend has this wing outfit — pretty nice outfit, actually, are those swan wings? No, wait, swan wings aren't that big — anyway, it looks to me like your friend is drunk or something, and to be perfectly honest I'm guessing you are too, and I see some blood there so I have to tell you, he needs medical help, from a people doctor, so—"

Roger, who was looking at the open bay doors, suddenly interrupted Dr. Mac with, "Hey. You broke into AHD. I'm calling this in." And he was pulling a radio off his belt.

Absolutely not. Dean knew he had to stop Roger instantly.

"HANDS OFF THE RADIO," Dean barked, whipping his .45 out of his belt and aiming it at Roger. "DROP THE RADIO." And a second later Sam spun around the bay door with the shotgun up.

Sam said, intense but calm, the shotgun leveled at Roger, "He said, drop the radio."

Mac and Roger both flinched and jumped back a few inches. "Drop the radio, Roger," said Dr. Mac, still with that surprisingly calm voice, and Roger dropped the radio obediently. They both put their hands up. Sam had his shotgun trained on Roger now, so Dean swung the pistol over a little to aim it at Dr. Mac.

Sam said, almost gently, "And both of you need to put your phones on the ground, too. Very slowly. Keep your hands visible." He added, "We're not gonna hurt you. We really just need your help, but we can't have you calling anybody."
"Okay. Okay," said Dr. Mac, still eerily calm. "I'm getting my phone out, okay?" He slowly pulled a
phone out of his pocket, said, "Now I'm putting it down," and he bent down and put it on the
ground, and carefully stood back up again, his hands in the air. He said, still looking at Sam, "Roger,
put your phone down on the ground and move slowly and do what they say and no heroics. Look,
guys, it's okay, we'll do what you want. We don't want any trouble. However," — here he glanced
over at Cas — "your friend there, in the angel outfit, does actually look like he needs some medical
help. He's passed out, and I do see a fair bit of blood on that costume, and I really strongly suggest
that you need to take him to a human hospital."

"That's not going to work," said Dean, "Cause apparently hospitals aren't too good with broken
wings."

Sam crouched down slowly by Cas's side, still keeping the shotgun leveled at Roger, and gently
pulled the gauze off the broken bone.

Sam stood again, still holding the shotgun, and he said, "Like my brother said, he broke a wing. So
we need your help. Not a hospital."

"Okay," said Dr. Mac, eyeing the bone, "I'm starting to understand. That's actually a broken
humerus. Your friend's broken his arm. A humerus is an arm bone and that is a humerus. And
you really need to take him to a hospital. Why don't you let me call 911?"

Dean and Sam both glanced down at the bone, puzzled. It was an arm bone? How could it be an
arm bone? Dr. Mac went on, his hands still raised, 'I think I might know what's going on. You guys
were probably partying or something, weren't you? And maybe you, um, had some recreational
chemicals of some sort, we've all been there, haven't we! Lord knows, I've done my share. Anyway,
your friend had his Halloween wing outfit on, right? — but then he got hurt and you're confused and
you actually thought he'd broken a wing rather than an arm and you thought you could bring your
friend here. But actually, what he actually needs is, actually, a hospital. So why don't you let me call
an ambulance to take him to a hospital?"

And suddenly Roger made a lunge for the back of the pickup. Dean could have fired; and Sam could
have fired too; but of course, they actually didn't want to kill these poor two innocent zoo workers.
Roger was probably just going for another radio, and Dean could get him to put it down in a
second...

... well, no, it turned out that Roger was spinning around now with a friggin' rifle in his hands. A rifle
that had been in the back of the zoo pickup, of all places.

"FREEZE!" Roger yelled. "DROP YOUR GUNS!"

Dr. Mac sighed and said, "Didn't I say no heroics, Roger? But if we're gonna do it this way—" He
was standing right by the pickup bed himself, and he just put one hand over into the pickup bed and
came up with —

Holy shit. Dr. Mac had a crossbow.

A crossbow.

"DROP YOUR GUNS!" Roger yelled again, jerking the rifle back and forth between Dean and
Sam.

"Drop your guns and let me call 911," said Dr. Mac, aiming the friggin' crossbow at Dean now.

"No, YOU both drop your guns," insisted Sam, keeping the shotgun trained on Roger.
Dean said, "A crossbow? What is this, a damn video game?"

None of them had noticed the sound of another car approaching.

Headlights suddenly appeared behind Dr. Mac and Roger. They both jumped, trying to glance quickly behind them while keeping their weapons trained on Sam and Dean. And around the corner came Sarah's green Subaru Forester.

*Oh, god, no*, thought Dean. *Not Sarah. She doesn't deserve this. Not Sarah.*

But it was Sarah. She pulled up on the far side of Miata, cut the motor, stepped out and walked over. The four men were all still frozen in a classic High-Noon tableau, like a Wild West shootout that had gotten stuck still, and of course poor Sarah faltered to a halt, standing there in her blue hospital scrubs as she stared at all of them: Dean with the pistol, Sam with the shotgun, Roger with the rifle, and Dr. Mac with the friggin' impossible *crossbow*.

And poor Castiel lying on the ground between all of them.

There was a frozen little pause.

"Hi Sarah," said Dean awkwardly. "Um, sorry about all the guns."

Sarah just stared for a moment.

"Guys," Sarah finally said. "Sheesh." She sounded completely unimpressed, as if she'd found four little boys throwing pebbles at each other. She put her hands on her hips and scowled, adding, her voice dripping with scorn, "This is classic."

Roger glanced over his shoulder at her and said, "Who the hell are you?"

"My name's Sarah Helvern," she said calmly. "I'm a nurse. I'm an ICU nurse at Jackson General Hospital in Wyoming. And that's my patient." She pointed at Castiel. Then she said to Roger, who was closest to her, "And you're impeding emergency care of a critically ill patient. Get out of my way. I'm going to check on my patient." Roger blinked at her and took a little step out of her way, and Sarah walked right over to Cas, directly into the line of fire of all four weapons. She knelt by Cas's head, and checked his pulse. She also took a look at the bone, her lips tightening grimly.

All four men still had the four weapons trained at each other over her head. But everybody was just watching Sarah now. She looked amazingly self-possessed; but Dean was pretty sure he saw her hand shaking slightly as she checked Cas's pulse.

Sarah looked up at Dr. Mac. She said, "Are you the vet?"

Mac nodded.

"Then put that ridiculous crossbow down and come over and *treat your goddamn patient*," she said. "Fix this goddam wing, because I sure don't know how."

"It's... not real, you know," said Mac. "It's some kind of Halloween outfit. He's got a broken arm. He's got to go to a hospital."

"Did you even examine him?"

"Well, it's *obvious*— and besides, that's a humerus."

"Did you examine him?" said Sarah sharply. "Because, how can that be his *armbone* if his arm's
over there?" She pointed, and Dean realized that Cas's arms were still spread in front of his head — both of them. Both perfectly visible, and both perfectly intact.

Dr. Mac blinked.

He said, "Then... that's... a fake bone." He edged a little closer to peer at Cas over Sarah's shoulders. "It's got to be a fake bone. And... fake blood... for... Halloween?"

Sarah said, her voice edged with sarcasm, "My anatomy lab partners said once, in nursing school, that vets are just the losers who couldn't get into med school. Are you going to prove them right?"

Dr. Mac bristled visibly, straightening up. He tilted the crossbow up in the air, perching it on his hip on his green hospital scrubs, suddenly looking incongruously like an M.D. who had just somehow wandered into a Mad Max movie. He snapped, "It's harder to get into vet school than into med school, you idiot. And, just speaking of losers who can't get into med school, let's discuss nurses, just for example, who have—"

"—who have the wits," Sarah interrupted sharply, "to go into a career where they make a decent living, and make a real contribution, after just TWO years, instead of going into hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt for EIGHT years, PLUS, nurses actually take care of patients instead of waving crossbows around at them. PLUS, at least I can tell an arm from a wing." She glared at him. "So there's that."

"Goddamn it," muttered Dr. Mac. He plunked the crossbow back down into the bed of the pickup and strode over to Cas's other side, almost shoving Dean out of the way, muttering, "This is ridiculous." Roger and Dean glanced at each other; Roger looked baffled, and Dean could only give a helpless little shrug. Sam shot an uncertain glance at Dean, a question clear in his eyes: should they put away their weapons? Dean just gave him another shrug; but Roger's rifle, Sam's shotgun and Dean's pistol all started to sag a bit, and soon all three weapons were just aimed at the ground, in various directions, instead of at people.

Dr. Mac knelt at Cas's right shoulder, opposite Sarah, by the good wing, which was still half-spread-out. Dean heard him whisper to Cas, very quietly, "Hang in there, fella, I know your friends here are nuts or stoned or whatever, but I'll make sure you get to a real hospital. Let me just get this costume off and I'll take a look at you." He briskly snapped on a pair of blue gloves that he'd pulled out of his little bag, and he began feeling his way across Cas's shoulders, running his hands through the feathers at the base of the right wing. He seemed to be looking for the "straps" of the "costume." Dr. Mac was soon muttering, "How is this attached... where are the straps... WHAT. What?"

Dr. Mac froze. His eyes widened.

With both hands, he slowly parted the feathers at the base of the right wing. Sarah was leaning close, too — they were kneeling at either side of Cas's head, their own heads close together now. Their previous argument seemed to be totally forgotten, as they both stared at the base of the wing together.

"Amazing," said Sarah. "Do they share the same shoulderblade, maybe? The wing and the arm?"

Dr. Mac was said nothing at all. He was as still as a statue, peering down at Cas's back so closely that his nose was almost touching the feathers.

For a long moment he didn't move at all.

Dr. Mac slowly shifted one hand to Cas's head, and looked at Cas's face (Cas still had his eyes closed), as if to reassure himself that Cas really had a human body and a human face. Then he ran his
gloved hand carefully over Cas's head, down his neck, over his shoulder, through the little bloody feathers between the two wings... He was tracing his way across Cas's skin, Dean realized, trying to figure out where the "costume" began. And a moment later Dr. Mac's gloved hand was going right up the base of the wing, and onto the wing... and then all the way along the immense wing, following the leading edge. Till Dr. Mac was leaning way over the extended wing, his arm stretched all the way out, his hand on the little black feathers at the bend of the wing.

"What... the hell..." he murmured. He did something to the flight feathers, prying them slightly apart and peering at the roots of the feathers. He even tugged on one of them. At which Cas gave a hiss of annoyance, and Cas jerked the wing sharply out of Dr. Mac's grasp, pulled it right out of Dr. Mac's hands and lifted it up.

And then the wing folded up.

And then it collapsed again. The bend of the wing ended up resting right on Dr. Mac's knee.

Dr. Mac gaped down at the wing as it rested on his knee. Dean stole a glance at Roger; Roger's rifle barrel was pointed straight down at the pavement now, and he was inching closer to Cas, mouth agape too.

"What the HELL?" said Dr. Mac, both hands on the wing now, looking again at Cas's back where the wing attached, "Did somebody... transplant these on, or something? Is this some kind of ... why are these attached to his back? HOW are they attached to his back?"

Dean was getting impatient. He said, "He's an angel. We told you that already."

Dr. Mac stared up at Dean for a moment and then looked back down at Cas.

Sarah put in, "I don't know if you've noticed, but things have been pretty weird lately. You've heard about the exploding people? And the lightning storms and everything?"

Dr. Mac and Roger both nodded slowly.

"Also, tornadoes," added Dean helpfully.

"And the hurricanes," put in Sam.

"And as I understand it," went on Sarah, "This angel here just took down the baddie who was responsible for the lightning storms in Zion. And got this injury as a result." She looked at Dr. Mac, who was still staring down at Cas's wing, mesmerized, as if he'd fallen into a trance. Sarah said sharply, "You. Crossbow vet guy. Listen to me."

Dr. Mac tore his eyes off Castiel's wing and looked up at her. Sarah said. "You have an angel with a broken wing here. An angel. With a broken wing. And I'm telling you, I know these two guys and I'm certain they are the good guys. And they've brought this angel to YOU for help. This is the case of your career. It's the case of a lifetime. This is your chance to really make a difference." She took a breath, and added, "You've been waiting for this your whole life. You know you have."

Dr. Mac stared at her for a long moment. His eyes seemed to have gone very dark.

He looked back down at Cas.

"Can you fix his wing?" Sarah said quietly. "Can you help?"

And then Castiel moved his head. Dr. Mac, Sarah, and Roger all flinched in surprise.
Cas said, his voice very soft, "He ... can't ... help." He managed to lift his head slightly, and slowly turned it around, till he was able to look right up at Dr. Mac. Who stared down at him blankly.

"You... can't... help," Cas whispered, directly to Dr. Mac. "Broken... wings... can't be ... fixed."

His eyes closed again, and his head sank back down.

Dr. Mac's posture had changed slightly. He'd stiffened a little bit, frowning. He glanced at Sarah one more time. He looked at the broken bone.

Dr. Mac said, "Broken wings can too be fixed." He cleared his throat, leaning over the bone and studying it closely. "It's a humerus break, yes... and those can be tricky... true. But... you know what, that's a nice big bone and that's actually a relatively clean break. It looks like it's been kept moist, too — did you guys use water?"

"Saline," said Sam.

"Sterile saline," said Dean.

"Oh, that's good. That's really good. See here, that bone's huge—I could easily get a pin into that thing."

Cas shook his head weakly and muttered, his eyes closing, "Even... angels... can't fix... wings."

Dr. Mac said, "Well, have angels tried the new I.M. titanium pins?"

Cas's eyes opened again. He glanced up at Dr. Mac.

"What?" Castiel said.

"I said, have you angels tried the I.M. titanium pins? Or maybe the hybrid fixators or those new plates? Because, we fixed a worse break than this in our turkey vulture last spring. He'd got hung up in the fencing somehow and broke the radius AND the ulna. I fixed that wing. He's fine now."

"I'm not ... a turkey... vulture," said Castiel, frowning.

"We also did a toucan recently," said Dr. Mac. "Though, granted, he does have a bit of wing droop, but he's still recovering."

Cas said hoarsely, "I am also... NOT... a toucan." Dean had to stifle a laugh.

"Well, no, obviously you're not a toucan," conceded Dr. Mac, now inspecting Cas's good wing, touching it gently and saying, "but it looks like the same basic wing anatomy. Humerus, radius and ulna? Primaries, secondaries, tertials?"

Cas blinked at Dr. Mac. "Y-yes," he said slowly.

"So, it looks like angel wings were sort of designed based on bird wings?"

It turned out Cas had enough energy to scowl. "Other way... around," he said.

"Oh. Heh. Right," said Dr. Mac. "Well, anyway, this is pretty good timing, actually, because we just ordered a whole new set of titanium hardware after the toucan. Got all the sizes. Hey, do you have air sacs?"

Cas blinked again. "No?" he said, sounding a little unsure. "I don't... I don't know."
Dr. Mac started to say, "I meant, so are your bones hollow or —"

"Stop quizzing him," snapped Dean. "Just fix him."

"I need to know for the anesthesia," Dr. Mac said, glaring up at Dean.

Sam said, "The whole body's human except for the wings. Um... We think."

"Right, okay," said Dr. Mac. "Then, great-ape anesthesia, raptor hardware. Let's get him into x-ray and get a real look." He looked up at Roger (who had crept up Cas's other side and was crouching down inspecting the broken bone, his rifle now aimed up at the sky), and said, "Hey Roger, you on board with all this?"

"My cousin lost his fiance in one of those tornadoes," said Roger, totally unexpectedly. "And... I lost some other family too. So, if these nutsos are trying to help with all the stuff, then yes."

"Then get the stretcher-board, would you?"

Roger nodded. He seemed barely able to take his eyes of Cas, but he stood, put the rifle back in the pickup, and walked right past Sam and Dean into surgery, still staring at Cas over his shoulder as he walked inside. Sam and Dean glanced at each other, more than a little amazed. Dean handed his pistol to Sam, and Sam just nodded and put both guns back in the Impala.

Dr. Mac said, "Right. I think we're in business. You. Amazon nurse girl." He was looking at Sarah.

"Sarah," said Sarah.

"Sarah, I'm really gonna need your help here on all the human stuff. Go get gloves on— gloves are by the door, inside— and I'll need your help in prepping him. You, giraffe boy, with the hair—"

"Sam," said Sam.

"Sam, go help Roger with the stretcher, would you? You, Guy-Who's-Probably-Not-Really-Named-Jake—"

"Dean," said Dean.

"Dean, get a pair of gloves on too— actually, make sure everybody gets a pair of gloves, there's all sizes by the door— you're going to help us lift him onto the stretcher. And you," said Dr. Mac, looking down at Cas. "Mr. Imperial Eagle."

"Castiel," whispered Castiel faintly.

"Castiel, I'm going to fix your wing whether you like it or not," said Dr. Mac. Glancing again at the good wing, he added, "And if you don't mind, I might just keep on calling you Mr. Imperial Eagle. It kind of fits."

A/N -  Whee! Dr. Mac is on the case! (Thanks to Sarah knocking some sense into him, and into everybody.)

If you liked this please drop me a line to tell me your favorite part - especially if there was a scene or
idea or a bit of dialogue that you particularly liked. Remember, your comments are my only feedback and the only reward and I do so love to hear from you! (even if I'm horribly slow right now at replying)

Hope you enjoyed this. :)

A Wing And A Prayer

A/N -

Part 2 of the events at the Salt Lake City Zoo.

Cas had seemed to be remarkably alert when he'd been talking with Dr. Mac, but as soon as they tried to move him it became very clear that he was just barely hanging on. The broken wing shifted again when they loaded him onto a sort of big backboard thing, and he gave a yelp of pain, tight and sharp, gritting his teeth. Once he was finally on the stretcher and they lifted him up, the broken wing shifted yet again, drooping slightly off the stretcher into a slightly different angle that seemed to be causing even more pain, and then Cas couldn't seem to stop groaning. He looked awful, white and trembling, his hands clutching at the sides of the stretcher.

Dean found himself cringing. He'd seen quite a lot of injuries in his life, and had suffered plenty himself, but it was terrible to see poor Cas in such pain. And Cas, Dean had learned in Wyoming, had a pretty high pain threshold. Dean finally thought of offering Cas his hand to hold on to, and Cas grabbed on to Dean's hand with such a painfully tight grip that Dean nearly yelled himself.

Well, at least he's still got some decent grip strength, thought Dean. That's a good sign, right?

Which was why Dean wasn't really happy at all when Cas's hand started to loosen, as they slid him onto the exam table. Cas also stopped groaning. And his eyes closed. And he got even whiter. "Mac, he's getting shocky," said Sarah, who had been monitoring Cas closely during the transfer to the table.

It turned out "he's getting shocky" was apparently a magic phrase, for it seemed to flip a switch in Dr. Mac. Whatever last shreds of disbelief and confusion he'd been wrestling with seemed to vanish instantly as he hurtled into some kind of Super-Vet Mode — right alongside Sarah, who'd gone into her Super-Nurse Mode herself. Both of them flew around the table for a few minutes, whipping out IV’s and syringes, barking at the others to run here or there, or hand them this or that, or hold this wing or move that leg. It was actually kind of impressive, thought Dean (though also pretty terrifying, given that it seemed to mean that Cas was really going downhill). In just moments Cas had been all fitted out with a glucose-drip IV, an O2 mask, ECG leads, several other mysterious tubes and wires, and a little thing on his finger that was connected to a little digital display that Roger propped by Cas's head. And Dr. Mac gave Cas a few shots of several interesting-sounding drugs that seemed to make Sarah happy.

After about fifteen minutes, Dr. Mac and Sarah both straightened up and took a big breath at the same time.

"Okay, guys. He's stable. Ish," said Dr. Mac. "He's out, too. Not under true anesthesia but sedated. And stable-ish. Everybody: if we're going to do this, I have to explain a few things. Dean. Sam. I need to point out that your Mr. Imperial Eagle here— Castiel, was that the name?— he is not in good shape. And obviously I don't have even one-tenth of a fraction of an ounce of any experience with angels, of all the species I never thought I'd be dealing with, but it's pretty clear that what we have to do is pin that bone and wrap the wing. And if you were panicky enough to pull guns for just
a radio, I'm guessing we have to do this fast, tonight, with what we have available, and, that we have to finish up by six-thirty, before the early keepers arrive. And that's just six hours away, and we're not set up for any of this, and I don't have my usual team. So you are all going to have to assist. Sarah, you ever assisted in surgeries?"

Sarah nodded and said, "Back in nursing school, though. It's been a while."

"But you know the idea? Hand me stuff, do what I say, and for pete's sake don't break sterility?"

"And let you be the asshole?" said Sarah, grinning.

"Exactly!" said Dr. Mac, grinning back. "Let me be the asshole, do exactly what I say, pretend I'm king while secretly saving my ass when I screw up, and we'll get along just fine. But, I do want you to speak up if you see me doing something totally idiotic. I do know great-ape medicine but I'll tell you straight up I don't deal with apes every day, and certainly not humans; so if you see something I'm missing, some human-medical thing, Sarah, you speak up immediately. Roger, you're going to be the nonsterile pair of hands, and you're gonna run the IVs, give injections, all the stuff you usually do anyway, and basically take care of the entire rest of his body, the parts outside the surgical field. Everybody else— you should be damn glad we've got a real night keeper here."

"I thought he was just security?" said Dean, puzzled. "No offense."

Dr. Mac just snorted. "Night keepers are the best in the biz. They're the ones who take care of the sickest animals all night long, all throughout the zoo, all species. Basically — heh, Sarah, I guess Roger's your equivalent, but for animals. If anybody can keep a sick angel going it's gonna be Roger." Roger was actually blushing at these bits of praise, scuffing his rubber boots on the floor and tugging at his gray beard in embarrassment. "Dean, Sam," Mac went on briskly, "How are you with blood? Are either of you gonna pass out on me? And tell me the goddam truth."

Sam and Dean glanced at each other.

"We've seen blood before," said Sam.

Dean added, "Quite a lot, actually."

Dr. Mac nodded. "Good. Well, not good for you guys, I guess, but at least maybe you can both keep it together. Any medical training?"

"Just battlefield medic type stuff," offered Dean, and Sam nodded, clarifying, "Emergency first aid, some suturing, that kind of thing."

Mac nodded and said, "That's helpful, actually. Okay, here's the plan. Dean, I told you before, back when you were Jake, that you were gonna run anesthesia and I'm sticking to that. That means, as soon as I tell you you are on duty, you are going to stare like an obsessed crazy person at this little display here." Dr. Mac tapped the monitor next to Cas's head. "This number on top is his pulse, the other number's the oxygen saturation of his blood, which is looking kind of low by the way, but unfortunately we can't do human blood transfusions here, or angel transfusions for that matter, so you are just going to have to keep a VERY close eye on that. And you are going to tell me THE VERY SECOND either of those numbers changes. And you are ALSO going to keep glancing at his face and tell me if his color changes or if his lips go blue, AND, every two minutes you take his respiration for fifteen seconds. There'll be a few more things for you to monitor later once he's under anesthesia. Can you do that? Can you watch all those things, and watch his breathing and not get distracted?"
"Yes," said Dean, nodding his head emphatically. "Absolutely."

"Great. I'll tell you when to start; you're not on duty yet; right now Sarah's watching all that. And Sam — I think I'll need you to hold the wing. Can't tell you more than that right now. Okay. Heigh-ho, heigh-ho, into x-ray we go!"

Roger rolled his eyes and whispered to Dean, "He always says that. For every single x-ray."

It turned out the exam table did have little wheels — they'd just been locked before. Roger unlocked the wheels and they all began rolling Cas over to x-ray. Dean and Sam caught each other's eyes as they helped steer the table. Sam flashed him a big grin and Dean smiled back. Dean felt absolutely elated, actually. Dr. Mac was on board, they'd lucked out with a real night keeper too, and it was becoming damn apparent that Dr. Mac really knew his job. It was going to work. It was all going to work.

They were going to save Castiel.

They had to take quite a variety of x-rays — the good wing as well as the bad one, carefully maneuvering Cas (who was completely limp now) into various positions so that Dr. Mac could see how an intact angel wing was supposed to look. And then they had to get several different angles on the broken wing as well.

Dean winced when he got a look at the x-ray of the broken wing. There was a big stout bone that connected the wing to Cas's body, and this bone (the "humerus", apparently) had really taken quite a blow from the hammer. It was separated into two jagged pieces, and there were also a couple of pathetic-looking little fragments that all seemed very far apart from each other. One of Cas's ribs, right underneath, had even gotten cracked.

Dr. Mac, though, seemed unfazed. He studied the x-ray and said just, "This is totally pinnable."

Then he stared at it for a long time, standing in front of a computer display in the main room and gazing at the x-ray quietly. The others, meanwhile, wheeled Cas back under the exam lights and arranged him on his stomach again. Then Sarah occupied herself dripping warm saline all over the wound, Roger tried to clean some of the blood off Cas's skin, Sam tried to help both of them, and Dean just watched Cas breathe.

Suddenly Dr. Mac said "Okay," and he spun away from the x-ray, walking briskly back over to Castiel. "Sam," he said, "Spread out the intact wing. Slow and gentle. Don't force it, but let's just see how it can move."

Sam did so, taking hold of the black flight feathers and slowly extending the entire wing.

Everybody in the room stopped what they were doing, and stared.

Cas's wing, just the one wing, seemed to fill at least half of that gigantic room. And the wing was... gorgeous.

It was spectacular, not to mince words.

Actually this was the first time Dean had really gotten a clear look at the top side of the wing in good
light. It turned out that only the very outermost flight feathers, the outermost five, were jet black. Those five feathers were glittering darkly now under the bright exam lights, sparkling with dark iridescent glints. The majority of the wing—the rest of the long flight feathers, along with the whole middle third of the wing—was a lustrous gleaming white that was glittering almost like silver. The innermost parts of the wing, along with the little downy feathers on Cas's back between the wings, were a soft, fluffy-looking dove gray. The black, the white and the gray made a stunning geometric pattern together, like triangles of different color set against each other. The whole pattern was much more dramatic than Dean had expected. And now that Dean was looking closely, he could see that many of the feathers were dotted with glints of gold at the very tips, the gold glittering where it caught the light.

It was simply gorgeous.

"Okay folks, stop gaping," said Dr. Mac at last. Everybody had just been standing still and staring at the wing. Dr. Mac set his hands on the innermost part of the right wing, taking a gentle hold of the same bone that had broken on the other wing. He said, "Sam. Fold the wing in and out a few times, very slowly. And then we'll move it around. Let's see what kind of range of motion the intact wing normally has. Roger, grab the tape measure, can you? I want to get a few measurements on this guy and see what angle all the joints open out to."

Sam carefully started walking back and forth, moving the good wing around. He seemed rather awestruck and tentative at first, moving as if he were afraid he might break that wing too, but he soon gained confidence and began to fold the good wing all the way in, and all the way out, moving it up and around and back and sideways, under Dr. Mac's guidance. Dean was now sitting at Cas's head watching the little monitor, but even looking from here it was clear that the wing had two major joints, not just one. There was the obvious big joint, at the big bend of the forward edge of the wing; but there was also another hidden joint, like an elbow almost, that had been totally hidden in the feathers closer to Cas's back. That other joint seemed able to unfold rather unexpectedly to give the wing a truly tremendous length. What had looked like a five-foot-wing, when it was all folded up, was turning into an eight- or nine-foot wing when Sam got it fully extended.

The wing also turned out to have an amazing range of motion. It could lift pretty high up over Cas's back; it could curve around Cas's body like a cape; it could even stretch all the way down past his feet.

And, of course, it could arc way up over his head.

Like the time Cas had spread his wings when Dean had first met him. That seriously impressive wing-display move.

*He'd BETTER be able to do that again,* Dean thought. *He'd just BETTER.*

Finally Sam gently stretched the wing fully out again, for some wing measurements, now looking pretty comfortable in his Wing-Maneuverer job. Roger and Sarah began to stretch the tape measure around and take various measurements.

"Oh, interesting, he's got an alula," said Dr. Mac suddenly, while Roger and Sarah were fussing over a tape-measure issue. Dr. Mac took a step over, reached out one gloved hand to the big joint at the bend of Cas's wing, and he touched what appeared to be the seamless smooth front edge of the wing. Dr. Mac stuck his finger under a feather, and to Dean's surprise he somehow lifted up a whole separate line of little feathers that all came up together, as a unit.

It was the group of little black feathers that Cas had been holding onto Sam's and Dean's hands with. *And holding the angel-blade with,* Dean remembered. Dean saw now that it was actually an
independent sort of winglet. The winglet was about six inches long, and it was attached at one end to the main bend of the wing.

"See, it's a feathered finger," said Dr. Mac. "All birds have them. Oh, hey, look, he has two." And he lifted up a separate little line of feathers that had been nestling on top of the first one. This one was about four inches long.

"Birds have fingers?" said Sam.

"Yep. Well, in birds it's the thumb, technically. A feathered thumb. It's called an alula. All birds have them, usually just one per wing. It's always right here, connecting to the wrist."

"That's a wrist? said Dean. That was the joint Cas had used to slug Ziphius twenty feet through the air.

Dr. Mac said, "Yes, that's the wrist. A wing is a feathered arm, didn't you know that? Or an arm is an unfeathered wing, whichever way you want to look at it. That's why I got confused about the broken bone—a wing has a humerus exactly like an arm does." (Here he shot a sharp glance at Sarah, who looked a little abashed.) Dr. Mac went on, "Anyway, your friend here seems to have two alulas per wing. Probably the thumb and first finger. Hm... prehistoric birds had two also—two per wing—now that I think about it. Modern birds just have the thumb."

Sam said, "How did I never know birds have thumbs on their wings?"

Dr. Mac shot him a dry look, and said, "Because you never looked?" He laughed at Sam's expression, and added, "They're usually folded down so that you don't see them. See—" He let go of the Cas's "alulas," and the two little alulas fell right back into place along the leading edge of the wing, the little black feathers blending in with the big black ones so perfectly that it was almost impossible to see they were there. Dr. Mac added, "They're for reducing turbulence. Birds only flare them out when they're flying, so usually you don't notice them."

"Cas can hold onto things with his," offered Dean.

Dr. Mac looked at him, and was silent a moment. He looked at Cas's face, and said, with a little wistful sigh, "That is extremely cool."

He sighed again, adding, "I wish I could see him use his wings. Well. Anyway. Gotta be grateful I'm getting to see this at all, right?" He shook his head. "Roger, what's the word?"

Roger gave him some information on the joint angles, then added, as he was wrapping up the tape measure, "Half-wingspan is nine feet one inch. For one wing; from the tip to the middle of the back. That's without even trying to flatten the feathers out or anything."

"So," said Mac, "With both wings out — assuming we do get the other one repaired — that'll be an eighteen foot, and two inch, wingspan." He added, thoughtfully, "That smashes the albatross world record by quite a few feet. Just by the way."

Sam whistled, Sarah said "Wow," and Dean said, "World record, Cas!"

"Quite the imperial eagle," said Dr. Mac. "Okay, folks. I think I have an idea now how to get that bone back together." He grinned at Dean. "I said we were gonna do this on a wing and a prayer, didn't I? I wasn't really that far off at all, huh? A wing and a prayer, and a few titanium pins. Ha!"
The surgery took hours. The broken end of the bone had to be cleaned, the other end exposed, the pathetic stray splinters retrieved and put in place, and then there was an incredibly difficult, meticulous, laborious process of setting some complicated screws and rods (the "pins," apparently) in place to hold all the pieces together. Sam seemed to be doing just fine watching the surgery, propping up the wing in various ways and even helping hold the bone pieces at one point. Dean, for his part, felt absolutely committed to his anesthesia job, staring at Cas and the monitors just as obsessively as instructed, reporting every tiny change to Dr. Mac.

Cas was actually doing pretty well. His vital signs, though apparently not ideal, were at least stable, and they even improved noticeably when Dr. Mac got the two biggest bone pieces back together. Dean watched as Cas's pulse improved immediately, and he wondered, *Does putting the bone back together sort of shore up his grace or something, maybe?*

After the bone was back together, the torn muscle had to be stitched back together. And then the skin. And a *lot* of feathers had to be cut off. Especially, the ones that had been attached to the broken bone — an array of stout, strong, foot-long white-and-gray feathers. "These are the tertials," Dr. Mac said, as he started to snip the first one off. "The innermost flight feathers. Wow. They're almost impossible to cut through." He struggled to cut the first one. "Jeez. Hey Roger, can you get the bolt cutters? This is crazy. They're incredibly strong."

Roger brought back a massive pair of bolt cutters, and Dr. Mac was only just able to snip through one tertial, grunting a little as he finally cut it. "Hm," he said, looking at the tertial that he'd just snipped off. "That's... kind of weird how strong these are. Look, Roger, that's unusual, don't you think?"

Roger said drily, "*Everything about him* is unusual, Mac."

Dr. Mac sighed, and nodded, but he added, "Thing is, I'm suddenly getting a feeling the tertials may be important."

"What do you mean?" said Dean.

"Well, they're just so *strong*. And so well-anchored," said Dr. Mac. "More so than most bird tertials. So they've clearly got a function. *And*, actually, that's exactly why I have to cut them. The thing is, they're so well anchored to the bone here, see, that they're really yanking the bone pieces around. I tried to work around them but we really have to cut them if we want the bone fragments to heal up and not just get all torn apart from each other the second a feather moves. So... hopefully he'll molt some new tertials soon. Dean, Sam, you guys have any idea when he molts his tertials?"

Dean stared blankly at him. "Molt?" he asked. Castiel had never mentioned anything about "molt."

Roger explained, "Molt, you know, grow new feathers. Birds molt all their feathers once a year."

Sam and Dean glanced at each other. *Molt?*

"We... have... no friggin' clue," said Sam, after a little pause.

Dr. Mac looked up at Dean, and said, "Wait. How long have you known this guy here? Has it been more than a year?"

"Five years?" said Dean, counting it out on his fingers. "No, wait, six. Six and a half." Which was kind of startling, when he counted it all up. Cas had been part of their lives for a damn long time, hadn't he?
Dr. Mac said, "And he's never mentioned molt?" He seemed surprised by this.

"No..." said Dean. "Um... should he have?"

"Jeez. Who knows," said Dr. Mac.

"Maybe angels just don't talk about it?" suggested Sam.

For the first time in the entire surgery, Dr. Mac seemed a little uncertain. He looked over at the first trimmed-off tertial, a dramatic big white feather piece that was now sitting, by itself, on the edge of the exam table. Dr. Mac said, "Damn. I really hope angels can grow new feathers. I didn't even think about that." He paused.

Sam was silent, just holding the wing. Sarah and Roger didn't seem to have any useful advice either.

After a moment Dean said, "What happens if you don't cut them off?"

Dr. Mac sighed. "The bone won't heal." And then he added, "Which means he'd lose the wing."

"Then do it," said Dean. "You gotta do it." It wasn't ideal, clearly; but it couldn't be helped. Dean could only hope that Cas did molt new feathers now and then, and just hadn't gotten around to mentioning this for some reason. And maybe those tertials weren't really all that important?

Dr. Mac sighed again, picked up the boltcutter, and began cutting off the rest of the tertials.

A couple hours later it was finally all done. Cas had actually stayed pretty stable all the way through it — aside from needing what seemed like ten times more anesthetic than Dr. Mac was used to. ("Bird metabolism, I think," he'd muttered to Sarah at one point). They started to clean him up. At which point Roger, who'd just been quietly following orders till now, turned out to be simply full of opinions about how best to clean Cas up and how to bandage him. In fact, Roger wouldn't even let Dr. Mac put a single piece of gauze on Cas till every single feather had been cleaned individually, and dried.

Pretty soon Roger had Sarah, Dr. Mac and Sam all bent over Cas's wing with little damp cotton balls, cleaning the blood and dirt off each and every feather carefully under Roger's strict supervision. (Only Dean was excused, since he was still watching Cas breathe.) This took another whole twenty minutes, but at last Roger gave his seal of approval.

"Did I tell you he was a good night keeper or what," remarked Dr. Mac at the end.

Roger blushed again.

Next they carefully folded the wing up, bundling it all gently with piles of gauze. Dr. Mac used up an amazing number of entire rolls of vetwrap — crinkly bandages in various shades of green, blue and red — to wrap the folded wing to itself, and then the whole wing to the Cas's back. Finally he wrapped what seemed like miles more bandages all around Cas's torso to hold the whole thing stable.

Dean was exhausted by the end, but somehow he felt amazingly happy, too. For Cas had taken it all pretty well, and he just looked so damn well-taken-care-of now. He was still out cold from the anesthesia, lying on his side now. But he was so cleanly bandaged, all the blood gone, the broken
wing looking so tidy and organized and neatly folded; and he was bundled up in such masses of clean white gauze, and so many criss-crossed layers of red, blue and green vet-wrap, that he looked like an enormous snoozing Christmas present. Sarah and Mac were disconnecting him now from all the tubes and wires, Roger was even wrapping a blanket around Cas's legs, and Dean just wanted to hug Sarah, and hug Dr. Mac and hug Roger and hug Sam and hug everybody.

*Step Four's working, it's working, it's working!* he thought, exhausted and elated.

Even better, Sarah announced she was going to come back with them to Kansas for a while. To take care of Cas. Dean *did* hug her, then, and she immediately looked at him and said, "Okay, the first thing we're going to do is find a safe rest stop to sleep in for a few hours, because you are getting delirious."

Dr. Mac gave Sarah a long elaborate set of instructions, writing them out for her, and he made her promise to call daily with reports. He turned to Sam and Dean last of all, and said, "I know you gotta get out of here quick, so I'll let Sarah explain all that stuff later. But I really need to be sure you understand one key thing, guys. The wing's as immobilized as I can get it, but it's really *not* very stable. It's hard to immobilize wings completely. Which means, the danger is going to be if he tries to flap, if angels do that, which I have no idea if they do—"

"They do," said Sam.

"They flap?" asked Dr. Mac.

"They definitely flap," said Dean.

"Okay then. In that case you've got to keep him *very* quiet and you've got to impress upon him that he *has* to stay very, very, VERY still and he has to NOT move that wing AT ALL. For several weeks. Not a twitch, not a flap, not nothing. Because, I'm betting he's got the strength to bend those pins, and if he bends the pins he rebreaks that bone, and if he rebreaks that bone all bets are off. Got it? You've got to keep him still. For *at least* three weeks, probably longer. It's going to be a long recovery, I think."

"Got it," said Dean, "So, speaking of recovery, I know this is kind of new territory for you, but, do you have a guess when he'll be able to fly again?"

Dr. Mac and Roger glanced at each other.

Dr. Mac sighed. And paused. And glanced down.

And he said, "Maybe I should have said this at the beginning. Birds usually don't fly again after this kind of break."

There was an awful little silence.

Dr. Mac said, "The turkey vulture I mentioned... we saved his life, and we saved his wing, but he hasn't flown yet. I'm still hoping, but... Look, with your friend here, I think he'll get some use of the wing back. But for flight, the thing is, wings need to be exactly symmetrical for flight. Exactly the same strength, able to open exactly the same way. After an injury like this the injured wing is never quite as strong or flexible as the other wing and... well." He stopped and said, "If he were a bird, I would say he won't fly again."

"He's *not a bird,*" said Dean.

"Obviously. And I told you before, I don't know one-tenth of one fraction of a ounce about angels.
So this is totally unknown territory. So don't give up hope.

It really wasn't the answer Dean had been hoping for, but at least the "don't give up hope" was something to cling to.

"He will fly again," said Dean sternly to Dr. Mac. "He will. You'll see."

"I really, really hope you're right," said Dr. Mac.

On that rather worrying note, they had to leave. It was nearly six, the sky was lightening, and the "early keepers" would be arriving soon.

They managed, with some difficulty, to get the still-unconscious Castiel loaded into the back of Sarah's Subaru. It turned out he fit okay in the back of the Subaru (which was damn fortunate since he definitely wasn't going to fit in the Impala anymore with the way his wing was bandaged now). So the new plan was for Dean to drive the Subaru, Sarah sitting in back with Cas, while Sam drove the Impala.

Dr. Mac finished loading several box of medical supplies into the Impala and said, "I'll tell you one thing: this has been the absolutely weirdest night of my life. Sarah, you'll call the second he wakes up, right? And, Dean, Sam, call any time. With any question. About anything."

"Sorry we had to pull guns on you," said Dean, shaking Dr. Mac's hand.

"Oh, I quite understand," said Dr. Mac. "Sorry about the crossbow."

"And the rifle," chimed in Roger. "If it's any consolation, they both only had empty tranquilizer darts anyway." Dean and Sam turned to stare at him, and Roger explained, "They're for animal escapes. We had an escaped-animal-drill earlier in the evening. I got to be the escaped animal, actually. I ran around pretending to be a lion. Then I chucked all the supplies in the pickup afterwards."

Dr. Mac nodded, adding wistfully, "I never get to be the escaped animal."

"But you got to fix an angel," pointed out Sarah. "And I'm pretty sure you're the only vet in the world who's done that."

Dr. Mac looked at her almost solemnly. Then he leaned into the Subaru, checked Cas's pulse one last time, and said to him, "You hang in there, Mr. Imperial Eagle. Because, it sure would be something to see you fly someday."

Now there seemed to be another endless round of handshakes and hugs and congratulations and advice and discussion. Dean was itching to get going, and finally he managed to rid Sarah away from a long discussion that she'd suddenly started up with Mac (about bandaging techniques for fur versus skin versus feathers). They finally got free, and headed out, Sam leading in the Impala, Dean driving behind in the Subaru, with Cas laid out in the back in a sort of a nest of blankets, Sarah sitting in the Subaru's little jump-seat next to him. Dean took the corner around the building incredibly slowly—he was planning to take every turn from here back to Kansas at about two miles an hour, hoping to avoid triggering any flapping. He realized, as he inched the Subaru very cautiously around the turn, that Dr. Mac and Roger were both walking along right behind the car. When he started heading up the driveway back to the main zoo entrance, he looked in the rearview mirror again and saw that Dr. Mac and Roger were both waving. Sarah was waving back.

Both men actually looked kind of choked up. Dr. Mac had that solemn look again, and gray-haired Roger, who'd cleaned Cas's feathers so carefully, was actually wiping his eyes. The two of them kept waving as they watched Mr. Imperial Eagle, Case of a Lifetime, disappear up the hill in the Sarah's
sturdy green Subaru.

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A/N - Long author's note for this one.

Alulas: So for those who hadn't picked this up from my super-smutty fic A Room Of One's Own, I was originally trained as an ornithologist and did a bit of work with raptors (though I work on lots of other nonbirds too now), and for some time now I've been wanting to explore how wing/feather/flight ideas might work for an actual angel. "Room" readers will remember Cas's "alulas" in that fic - so, yes, alulas are real, yes birds really have one per wing, and ancient birds had 2 per wing. The really awesome thing about the idea of angels having alulas on their wings is that it fits PERFECTLY with the mythology that seraphs have 6 wings. One main wing on each side, each with two winglets = six "wings"! woo! So, real-life seraph lore actually matches up ridiculously well with the biology of real-life ancient flying creatures.

Color: I like to give Castiel the wing patterns of some of my favorite birds. In Room Of One's Own he had the color pattern of a gyrfalcon. In this fic I have given him the color pattern of one of my favorite Arctic birds, the beautiful Sabine's Gull (so beautiful that one of my bird field guides has the Sabine's on a special page labeled "Classy Gulls"). But with the white part a touch bigger, and the gray smaller, than on a real Sabine's. I just really liked the idea of Cas having mostly white wings but of his outermost feathers being black. The colors all have some meaning, and there's a reason his outer feathers are black; we'll get to that later.

The surgery: So after my ornithology PhD I ended up studying large mammals at several different zoos, for my postdoc. Also, in a previous life I was a vet tech who did surgery assistance and ran anesthesia at an exotic-animal clinic. I've vague-ified many details of the surgery, but that room is based on a real room, and Dr. Mac is a blend of several different zoo vets I've worked with, and I've roughly followed the outline of the kind of surgery Cas would probably need. (Count yourself lucky I didn't go into the bloodwork and lab results) BTW I've found that zoo vets tend to stay calm in stressful situations, and they're also good at assessing if scared animals are going to attack or not, which is why Dr. Mac was so calm during the gun scene in the previous chapter— he was assessing Sam and Dean's body language as he would with wild animals, and he knew all along that they were not going to shoot.

And now back to the story. Cas is alive, his wing seems to be fixed, yay!... but will he ever fly again? (and what about those tertials?)

Please let me know if you liked this! (nothing negative please, but I do love to hear about elements that worked and things that you liked.)

PS - Also, apologies for both my long delays posting updates and also the fact that I've been so awful at replying to comments. I just wrapped up a long stretch of fieldwork that had a lot of 16-hour work days, and there just was no time, and I am still scrambling catching up. But please know I read EVERY comment and adore every one. Please keep the feedback coming, it helps me get the next chapter done! (yes, I know these chapters is 98% identical to Flight, but I still have to reread the whole thing and tweak the Destiel stuff and smooth a few things out. Flight readers, did you spot the little thing I changed here?) :D
They looped their way through the winding roads and on-ramps back to I-80, Sam leading the way in the Impala while Dean (with Sarah and Cas) followed in the Subaru. Every time they had to take any kind of a turn, Dean slowed to a snail's pace, Sarah bracing Cas carefully till the car straightened out again. Fortunately Cas seemed to still be pretty much comatose; Sarah reported some very faint twitches of the good wing, but to Dean's relief they managed to get on the highway without any real flapping incidents. Once they got onto I-80, Sarah even declared that Cas was doing "very well."

Yet Dean found himself surprisingly unsettled by not being able to check Cas's breathing. After an entire night spent staring at Cas pretty much nonstop, watching those grey feathers on his back rise and fall with every breath, and monitoring his pulse constantly, it was weirdly disorienting not being able to see him at all. So a few minutes after they got onto I-80, Dean asked, "Sarah, is he breathing okay?"

"Yup," Sarah said. Dean checked the mirror; he couldn't really see Cas very well from this perspective. Mostly he was just seeing Sarah's shoulder. He angled the mirror a little more till he could at least see the edge of Cas's bandaged wing. "How's his O2?" Dean asked. "And pulse?" Dr. Mac had loaned them the little finger-clip thing for the drive, and Dean felt practically expert now with the pulse and "O2 saturation" readings.

"Steady," said Sarah. "Pulse is maybe a little fast, but steady. O2 sat's pretty good."

"You're sure? You'll notice if that changes, right? Because, Mac said, it's important to keep watching it. He said, it's important to..." Dean heard Sarah give a very soft laugh, and a moment later he remembered that Sarah was a critical-care nurse.

He added, feeling a little sheepish, "I mean, I know this is your thing, of course. Just wanted to check."

Sarah leaned forward and said into Dean's ear, a smile audible in her voice, "Not a problem, Dean. I'll keep you updated. Just so you know, I'm looking right at him nonstop. I'm not taking my eyes off him and I've got one hand on his chest so I can feel him breathing. And I'm watching his pulse and O2 levels pretty much constantly. Right now—" Sarah paused, turning back to Cas. "Pulse 88, oxygen saturation 98%," she announced. "Respiration was 24 a minute ago. His last BP was 110 over 60. So, pulse still a little high and BP still a little low— that's probably because of the blood loss, but, the really important thing is, he's stable. Those numbers haven't changed in a while."

"Great," said Dean. It was a little hard to believe that things had gone so well... and that Cas might actually survive. Dean could feel the tension of the terrible day before slowly starting to drain away. "Great," he said again, letting out a big sigh.

He felt a pat on his shoulder, and Sarah said, "Your friend's going to be okay, Dean."

"I'm almost starting to believe that," said Dean. "Anyway, tell me if he changes, okay? Like, tell me right away."
"I will," said Sarah. "I'll update you the second anything changes. Now, I gotta give Mac a call and tell him things are going good. Meanwhile... The main problem I'm worried about now is actually just making sure you and Sam stay awake. That was a long night. Maybe some music might help keep you awake? You could try the radio. Does Sam have some music in the other car?"

Dean grinned at her in the rearview mirror, and said, "Sam's got the best music there is. And I'm sure I can find something." He flipped on the Subaru's radio, scanned around a bit and landed on some classic AC/DC almost immediately.

Things were looking up.

Soon they were shooting out of Salt Lake City, past the massive Wasatch Range. The Wasatch was Utah's section of the great sprawling Rockies, towering along the city's eastern side. Even though it was only just past Thanksgiving, the mountains were already coated in the first fresh snows, every peak a picturesque gleaming white.

As they drove past the beautiful view, Dean noticed that the traffic seemed unusually thick. Sarah had insisted that Sam (who was just ahead of them) should find a spot soon for them all to get a bit of rest, but as Sam led them through one rest stop after another, they couldn't seem to find a good spot to park. They were searching for a semi-deserted rest stop where they could park in a deserted, inconspicuous corner. Ideally somewhere where nobody would notice that they had a six-foot-tall surgery patient laid out in the back of the Subaru, curled up on his side with a gigantic bandaged wing pretty damn visible on top. (And an unbandaged wing, feathers and all, not all that well hidden underneath.) Plus, just for extra conspicuousness, there was an IV bag hanging in the passenger window.

But the traffic was strangely heavy, especially for so early in the morning. Every single rest area seemed crammed with cars. Every gas station was busy, every parking lot full.

Oh. It's Sunday of Thanksgiving weekend, Dean finally realized. One of the biggest travel days of the year. Dean took a closer look at some of the cars around him: there went a minivan loaded with kids, probably headed home after the Thanksgiving weekend at Grandma's... over there was a couple in an SUV with the classic two-kids-and-a-dog in the back... there, a younger couple, no kids yet, maybe on their way back from one of their folks' houses... and there went a gang of college students, two guys and two girls, an array of snowboards and skis strapped on top of the car, headed up to the mountains.

Everywhere Dean looked he saw families and friends. Families traveling, families on vacation... couples enjoying their lives together... and groups of friends going off to have fun.

Families and friends.

Dean glanced in the mirror— there was Cas. Still alive. (And there was Sarah, too, for good measure.) He looked ahead - there was Sam, in the Impala. Still alive.

We haven't been having fun exactly, Dean thought. No snowboarding trips. No meals at Grandma's. But we're alive. And we're still together.

The black Impala and the green Subaru zoomed along, east along I-80 into Wyoming. It was going
to be another damn long drive, another twelve-hour all-day haul, and Sarah turned out to be totally right that staying awake was turning out to be the biggest problem now. They'd only been going an hour when Dean felt his eyelids drooping, and no matter how much Sarah chatted to him, or how much he turned up the radio, he couldn't seem to stop yawning. So they were out of the Salt Lake region they found a place to pull over, on the edge of a national forest, and both Sam and Dean crashed out in the Impala for a couple hours of much-needed shuteye, while Sarah stayed with Cas.

Sarah woke Sam and Dean after a couple hours, passing around a huge pile of snacks and drinks that she'd found stuffed into the trunk of the Impala. (Apparently Cas had stocked up at a Gas-n-Sip somewhere. Which was pretty helpful, actually.) Cas was still okay— just sleeping now, reported Sarah.

Soon they were as refreshed as they were going to get, and they left the national forest and headed out onto I-80 again, climbing up the long, steep climbs that took them over the last of the Rockies.

The classic-rock station faded away into static as they drove through the hills. Dean, now munching his way through one of Cas's bags of chips, flipped around to some other stations, and eventually he landed on a news station that seemed to be doing a very long weather report. It turned out that a series of three more hurricanes were approaching the East Coast, one after another, all of them due for landfall in the coming week. This was very late in the year for hurricanes, so there was a lot of discussion on the news about that. Ohio had also apparently just been hit by some kind of hybrid winter blizzard-tornado storm, immediately dubbed a "snow-nado" by the media. And there'd been gale-force winds last week at a few places in the Great Plains, violent bursts of winds so strong they'd ripped some wind turbines apart.

There seemed to be some water-related things happening too. The Mississippi River was flooding, for one thing— and again, this was very much out-of-season. And gigantic waves had been battering several coastal regions, including San Francisco, LA, and... Chicago. Which was an inland city on a lake. One of the Great Lakes, but still.

Ten-foot storm surges just weren't supposed to happen on lakes. Not even the Great Lakes.

*Is there such a thing as a water elemental?* Dean thought.

Dean listened to the radio for only a minute or two longer, and then turned it off.

"Weird weather, huh?" said Sarah.

"Yeah."

"Is that..." She hesitated, and then said, "Is that something that you're involved with?"

"I really hope not," said Dean, with a sigh. "Cause we really gotta focus on Cas right now. Sam and I have been kind of hoping the world can hold itself together till we get Cas on his feet again."

After a moment, Sarah said, "At least there didn't seem to be any lightning storms."

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It was midnight by the time they got to the bunker. As Dean parked the car in the garage, Sarah reported that Cas was actually awake! Though "very dozy," as she put it. Dean twisted around to check on him, and... there was Cas, looking right up at him. Those familiar blue eyes were open at last.
"Hello...loooou..." said Cas, blinking at him slowly.

Okay, so maybe the blue eyes were kind of sleepy-looking. And pretty unfocused. And barely half-open. But still! Cas was awake!

Dean gave him a big smile, saying, "Good to see you awake, Buddy! How you doing?"

"It... hurts," Cas said slowly, "but... I... don't... care..."

Dean glanced over at Sarah, and she whispered, with a little smile, "Mac gave him a whole cocktail of painkillers. So don't expect too much in the way of lucidity." Ah. Dean had to chuckle a little. He turned back to Cas and said, "Look, Cas, we're gonna get you back to your bed. But you just gotta not move your wing, okay? Don't move your left wing, no matter what. It's really important, Cas. It won't heal if you move it. So don't move your left wing, and just stay still and relax."

"O... kay..." said Cas, and his eyes slid shut.

Hmm. Dean got out of the Subaru and looked over at the door to the bunker, which Sam was propping open. It was going to be tricky to get Cas inside to his room. The fireman's-carry obviously wasn't a good choice anymore, because of the whole flapping issue; and they didn't have a decent stretcher that would keep him stable going down stairs; and the wings wouldn't fit on a stretcher anyway...

For several minutes they discussed the problem, all three of them walking back and forth to Cas's bedroom, counting up all the stairs ("I never realized how many stairs this place has," commented Sam), and the width of the doors, and various other problems.

Sarah finally said, "He might be able to walk. It'd actually be good for him to move a little. However — he's still pretty doped up right now, so we'd have to be extremely careful that he doesn't fall, especially not onto that broken wing. I normally really wouldn't advise trying to have him walk this soon. Normally I'd advise against it, but..."

"But it's our best option," said Dean. Sarah nodded.

Sam suggested, "Let's just see if he can stand, and then decide." That seemed a good plan, and they all walked back to the Subaru.

It turned out Cas was able to move a little. Sarah managed to get him to his hands and knees and then she somehow got Cas backing slowly out of the Subaru, coaxing him backwards as if she were guiding a small, sleepy horse out of a horse trailer. Sarah watched his broken wing carefully, Dean grabbed Cas' right arm as soon as he got back far enough, Sam steered his feet down to the garage floor, and a moment later Castiel was actually on his feet. For the first time since the hammer had struck him.

He looked pretty wobbly, though, so Dean kept a firm hold on his right arm, and Sam took hold of the left.

Cas leaned on Dean heavily, blinking owlishly in the light of the garage and staring around with an air of vague confusion. Sarah had got him into a pair of sweatpants during the drive somehow but he was still shirtless, with the folded left wing neatly bound to his torso in a huge mass of gauze and vetwrap. The good wing seemed to be drooping a little drunkenly, almost brushing the floor.

"Hello... Dean," Cas said, looking back and forth now between Sam and Dean. "Hello... Sam."

"Hey there, Cas," said Sam. "Do you think you could walk to your room?"
"Of course, Sam... Sam, did you know... my wing is broken," Cas informed Sam, "My wing... broke... Dean, my wing broke. SARAH!" He'd just caught sight of Sarah, who'd clambered out of the Subaru after him. "HELLO, SARAH," said Cas loudly, slanting heavily onto Dean now as he tried to give Sarah a very clumsy hug, saying, "SARAH! HOW ARE YOU! Sarah, I broke a wing."

"What kind of drugs is he on exactly?" Sam asked Sarah under his breath.

"A bunch," whispered Sarah back, "And remember Mac had to guess at the doses. Normally I would never risk having him try to walk—"

Cas put in loudly, his head leaning onto Dean's shoulder now, "I... can walk... The drugs... have... had... hardly any effect... at... all. Dean... I broke a wing... but I'm not dead." Sarah was smothering a grin now. She got in front of Cas, facing him and holding her hands out. She said, slowly and clearly, "Castiel, can you walk toward me? Can you walk to your room? Take both my hands. Here, take my hands and see if you can walk toward me."

"Sarah, I broke a wing," Cas told her, grabbing both her hands and taking a tiny shuffly step in her direction, Dean and Sam helping him along. "But I'm not dead," added Cas helpfully.

"Yes, I know, Castiel," said Sarah, backing up slowly, coaxing him to follow her toward the bunker door. "Sam, get the doors, could you? Castiel, just keep walking toward me. There you go. You're doing great. Just keep going. Dean, make sure you keep hold of his right arm there— yes, exactly— come on, Castiel, you're doing great."

They kept inching along. Cas was gazing at Sarah's face now, apparently riveted. He said, "Sarah you're so nice... you're... just... SO nice." He turned to Dean to say, "Isn't she nice, Dean? Dean, is she moving in?"

"Sarah's very nice, yes, Cas," said Dean, trying not to smile. "Cas— you can lean on me a little more. Just lean on me—"

"I don't need to lean on you, Dean, I'm perfectly fine, but if you insist—" said Cas cheerily, nodding his head, and Dean jumped a little when he felt something press on his far shoulder, the side away from Cas. He realized a second later that Cas had wrapped his right wing tightly all across Dean's shoulders. This actually made everything feel much more secure, Cas sort of wrapped onto Dean now, and they began to shuffle along with reasonable speed. Soon they were inching down the stairs that led from the garage to the bunker, one step at a time, Cas hanging tightly onto Dean with his good wing, Sarah stabilizing him with every step and Sam steering Cas's feet down the stairs. As they slowly descended, Cas said, his voice distinctly slurred, "Angels... with a broken wing... always die... but I... am not dead. SAM!" Cas had just noticed Sam down by his feet. "SAM. Hello Sam. Sam, I broke a wing, but I'm not dead. Sarah's moving in, Sam, isn't that nice?"

Cas actually made it all the way down the hall to his room, wobbling the whole way there but with his right wing wrapped securely around Dean's shoulders the whole time. And the entire way there, Cas kept up a running commentary, informing all three of them, individually, about a dozen times each, that he had broken a wing but was not dead, and that they were all very nice people and that he was very happy to see all of them. Eventually they got him into his room, where he crawled onto the bed on his hands and knees and slumped right down into the nest of blankets that Sarah had prepared, still muttering, "I broke a wing... but I'm not dead..."

Sarah bustled around setting up an IV and propping pillows up around him, and Dean leaned down and patted Cas on the head. "Told you we'd take care of you, Cas, didn't I?" said Dean. "Now, you just rest up. And don't move that wing, I mean it."
"O...kay," said Cas, looking up at him out of the corner of his eye and blinking slowly.

And then Cas added, "Dean... did I lose some feathers?"

Dean tensed. Sarah and Sam glanced up.

Cas whispered, "I did... didn't I... I can feel it."

The tertials. It had to be those damn tertials. Whatever it meant to cut a tertial, apparently Cas could actually "feel it". Even through the haze of the drugs, and the pain of the shattered bone.

Cas was still looking up at him, sort of teary-eyed now, and said, "Dean—my feathers— Dean— I—I—"

Dean crouched there by the bed, biting his lip, waiting for what Cas would say next.

Cas said in a fast rapid slur, "Dean I knew you wouldn't leave your car! You wouldn't leave your car. Dean I got a movie at the library. It's about... some lost animals... they're all friends... Dean, I broke a wing..."

Castiel drifted off, still mumbling. His eyes slid shut, and he finally went quiet and immediately started to snore. Sarah, Sam and Dean all laughed a little bit, quietly. Then they went to get their stuff out of the cards. Dean stayed and watched over Cas a bit longer, till he was sure Cas was fast asleep.

Sarah'd already explained she could only stay for two weeks. Apparently she had to get back to her actual job— she had some kind of commitment to work a holiday shift over Christmas.

And, of course, she probably has some sort of life of her own to get back to, thought Dean. She must have some boyfriend or something. Somebody to spend the holidays with. She hadn't gone into any details about that, though. But she did say she might be able to visit again in January, when Cas's pins were due to come out, and the bandages would come off. "And maybe I can convince Mac to come out too," she said. She'd already called Mac to report that Cas was safely settled in at the bunker."He's dying to come do a follow-up, actually. Just needs to arrange some shifts off."

Dean knew it was an incredible gift just to have Sarah here at all. The first several days especially, when Sam and Dean were really wiped out, Sarah took care of all of Cas's needs. Not just the medical things like his IV and meds and changing his bandages, but also all sorts of little personal stuff too— feeding him, giving him sponge baths, helping him wash his hair, and, presumably, the sorts of bathroom details that Dean was just as glad not to have to learn about. Cas mostly slept for the first couple days anyway, conked out on whatever painkillers Sarah was giving him. He surfaced from sleep only long enough to eat the occasional bowl of soup and make some more muddled declarations about how he'd broken a wing.

But soon Cas was mostly off the painkillers and was looking much more alert. The day came when, for the first time, Cas was wide awake when Sarah, Sam and Dean were all changing his bandages.

The plan, that day, was that Sarah was going to train both Dean and Sam about how to dress Cas's surgical wounds. But as soon as the dressings came off, Dean was appalled to discover that the ends of the titanium pins were actually sticking right out of Cas's skin (this was normal, Sarah said— Mac had planned it this way— but Dean thought it looked grisly as hell). The pins were also bolted to a little exterior rod. Apparently the exterior rod made the whole thing much more stable, and also would make the pins more easily removable later, but Dean wilted instantly at the sight. So he
volunteered to just sit in front of Cas, helping Cas hold his arms up out of the way of the bandages, while Sarah and Sam dealt with the bandages.

"How does it look?" Cas asked, as Sarah was pointing out to Sam how to put more ointment on. This was actually the first time Cas had really seemed awake enough to try to assess the extent of his own injuries. He was sitting upright on a corner of the bed—perched on the very edge of the corner a little awkwardly, actually, so that his broken wing wouldn't brush the bed, while Dean helped brace him. Cas was peering over his left shoulder, trying to see the wing, but of course he couldn't really get a clear view.

Sarah said, "It looks pretty good. Very good, actually. The incisions are healing quite well. The swelling's going down a little, too, and—see, Sam, see how the bruising around his ribs, underneath the wing, looks better, too. Cas, are you finding it any easier to breathe?"

Cas hesitated. He tried a tentative breath, a slow, careful breath, and said, "Yes, actually. I've been noticing that. But Sarah, do you really mean it's... it's healing? Are you sure?"

"Yes, it's healing," said Sarah.

Cas looked at Dean with wide eyes, and Dean suddenly realized why Cas seemed so startled.

_Castiel was healing._

Not only was Cas not dying, he was actually _healing._

Just last week, Cas had been unable to heal from any injury at all, even just a bruise. He'd been _dying_. Because of that damn spell that had cost him the thirty years.

"Cas!" Dean said, as the implications sunk in. "Wait! You're healing! Does this mean... did you get your thirty years back? Or... does it mean you have some grace? Does it mean..." Actually, this was kind of confusing. Cas had been mortal but had lost thirty years... and now he was... mortal again? But with the thirty years back? Or was he... an angel, just with no power? Was he angel or human?

Dean got confused just thinking about it, and at last he blurted out, "Cas, what does that mean?"

"I'm not sure, Dean," said Cas, "but I suspect the thirty-year spell, and the shortened lifespan, is no longer a problem." He went silent a moment, thinking, and added, with a rueful smile, "I only had my powers back for just a moment, but apparently that moment was enough to take care of that particular problem."

"Really?" said Sam, who'd stopped dead in the middle of putting on the ointment and was staring at Cas's face. "That's... that's _great news_, Cas! Wait, so..." Sam started to look confused too. "Um... Cas... I don't understand, actually. Are you human now, or an angel that has no power? Or... what's the difference, anyway?"

"Well, that's an interesting topic—" Cas began.

"Arms, Cas," murmured Sarah, softly interrupting, and Cas put his arms up, bracing them on Dean's shoulders so they were out of the way of the bandages. It was part of the usual wing-bandage routine that Cas and Sarah had worked out, over the past week. "Wing," added Sarah, and Cas flared his right wing up out of the way, so that Sarah could start wrapping vet-wrap all the way around Cas's torso.

As Sarah reached around with a bundle of hot-pink vet-wrap, holding onto one end of it and handing the roll around Cas's back to Sam, Cas said, "I'm not even sure, Sam. I think I probably still have a...
well, a de-powered grace, is the best way to put it. An empty grace. But... I'm not actually sure of the implications." He looked up at Dean with a wry smile and added, "This has never happened to me before. I must admit, I'm simply astonished, really, to hear that my wing's healing. I was astonished to wake up at all, and more astonished now." Cas glanced over his left shoulder at the wing, watching Sarah pad it with some more gauze. "I don't know of any other case of an angel healing from a broken wing."

"So, how often has an angel broken a wing?" asked Dean.

Cas glanced up at the ceiling, thinking. "I know of a few dozen cases myself. A few were cases of, um, angels, um, you know, being hit, with, the hammer..." He bit his lip, closing his eyes for a moment.

The horror of his experience was obviously still pretty fresh.

Dean tightened his grip on Cas's arms. And Sarah gave Cas a little pat on the shoulder.

Cas took a slightly shaky breath, and finally opened his eyes and went on calmly with, "But more often it's happened to angels in battle, or sometimes just in accidents. If the wing's fully broken like that, all the power draining out of it, they've always died."

"But you guys never tried the new I.M. titanium pins?" asked Sarah with a little grin, looping more vet-wrap around Cas's torso and handing it to Sam.

Castiel gave a little huff of a laugh, and he said, "Indeed we didn't. You know, there are some fields where human technology really shines, and this may turn out to be one of them."

"But," asked Sarah, pressing down the tail end of the vet-wrap so that it stuck to itself, "I'm still not getting why the magic healing thing wouldn't work."

"In that sort of healing," said Cas. "You simply query the body about its own memory of itself."

"Simply?" said Sarah, raising her eyebrows.

Cas gave her a little half-smile. "Well, it seems simple when you're doing it. Basically, you ask the body to remember itself when it was healthy. But if what you're dealing with is a hybrid body— an angel's wings physically present on a mortal vessel— the problem is that the vessel doesn't normally have wings. It has no bodily memory of having had wings. So when you query the vessel you get no response."

They all considered that, looking up at Cas's right wing, which was still spread up in the air over their heads. (It had started to seem perfectly routine to have a nine-foot long wing flaring out dramatically now and then.)

Dean said, "You mean, the body replies that there shouldn't be wings at all?"

Cas nodded. "Exactly. I tried that at first, actually, in the first... in the first few seconds...." Another slightly shaky breath. "I tried it automatically. I asked my vessel to heal the wing, right before all my power drained away, but, well, nothing happened. This human vessel just has no idea how physical wings should feel." He glanced back the broken wing again, frowning. "I realize now, we angels probably should have tried a physical method of putting a broken wing back together, all along. We should have tried that ages ago. We're just so used to our powers being able to heal anything. But, also—" Here he paused a moment, glancing at Dean with a thoughtful look. "Angels with broken wings typically suffer a great deal of shock and usually they die almost immediately, before you could try anything like that anyway. To be honest, I suspect Crowley helped quite a bit. I don't
really... remember it very clearly, but... all my blood was draining out....” Cas looked very serious now, and Dean felt his fingers tighten on Dean's shoulders. "I knew I was dying. I knew it. Then Crowley touched my head and suddenly I wasn't dying anymore."

"You're saying Crowley saved your life?" asked Dean. "Well, his timing sure sucked."

"His timing may have... sucked, yes," said Cas, hesitating slightly on the swear word. "But he stopped the bleeding. And stole the hammer. He saved my life... and I don't know why."

Cas fell silent after that. He was looking a little tired, actually, so they finished up the bandaging and got him back down on his stomach. Sarah got the blankets nestled around him just right, and then she went off to give Mac her nightly-update phone call (she'd been taking photos of the healing wing and texting them to Mac every night for a consultation). While she was busy talking to Mac, Dean heated up some soup for Cas and then made dinner for everybody else, while Sam read Cas to sleep with another chapter from one of the old Oz books.

To everyone's relief Cas turned out to be unexpectedly obedient about keeping the wing still. In fact, the more awake he got, the more obedient and quiet he got. Which all seemed very un-Cas-like.

Dean eventually concluded that Cas was probably far more frightened than he was letting on about whether the wing was truly going to heal. It was one thing for the incisions on his skin to heal up, and the bruises; but what about that bone?

In fact Cas was spending so much time just lying absolutely still in his room that Sarah had to order him to start walking around. She insisted it would be good for him (Mac even called in to back her up) and soon she started shepherding him on walks around the bunker. Back and forth down the hallway, and back to his bed. To the library, and back to his bed. To the kitchen, and back to his bed. Around the garage, and back to his bed.

Always back to his bed, in the end. Back to where he could sprawl out on his mattress on the floor, on his stomach. Always back to his bed, because...

Well, because the wings were turning out to be a problem.

The wings were turning out to be a big problem, actually. Emphasis on "big." They were just too damn big. First off, Cas couldn't actually sit down anywhere — the wingtips extended too far down, and they bumped the floor any time he tried to sit down in any sort of a normal chair. He could probably have maneuvered the right wing a little, to get it up out of the way, but the left wing was firmly bound to his side. The five-foot long flight feathers on the left side were sticking straight down past Cas's hip, clear past his knee. And he didn't dare do anything that so much as bumped those feather tips, for fear of re-breaking the whole wing. And that meant he couldn't sit in any of the bunker's chairs.

Dean had him try swinging a chair around, sitting on it backwards, cowboy-style, but even that didn't work. The feather-tips were just too long. And after Dr. Mac's speech about not ever moving the broken wing, no way was Dean going to risk having Cas bump those feather tips on the floor.

"No chairs for you, Cas, I guess," Dean had to tell him. "Sorry, bud. We just can't take the risk."

All of which meant Cas couldn't join them in the kitchen for meals. And he couldn't sit on the sofa in the library, in front of the fire, with Meg on his lap, like he used to.

He couldn't even relax on the sofa by the tv and watch movies with them. They still hadn't watched
that idiotic-looking kids' movie about the "lost animals", in fact. It was still sitting on the map-table, right where Cas had left it.

It was starting to become clear Cas was kind of trapped. Trapped in his bedroom. Of course they were all trying to spend lots of time with him—Dean still slept on the floor of Cas's room now and then, making sure he didn't have more nightmares, Sarah was in and out constantly chatting to him, and Sam kept reading him the Oz books and had branched out into old "Hardy Boys" mysteries too. In fact sometimes they all ended up in Cas's room talking so much that Sarah had to shoo Sam and Dean out so that Cas could get some rest.

But it was still kind of a bummer that Cas couldn't hang out with them anywhere else. Dean even dragged one of the spare beds over to the tv, but it turned out it was too awkward for Cas to try to watch anything when he had to stay lying down the whole time and couldn't sit up properly.

Sam eventually returned the "lost animals" movie to the library, unwatched.

And there was another problem looming. Dean had been ignoring it, but one day when he and Sam were reorganizing the Impala's trunk, rearranging the armory and restocking the ammo, Sam spoke up.

"Dean," said Sam quietly, "He's not going to be able to come on hunts with us. Even when he heals up."

Dean paused in the middle of setting an array of fresh shotgun shells in place. He looked up at Sam.

Sam said, "He's not going to fit in the Impala. He's not going to be able to ride with us. Or work with us. Not with the wings."

Dean straightened up a bit, and looked at the Impala. The Impala that Cas had just learned to drive.

Cas had, in fact, driven it all the way to Zion, to try to save them, with his "Cas T.L. Winchester" license in his pocket the whole way. The license had still been in his jeans pocket later; Sarah had found it there during the surgery prep. And Dean happened to know that Cas still kept it on his bedstand; Dean had spotted him looking at it several times.

Dean said, "I was thinking he could lie in the back, maybe? Like when we were driving him to Salt Lake."

"With his wings all jammed into the back window?" said Sam. "Or sticking right out of the side window? Which is going to be pretty obvious if we're in any kind of a town in daylight. And which also can't be comfortable. It barely worked for a couple hours and he got all wedged in and stuck, and that wing's going to need a much more comfortable position for a long time now, like, months. He couldn't even do a day-long drive like that. And also, Dean..." Sam hesitated, shuffling his feet, his hands on his hips. "Even aside from fitting in the car... he's not even going to be able to... You know. Walk into motels. Go to interviews. Use his FBI badge. All that."

Dean bit his lip, still looking at the Impala. Cas can't be seen in public, was what Sam meant.

Cas can't come out with us at all. Not with those wings.

Sam was right. And Dean knew it.

Dean just said, "I know. I know. But... I was thinking that when he heals up, maybe he can make his wings invisible again. Don't you think?"
"Maybe," said Sam, but he still looked worried, and Dean felt plenty worried too.

Dean had been hoping to avoid the topic as long as possible with Castiel. In fact, Dean had been kind of avoiding discussing all sorts of details about the wings... like what it might mean to have an "empty" grace, and whether Cas would ever get any of his powers back. And then there were those tertials. Cas had never mentioned the "missing feathers" since he'd really woken up, and Dean was hoping that meant it wasn't a big deal. But he'd never really asked.

As the second week of Cas's recovery rolled on, Cas started asking if maybe he could come on a grocery run, or maybe go down to the Lebanon library. He seemed aware that his wings might attract some attention, but it was becoming very clear that he didn't really grasp what a problem it was going to be and how much it would freak people out. Day after day he asked Dean, whenever Dean was heading out on some errand, "Maybe I could come out with you? I could lie in the back, Dean, like before?"

Dean kept putting him off with, "Not while your wing's still healing." Which he knew was kind of giving Cas the wrong idea, but...

Thing was, Cas had been so happy. Back when Dean had given him the FBI badge and all the other ids, and the driver's license. Back when they'd done the shooting lessons, and the driving lessons. Back when Cas had realized he might be able to join Sam and Dean on hunts. Be useful. Be one of the gang. Part of the family.

Finally one day Cas announced he was going out for a walk. In daytime. To Lebanon. To the library. To check out that kids' movie again, the one about the lost animals, of all the damn things.

"Cas, you can't," said Dean, lapsing instantly into his default excuses: "Your wing's still healing. And it's... too cold." Which was true, actually, it was too cold, well into December now, and yet another problem with the wings was that Cas couldn't wear any sweaters or jackets. Cas had taken to slinging a blanket up over his right shoulder, kind of like a toga, when he went on his little walking tours around the bunker, but that wasn't going to work outside in a frigid Kansas winter.

"I think I can walk that far, Dean," said Cas. "I thought I could wear two blankets, maybe." He actually held up a little bundle of blankets; turned out he was all ready to go. "And I'm feeling much better. And it would be really nice to get outside. I'll just go quick and I'll be right back—" —and now Cas had actually started to head up the spiral stairs to the door, and Dean had to jump forward and catch his hand, saying, "Cas, wait!"

Cas turned to look at him, frowning.

"No, Cas, you can't, look, what I mean is..." Dean took a breath, releasing his hand. "Cas. You can't let people see you."

Cas's frown deepened. "My... wings, you mean? I know they're unusual, but, Dean—" He glanced down at his right wing, flaring it out slightly. "A few times, in Mesopotamia, I had my wings out like this and people got used to it. Wouldn't people get used to it?" He hesitated, looking at his right wing, and said, "Though... they were all white then. Is the black a problem?"

He's worried the color's the problem? thought Dean. Oh man. He really doesn't get it.

"This isn't ancient Mesopotamia, Cas," Dean tried to explain. "And I'm betting media coverage wasn't really at its best back then. Today— Look, Cas, people will freak. At first glance they'll just
A/N - aww, Cas doesn't FIT anywhere! What now?

Multiple small changes are accruing now as Broken starts to diverge in emotional tone from Flight. I think this chapter had the most changes yet. Still just very small subtle stuff, things like Dean's amount of physical contact with Cas (at this point in Flight it was still all platonic contact, but it was starting to pile up), the emotional tone of his worry for Cas... (And one other change is happening too that involves neither Dean nor Cas - Flight readers, have you spotted it? What do you think? This is the puzzle that has caused me the most thought.)
I hope you're enjoying Broken! I'll keep updating it over the summer. Updates will be erratic since I'm also working on another fic, but I promise I'll keep it going. :) 

also: Please check out elphiascutie's lovely portrait of Cas with a bandaged wing, awww. (ff readers, your site doesn't allow links in fic chapters; come on over to AO3 to see the link.)
Sarah called a little meeting that evening, pulling Dean and Sam aside after dinner while Cas went to lie down in his room again.

She said to them in a hushed voice, "You have got to rig up some way for him to get out of his room more often. It's not good for him to be lying in there all the time. He's gonna go stir crazy."

Dean couldn't help giving a sad little huff of a laugh, and he said, "Wasn't that long ago that he told me this was where he wanted to be." Sarah gave him a puzzled look, and Dean clarified, "This bunker was sort of his idea of Heaven, actually. It was where he most wanted to be."

Sarah shook her head. "Where he wants to be is with you," she said to Dean. She added, to Sam, "With both of you. That's very clear. It's not the building that he wants, Dean, don't you get that? It's you guys. You're his family. And right now he's stuck in his little room and though I know you're both really trying to spend time with him, it's obvious that he just can't hang out with you two like he used to. He's mentioned that you used to take him along sometimes on your, on your, magical hero-quests or 'hunts' or whatever you call it?"

Dean and Sam both had to laugh at the "magical hero-quests," but they nodded, and Sarah went on,"And he used to go driving with you? And you'd watch movies with him, sit around the table and eat with him?" They nodded again, and Sarah said, "Well, you've got to find some way for at least some of that to happen. Or I think he's going to end up a pretty sad angel. He's kind of getting there already."

"I know. We know," said Dean. "We're working on it."

Sam added, "We'll come up with something. We will, Sarah, I promise."

Dean and Sam discussed it further late that night.

And they got some ideas.

Clearly one thing they could do was retrieve Meg the cat from the vet clinic. Cas had told them he'd left her there for safekeeping when he'd first driven out to Zion National Park to try to help Sam and Dean. Dean hadn't fetched her yet only because they'd all been a little worried about whether Meg might try to curl up on top of the broken wing.

And there were a few other things they could do, too. After some discussion, they Sam went to ask Sarah if they could borrow her Forester. Just for the cargo space. There was going to be some shopping first; then pick up Meg; then back to the bunker.

Later that day, Dean, Sam and Sarah all paraded into Cas's room, Sarah holding Meg's little cat carrier and Dean carrying...
A barstool. A tall kitchen barstool with a comfy padded seat.

"Check it out, Cas!" Dean announced, plunking it down by Cas's mattress. "No back, no sides! And it's high enough up off the floor, I think. What do you think?"

Cas had been lying on his stomach with his head hanging over the edge of the mattress, trying rather awkwardly to read a book, but he took one look at the barstool, said "Oh," and scrambled to his feet. Without a word to any of them, he picked the stool up, examined it from all angles, and then set it down, looked back over his lefthand at the bandaged wing, and inched himself up onto the stool. Very slowly, with exaggerated caution, watching his wing carefully the whole time.

He got up on the stool, holding himself very tensely at first, and gradually relaxed, looking back at the left wing.

The wing was fine. It didn't even brush the side of the stool.

"Is this for me?" Cas asked, looking over at Dean.

Dean said, "Well, Cas, I bought it for me actually, I kinda suddenly wanted a couple barstools," Of course Dean had meant it as a joke but of course Cas's face fell. Sarah growled, "Dean," and Sam punched Dean in the shoulder (pretty hard), saying, "My idiot brother is joking, Cas, in case it isn't obvious."

Dean backtracked as quick as he could, saying, "OF COURSE they're for you, Cas, I'm just joking, YES they're for you! Actually I went all the way to Hastings to get them for you. I swear they're for you. Anyway I got four of them. And wait'll you see what Sam's working on; he's got this idea for a movie-watching chair for you. Which apparently is going to involve Sam to doing some carpentry, so it might take him a few hundred years. Anyway, do you like the stool?"

"I love it," said Cas. "And, I can wait a few hundred years, Sam. Where are the other stools?" He was already bouncing off the first stool as if he couldn't wait to go and try the other three (totally identical) stools. Even his right wing looked sort of eager, somehow— Cas seemed to be holding it a little bit higher than usual, a little bit flared out, with the feathers along the top edge fluffed up a bit.

"One's in the library," said Sam, "one in the kitchen, one in the tv room. For now. But— before you go running out sitting on stools all night— we got one other thing, too." And Sarah held up Meg's little cat carrier.

To everyone's relief she didn't actually start gnawing on the feathers, and she didn't do anything with the bandaged wing. Instead, she wormed her way directly under the right wing, as if she were wanting a sort of feather-cave, and there she curled up and started purring madly.

Castiel felt obliged to stay there for a while to provide the feather-cave for Meg. ("I can't move my wing," he said to Dean, "Meg's purring.") So Sam and Sarah went off to make some dinner. But once Meg had finally settled down to a more normal volume of purring, Cas picked her up and brought her into the kitchen. He sat up on his stool, put Meg in his lap, and Sam handed him a plate...
of food.

And for the first time in weeks Cas ate dinner with them.

It wasn't a perfect solution. Cas still had to hold his plate on his lap a little awkwardly. (Partly because Meg was hogging Cas's lap.) Clearly they were going to have to get a higher table, and maybe a high desk.

And of course the big problems still weren't solved. Cas still couldn't go outside; he still couldn't be seen in public, he still didn't fit in the Impala...

It wasn't a total solution. But it was a start. And for now, Cas seemed content to just sit on the barstool in the kitchen, Meg purring in his lap, while he chatted with Sam, and Dean, and Sarah, and eat his dinner with them.

All too soon it was Sarah's last day. December 13th. It had somehow been two weeks already, and she was planning to start her long drive back to Wyoming at dawn the next day. Happily, she'd already said she was going to try to come back in mid-January, when Dr. Mac was planning to come visit to check Cas's progress and maybe take out the pins. (Sarah had been talking with Mac regularly, and emailing him pictures of Cas's healing incisions, and Mac had actually decided to fly out for an in-person checkup.)

But this would be Sarah's last day for a few weeks.

Cas seemed almost despondent to hear she was leaving; he hadn't fully realized that it had already been two weeks since his surgery. And all of a sudden, that afternoon, Cas swung full force back into his long-postponed baking hobby (which, Dean realized, was something Cas could do while standing). Cas announced that he was "making some cookies for Sarah," and he disappeared into the kitchen for most of the afternoon.

Dean strolled into the kitchen a few hours later to find Castiel, soldier of God, the impressive six-foot-tall angel who Dean had seen storming through life-or-death battles everywhere from Heaven to Hell to Purgatory, completely surrounded by cookies. He was standing at the kitchen counter, one massive wing bandaged dramatically and the other half-flared-out even more dramatically... frowning in concentration as he carefully counted out two chocolate-chip cookies, two oatmeal-raisin cookies, and two snickerdoodles, for each and every bag. And he was making bag after bag after bag, lining up all the bags in a neat row in the counter. There was a dusting of flour on his black wingtips, and a few feet away was fluffy little Meg, curled up on the padded stool, watching him.

It was a bit of an incongruous sight. Dean couldn't help chuckling a little.

Cas glanced up at him with a frown. "This is important, Dean. It's food for Sarah."

"That's all for Sarah?" said Dean, looking over the array of ziploc bags. "Um... Cas, how many cookies did you make?"

"A hundred and four," Cas replied, without looking up. He inspected the last batch of snickerdoodles and started popping them into the last set of ziploc bags. He added, "Some are for you and Sam, actually, but I've set aside seventy-eight for Sarah's drive back to Wyoming."

"Seventy-eight cookies?" said Dean, eyebrows raised. "For Sarah? For one drive?"
"It's a thirteen-hour drive, Dean," said Castiel calmly, sealing up the last bag. He counted them off: 
"... eleven, twelve, thirteen. There."

Ah. Thirteen bags, with six cookies each, for a thirteen-hour drive.

"So... um... you're thinking she'll need one cookie every ten minutes?" Dean asked, trying to hide a 
grin. "For thirteen hours solid?"

Cas nodded, still looking at the bags. He said, "I was originally estimating one cookie every fifteen 
minutes, but I wanted to add a safety margin. People have different metabolic rates, I've noticed, and 
I'm not sure what her metabolic rate might be." He looked back over his shoulder at Dean and must 
have noticed Dean's slightly strained expression (Dean was trying not to laugh), for Cas's right wing 
folded up a bit tighter, and Cas asked, sounding a bit worried, "Do you think that's enough cookies? 
Should I make another batch?"

"Um," said Dean. "I think seventy-eight cookies is enough to get Sarah through one day, Cas."

"Are you sure?" Cas looked more worried now. His right wing folded even further, tucking up 
narrowly behind his back. "I could easily make another batch. I think there's still enough butter and 
eggs." He was already opening the fridge to check.

"I'm really pretty sure that seventy-eight cookies is enough, Cas," said Dean, biting his lip now to 
keep from laughing outright. "And Sam was going to make her a few sandwiches also."

"Oh, that's good," said Cas, looking relieved. He closed the fridge. "I never used to pay much 
attention to how much people ate, you know, so I wasn't sure. I wanted to be sure she doesn't go 
hungry just because of coming here to help me." He looked over at the pile of cookie-bags, adding, 
"Because, it can be so terribly uncomfortable when you're really hungry. It can get painful, actually. I 
wanted to be sure she doesn't have to go through that."

Oh. Right. Cas had been going hungry himself, pretty regularly, not all that long ago. Actually... he'd 
been broke and homeless for most of the past year.

And he was so thin when we found him, Dean remembered. And even when we got him back here he 
was still practically starving, all last month, no matter how much he ate, because of that damn thirty- 
year spell.

Probably Cas truly didn't know how many cookies Sarah would need to keep from feeling hungry.

"That's really nice of you, Cas," Dean said. "She'll be thrilled. And she definitely won't go hungry, I 
promise. Here, how about I go get a box that'll hold them all?"

Cas actually flashed him one of his rare smiles, Dean smiled back at him, and then Dean went off to 
look for a good box. It took a little time of poking around in the garage, but eventually Dean found 
the perfect-size box, to hold Sarah's seventy-eight cookies, in thirteen bags of six cookies each.

That night Sam announced that his "movie chair" was finally ready for Cas to try out. "Here, it's not 
perfect but I think it's sturdy enough to try out tonight," he said, dragging over a very strange-looking 
contraption. It looked rather like a very oddly shaped animal with four stiff, splayed wooden legs, a 
padded seat, and a padded flat "neck" that slanted up on one end.

"You made a drunk donkey, Sam," said Dean, tipping his head as he assessed the slightly crooked
wooden legs.

Sam said, "Cas, it's actually one of those shoulder-massage chairs, like they have at airports. Dean and I bought it the other day and I've been modifying it for you."

"Mutilating it, you mean?" said Dean.

Sam shot him a scowl. He turned back to Cas and said, "See, you straddle this seat thing and then you lean forward against this padded part. There's no back or sides to hit your wings, and I think you'll be able to relax way more than on the stools. You can kind of just slouch forward and practically doze off if you wanted. It's basically like sitting cowboy-style on a regular chair, but designed better, and padded, and I re-did the head part and put the wooden legs on to get it higher up off the ground, so that your feather tips won't hit the floor. You wanna try it out?"

Cas walked over, and swung one leg slowly over the seat. He was moving very cautiously, just as he had with the barstool. And everybody, including Cas, was looking at his broken wing.

The wing didn't brush anything. The wing was fine. Cas sat all the way down, and then, slowly, leaned forward on the padded part and relaxed.

And relaxed more.

"I can change it if it's not right," Sam said. "I could make it all different if you want something else. And, I made some extra things." He began dragging some more weird-looking little wooden pieces over, and Dean said, "Wow. You made extra little mutants to keep it company!"

Another scowl from Sam. "Well, you know, Dean, I made something for Cas instead of just buying stools at Target. So there's that. Anyway, Cas, these other things are just rough mock-ups, we can firm them up later, but the idea is, they attach to the front. This one's sort of a tray or desk, so you can read a book or whatever, this thing's a chinrest in case you want to just put your head down, and this one's a cup holder for coffee, —"

"Or beer," put in Dean. "Sam, we have got to work on your woodshop skills. You know, there's this thing called a 'level'—"

"It's perfect," interrupted Cas. "Sam. It's so comfortable." He closed his eyes for a moment, and sat there, eyes closed, propped up on the chair, his feet loose underneath him. He folded his hands on the little chin rest and let his chin sink down on his hands. "I can just relax," he said, opening his eyes again. "I can just relax and my wings don't hit anything. Sam... thank you."

He closed his eyes again, with a relaxed-sounding sigh.

Dean caught Sam's eye and mouthed "Good job."

Actually Sam had done an awesome job. Hell if Dean was going to say that out loud, though.

Sam just grinned. He added, "I thought it was high time we got the movie nights going again. So... Sarah, what do you say to a movie, for your last night?"

"Sounds perfect," said Sarah.

Cas's eyes opened. "Maybe the one about the lost animals?"

Dean and Sam both laughed, glancing at each other, and Dean said, "Oh, this one, you mean?" — waving a dvd copy of "Homeward Bound" at Cas. He added to Sam, "You might remember I
picked it up at *Target*, Sam, so there's *that*."

It was the movie Cas had seemed so obsessed with — the kids' movie about lost animals. A *kids'* movie... it was bound to be boring as hell. But Cas wanted to see it, so suddenly it was everybody's favorite movie. ("I've been dying to see that one, Cas, actually," Sarah insisted. "Me too," said Sam. "Been on my list for ages," said Dean.)

They started to get all arranged, dragging Cas's new "movie chair" closer to the tv and lining it up next to the sofa and armchair. Sarah made some popcorn, Dean got some beers, they all got settled, and the movie finally got underway. As soon as it started playing Dean realized why Castiel had been so interested in this particular movie. It was only about animals, yeah, and it was just a dumb kid's movie, yes, but...

It was about three animals of *different species*.

Two dogs and a cat.

*Two dogs and a cat.* Two animals of the same species, and *one of another species*. They were all friends.

And they were lost, and they were trying to find their way home.

The two dogs and the cat all stuck together. Sure, they got separated briefly now and then— the damn stupid cat went over a waterfall at one point, the dogs barking frantically, one even jumping in to try to save her; the dopey old golden retriever fell in a hole near the end and things were looking pretty grim there for a moment. But they kept re-finding each other, and trying to help each other. They stuck together, through thick and thin, the whole way home.

Dean's eyes developed some kind of damn vision problem several times during that stupid kids' movie. The second time this happened, he felt a soft touch on his shoulders and he jumped, only to discover that it was Cas's wing. The good wing. Cas had stretched his right wing out across Dean's shoulders. It was startling how far it reached; the wing extended all the way across the back of the sofa where both Dean and Sam were sitting, and the longest wing-tips reached almost to Sarah's armchair.

Cas kept his wing stretched out behind Dean and Sam for the rest of the movie.

And in the end, the three lost animals found their way home.

At dawn the next morning, Cas presented Sarah with the box of cookie-bags. They were all standing together out in the frigid air, Cas shivering in one of his toga-blankets, as Sarah packed the last things into her Subaru.

Sarah peeked into the box, puzzled. "Wow, Cas! That's— a lot of cookies."

Dean explained, "Cas was worried you might go hungry, so he thought you might need a cookie every ten minutes." Sarah started to laugh, and then she almost cried.

She thanked Castiel profusely, setting the cookie-box hurriedly in the Subaru's passenger seat and
turning to give Cas a hug (a very careful hug— staying on his right side and just hugging his neck, so as not to hurt the broken wing).

She even gave him a peck on the cheek. Cas hugged her back with both arms and one wing, wrapping the right wing tightly around her. He reluctantly released her a moment later, and said, "I owe you so much, Sarah. More than just cookies."

"You don't owe me anything," she told him, patting his good wing. "I'm so glad I could help."

Sam spoke up with, "Here's some sandwiches, too. Just in case you run out of cookies." He held out a stack of neatly-wrapped sandwiches that seemed almost as excessive as the cookies.

"Uh, all I got is gas money," said Dean, tossing several twenties into Sarah's Subaru.

"Guys, this is awesome," said Sarah. "I've got enough food for weeks. And Cas, the cookies look fantastic. Dean, stop throwing money in my car, that's more than enough. Thanks, guys. Thanks everybody."

She got in the car and then rolled down the window, "Cas," she said, "You know I'll be back, right? Mid-January, with Mac, like I promised. Sam, remember to keep sending me and Mac the wing pictures every day, and Mac and me are going to come up with a plan about when to come out. You will get those pins out, Cas, and the bandages will come off, and you'll be moving that wing again sooner than you think. You wait and see."

Last of all she added, "Dean, you bundle up that angel. He looks cold."

"Yes, ma'am," said Dean. A minute later she was driving away, and the two hunters and the angel stood together in the chilly wind, watching her go.

Dean bundled up the angel as ordered, rearranging Cas's toga-blanket as best he could. Cas didn't even seem to notice; he was just watching the Subaru drive away. In fact they all seemed to feel compelled to just stand there and watch the Subaru, as it went all the way down the long driveway, and turned the corner, and disappeared onto the main road.

A /N - Awwww, bye Sarah!

But she'll be back. :)
And if you haven't seen "Homeward Bound," give it a watch! It's a classic, and I always think of Cas, Dean and Sam when I see it. Cas is the cat, of course. :)

I hope you enjoyed this chapter!
The Gathering Storm

They watched movies and TV shows almost every night that week. Cas always relaxed in his movie-chair (it was clear he adored the chair), while Sam and Dean sprawled out on the sofa passing a bowl of popcorn around. Somehow the popcorn always ended up over by Cas.

Meg soon found a favorite spot too: perched on the back of the sofa, right where Cas could stretch his right wing across her. Once he had the "wing-cave" set up, she would sit there all night, purring gently while the movie played on. Sam and Dean soon got used to having the huge angel-feathers draped across their shoulders.

There were a lot of Christmas specials running on the TV. Christmas was getting damn close; only a week away now.

Dean was always sort of on-the-fence about Christmas in general. It was one of those dangerous family holidays that could arouse, well, dangerous family feelings. And, also, Dean never quite knew when Christmas-related conversations might spur Cas into some unexpected (and often disturbing) revelation about what had actually happened two thousand years ago (the most fascinating so far being, "I wonder sometimes if Balthazar wasn't the best choice to talk to Mary. He really went pretty far off script.")

But Sam couldn't resist showing Cas some of the classic animated Christmas shows. They spent quite a few evenings watching some of the old ones. Cas turned out to be a little doubtful about the biological plausibility of "How The Grinch Stole Christmas" ("It would be extremely unhealthy, from a cardiovascular perspective, for one's heart to be two sizes too small.") He then got rather preoccupied during the entire second half of "Rudolph the Red-nosed Reindeer" and remained rather quiet for the entire next day ("I was thinking about the misfit toys," he finally explained).

But he seemed to enjoy them, more or less. So two days before Christmas, Dean decided, in a possibly-unwise burst of curiosity, to see what Cas might think of the movie "It's a Wonderful Life." It just happened to be playing nonstop on about eighteen different channels that particular night.

But once they got the TV on, Sam made the tactical error of flipping past the Weather Channel on his way to the movie, instead of just punching in the right channel number.

"Wait, Sam," said Cas, "Go back." He folded up his wing.

He made Sam go back to the Weather Channel. Which was showing more news about more hurricanes. More windstorms. More flooding. There had also been a sudden burst of wildfires in northern California.

They all watched in silence for a few minutes.

Dammit, thought Dean. This weather stuff is getting bad.

Dammit, world, hold together. Can't you just hold together on your own? For just a couple months?

Cas broke the silence with, "I'm estimating two air elementals, two water elementals, and one fire elemental." He was still sitting on his movie-chair, his hands on the chin rest and his chin resting on his folded hands, studying the map on the screen with a frown. He added, "Elementals usually don't range all over the planet; they tend to stay in one area, more or less. Like Mr. Magma did. They have a home range where they're most comfortable. So what we're seeing here is likely the actions of several different elementals."
"So... why two air, two water and one fire?" asked Sam.

"Well, first look at how the events are clustered," said Cas. He swung one leg around to extricate himself from the movie-chair, and walked over to the tv screen, pointing at the map that was currently on screen—a map of all the hurricane tracks of the past month. Cas said, "For example, these hurricanes are all starting in precisely the same spot; very likely an air elemental. And probably it's being controlled from somewhere in south Florida; see how they all begin as fairly ordinary tropical storms, but then suddenly accelerate into hurricanes right when they pass southern Florida." Cas crossed his arms and frowned at the screen for a moment. He added, "I wonder if whoever's controlling it might be feeding it souls there— sacrificing humans, I mean. That's really quite a dramatic increase in strength of the storms. And also, at the same time, the storms are redirected. Their paths change, right there."

He started to point toward Florida on the map, but just then map changed, now showing all of North America. "Extreme" weather anomalies of all types were charted on this map, the weather forecaster talking animatedly in front of it. Cas ignored the TV guy entirely, and said, "Another air elemental has likely been doing the big storms in the middle of the continent, see, here. The blizzards, the windstorms; I think that's all one elemental, because, see how they're clustered and also, notice how there's only ever one such storm happening at any given time. Then, over here the Mississippi River floods; there's a single freshwater elemental in that river that controls the whole river."

"And you know that because..." Dean said.

Cas shrugged. "Almost all major rivers house a single water elemental. It's always been like that. The oceans tend to have more than one, though. And that brings me to— look, here, there's likely a salt-water elemental along the West Coast that's probably doing all these coastal floods." Cas straightened up and took a step back, saying, "Salt-water elementals are extremely powerful, by the way, so that one's rather disturbing. Pacific Ocean elementals particularly; they just have such a vast mass of their element to work with. And now..." — he pointed to the cheery little flame logos that the map was showing in California— "...a fire elemental as well."

He paused.

Dean could think of nothing to say. All he was thinking was, This is bad. This is bad.

Sam was silent too. For a few moments the only sound was the newscaster's voice talking excitedly about the new burst of wildfires.

Cas said, "This really isn't looking good. Even despite the freeing of the air elemental in Zion, already there are several more elementals involved."

Sam said, "Could it be... demons summoning these elementals? Like happened in Wyoming?" It had taken two demons to awaken Mr. Magma. Angels had been involved too, but the actual incantations had all been done by the demons.

"For the fire elemental, possibly," said Castiel, with a slow nod. "Demons can often control magma elementals and fire elementals. That doesn't mean those elementals are evil, by the way — it's just that Hell has used fire and molten lava for so long, as, well, decor, that most demons have just learned by now how to trap those two types of elementals. How to force them to do things. But air and water elementals are another story. Water elementals are quite difficult to work with; they're tremendously powerful but difficult to convince about anything, whether you're angel or demon. They're very opinionated and they're also rather moody. Best approached during certain phases of the moon; certain tides. Air elementals are much easier to work with— at least for angels, anyway, but not for demons. Angels have a natural affinity for air elementals. We are somewhat creatures of
the air ourselves, due, of course, to our—"

Cas stopped abruptly.

A few moments ticked by.

"—power of flight," Cas went on, in exactly the same tone of voice, as if determined to pretend he hadn't even hesitated. "Air elementals seem to like flying creatures. In fact they will only speak directly with flying creatures. Also it's easier to capture the soul of the elemental in the first place, the "piece of sky," if you can fly."

Castiel fell silent.

The "if you can fly" seemed to be echoing through the room.

"Huh," said Dean.

"Makes sense," said Sam.

There was an awkward little pause. Cas kept staring at the TV, completely impassive, his arms crossed over his chest. There was a soft ruffling sound; his good wing was folding a little more tightly against his back, tucking up next to the heavily bandaged left wing.

Cas went on smoothly, in exactly the same tone of voice, "At any rate, we should be doing something about this. Especially since more and more elementals are being called into service. Clearly there's an overall plan at work here, but I'd also guess that each elemental is being controlled by someone local; someone close to that elemental."

"That means a network?" said Dean. "A network of... elemental-wranglers? Elemental-cowboys?"

Cas nodded. "Could be demons, angels, or possibly even humans. And obviously Ziphius's superior is the best guess for the overall organizer."

"The Elemental King?" asked Sam. "Or, queen, I guess."

"The Elemental Queen and her Cowboys," summarized Dean.

Cas nodded. "Exactly." He was studying the screen; it had switched back to scene of last week's hurricane hitting Miami—palm trees thrashing in a howling gale, roofs flying. "Dean. Sam," said Cas. "We should go to Miami immediately and see if we can do something about the hurricanes. Those are causing the most damage right now, and it's actually not all that hard to free an air elemental— you saw how easily Crowley did it. You just need to find the piece of sky and set it free. We'd just have to find the local cowboy." He looked over at Dean. "We should all go to Florida right away."

"Cas, you've got to heal up first," said Dean, suddenly realizing that he hadn't quite gotten around yet to pointing out to Cas that Cas didn't fit in the Impala anymore.

Cas wasn't going to be able to come on any trips with Sam and Dean.

Not to mention the whole "you can't be seen in public" thing, which Cas sort of had accepted in terms of not going into town... but Dean hadn't really made clear that it also meant Cas couldn't help out on hunts.

This was a little awkward. Dean cleared his throat and said, "We shouldn't go anywhere till you're
Cas looked back over his shoulder at Dean, frowning at him. "Dean, this is important. Ziphius and Calcariel and the, um, the Queen, they failed to annihilate North America with the magma elemental, but they're clearly trying again with other elementals."

Dean said, "I know, but, um. It's escalating pretty slowly, isn't it? And, well, you see, me and Sam were thinking of..." Dean shot a pleading glance to Sam. "Um. Taking the holidays off from hunting. You know. Just taking a short break."

"Well... I suppose that's... okay, I guess..." said Cas, looking pretty doubtful. "But, we'll all go to Florida soon? After your holidays? We shouldn't put this off much longer."

Sam cleared his throat and said, "You know, Cas...we were actually kind of thinking, Cas, that maybe you could stay here and just rest up a bit more. Even after the holidays. Cause your wing will need to rest up. And, um, maybe we'll go to Florida, Dean and me, and you can hold down the fort here."

"Yeah," said Dean. "Actually we'll kind of need your help here with some research. Library research."

Cas slowly turned away from the TV to face them.

He looked at Dean, and at Sam, and back to Dean.

"You're going to go without me," Cas said. It was a statement, not a question.

"Well, um," said Dean, squirming a little now, "It's just, Cas, we thought we'd wait till you're all healed up. All powered up again."

Cas just looked at him.

And then Cas looked over his right shoulder at his good wing, flaring it out slightly to look at it.

"My wings..." he said. "It's because of my wings. Isn't it. Even if the left one heals... they're still... They're..."

He didn't finish his sentence. It might have been, They're too big, or They're too strange, or, They don't fit... Or just: They're a problem.

He stood there gazing at his wing. His lovely, beautiful, gorgeous wing.

His useless wing.

Gradually that terrible Sad-Puppy look began to creep onto Castiel's face again.

Dean sprang to his feet and took a few steps over to Cas, just so he could give Cas a pat on his good wing while he said, "Cas, this is just temporary. Soon you'll be able to stick 'em back in that etheric place, right? As soon as you're powered up again? You'll get powered up again soon, won't you? Once you're all healed up?"

Cas hesitated a moment. The incipient Sad-Puppy look was suddenly gone, erased completely, a sort of cool mask coming over his face. Though Cas seemed to suddenly be having a little trouble looking Dean in the eye.
"Of course, the etheric plane," said Cas. He turned back to the TV, saying, "Right. I'll just put my 
wings back in the etheric plane then. And then I'll be able to help you again. Of course. It'll just take 
a while to power up, but, yes. That's... that's a good plan, Dean."

Dean couldn't help noticing, though, that Cas's right wing had pulled away from his hand and was 
suddenly folded up very tightly against Cas's back. And Dean knew by now that the right wing 
seemed to have a way of broadcasting Cas's mood.

A tightly tucked wing meant Cas was worried.

"We will get you powered up again, Cas," said Dean. He reached out and gave the wing another 
friendly little pat, resting his hand on the "wrist" of the wing, the big joint at the top to give it an 
encouraging squeeze. "You're still healing. Just give it time. Now c'mon, come sit down and we'll 
check out that movie."

Cas gave him a small, rather unconvincing smile, and went slowly back to his movie-chair. Sam 
finally got the TV to one of the eighteen channels and managed to find one that was just starting It's 
A Wonderful Life. But just one minute later, during the very first scene, Castiel announced he was 
feeling a little tired. Maybe too tired for a movie tonight, he said; his broken wing was feeling a little 
sore, he said; maybe he should just get to bed early, he said. And he went off to bed.

Dean sighed.

Sometimes it's not such a wonderful life, he thought.

"Still feel like the movie?" asked Sam quietly.

"Not really," said Dean. He sighed again, got up from the little chair and picked up the remote to turn 
the TV off. "Dammit, Sam, this is gonna turn out okay, isn't it? Isn't it?"

"Yes," said Sam in a sort of uncertain tone. "Absolutely."

"He's still just adjusting," said Dean, staring at the floor with his hands on his hips now, thinking. 
"He's still kind of shellshocked about it. He just broke the wing three weeks ago and he still doesn't 
really believe he's gonna heal. But that bone is back together, Sam; Cas doesn't even know yet what 
a good job Mac did. The bone'll heal up, and then he'll get his power back, and then he'll tuck the 
wings away and he'll fit in the Impala again. It'll just take a few months. And then we'll all go 
hunting and we'll take care of all the elementals. It'll be easy. Cas even said it was easy."

Dean was almost able to convince himself that this would all really happen if he just stated it firmly 
enough. He went on, "We'll smash the pieces-of-sky things, and free all the elementals and deal with 
Ziphius's boss. And then we'll take the summer off and just lie around drinking beer and watching 
movies all summer, you and me and Cas; maybe we'll have some cookouts; and, hey! We should 
invite Sarah and Mac to come hang out at the cookouts! Roger too!"

Sam was looking kind of unconvinced, but Dean could practically see it all in his mind's-eye now: 
cookouts in summer, maybe burgers and hot dogs, over a grill maybe, out back of the bunker; or 
maybe they'd even build a firepit or something really cool; and Cas would be all back to normal and 
healthy as a horse and maybe even smiling for real for once, and no more of those damn Sad-Puppy 
looks. Maybe Sarah and Mac and Roger really could come? Everybody would be laughing, all 
gathered around the firepit.

Dean couldn't help smiling. In his little daydream, everybody just looked so damn happy.

"How's that for a plan?" asked Dean, still half-smiling.
"Great plan, Dean," said Sam. For some reason he wasn't smiling.

The next morning, Dean awoke feeling absolutely determined to make Christmas a nice day for everybody, and especially for Cas. Cas needed some more cheering up, that was clear, and today was Christmas Eve. They were going to really do Christmas after all!

But of course that meant a last-minute shopping trip. "Guy shopping," it'd be— buying all the presents in one single last-minute shopping trip on Christmas Eve. Guy-style Christmas shopping was definitely the way to do it, actually. Dean described his plan to Sam, and Sam was instantly on board.

They were a little slow getting going (there was some planning to do, and a grocery list had to be made, and so on) and Sam and Dean didn't get out the door till after noon. It would take a full hour to drive to the stores in Hastings, Nebraska, and the sun would be setting by five, which only gave them a few hours of shopping before they'd want to be back to make a nice Christmas Eve dinner. Two hours for all their Christmas shopping, including groceries and a Christmas tree. Plenty of time!

On their way out the door Dean told Cas, "We're going to get you a real Christmas tree, Cas, like it or not! Back around sunset, okay?" Cas nodded, and off they went.

Sam and Dean got to Hastings, and hit up a few stores for some random gifts, and did the grocery shopping, and got some more booze. Last of all was the tree. Dean was determined to get a real tree, for once. The Christmas-tree selection for last-minute shoppers turned out to be pretty pathetic (it turned out most people apparently bought their trees before Christmas Eve, though Dean couldn't fathom why anybody would do it that far in advance). So it took a while, but at last Dean actually found a semi-decent little tree at a deserted Christmas-tree sales lot in the back of a Walmart. With Sam's help he managed to tie it to the roof of the Impala. It had taken a while, and it was getting toward sunset now, but Dean felt pretty pleased.

They were just about to pull out of the tree-sales parking lot when Dean's phone rang.

It was Cas. "You shouldn't come back here," he began abruptly, without even a hello. "You and Sam should head straight north. Right now."

"What?"

"I've been watching the Weather Channel. There's a blizzard coming, Dean, and it looks like one of the bad ones. Apparently it appeared suddenly over Colorado this morning and it's accelerating. It's headed directly for Kansas and it's moving fast. It's crossing the Kansas border now and due to reach here in about four hours. It's been producing a great deal of snow." Cas added, "I believe your car's not well equipped for snow, Dean. I learned a bit about that when I was living in Wyoming. You need different types of cars, and different types of tires, for snow."

"We'll be fine, Cas. We're only an hour away."

"Dean, this storm is really quite concerning. I think it's the air elemental, and I strongly recommend you should go north. Go straight north and get out of its path."

"It's Christmas Eve, Cas," said Dean firmly. Sam was looking at him with a frown now, as Dean went on, "We're not leaving you there alone. Be there soon."

"Dean, you shouldn't worry about me. You should go north—"
"The more you talk the more you slow me down, Cas. See you soon."

Even as Dean was hanging up he could hear Cas's exasperated sigh.

Dean tossed his phone down on the seat and told Sam what was going on, as he pulled out onto the main road and drove them out of Hastings.

"Damn, does Cas mean it's that blizzard elemental?" Sam asked. "The air elemental that he thinks is doing the blizzards?"

"Yep."

Sam thought a moment. "Those blizzards have just been dumping snow, usually. No lightning, right?"

"No lightning," Dean said. "But a ton of snow, if I'm remembering right. So we just gotta get back before the snow hits. Cas said it was still in western Kansas and it's not supposed to hit for like four hours, so we've got plenty of time."

"Yeah, it's only a one-hour drive," said Sam. "And how bad can the weather get in one hour?" They both looked up at the sky; it looked perfectly nice. Pretty, even. Blue sky, patches of clouds.

But Dean felt a little worried. Going north and abandoning Castiel was obviously not an option, so Dean sped south as quick as he could.

As they raced south, approaching the Nebraska-Kansas border, the cloud cover gradually thickened, dark clouds rolling in from the west, till the sky was totally overcast. The wind began to pick up, loose leaves swirling across the road. The sky began getting darker, and darker, and darker.

Soon the tops of the trees were lashing around dramatically as strong gusts blew past now and then. The sky darkened further, to almost a green-black.

"Is it sunset already?" asked Dean.

"No," said Sam, checking his phone. "Not even close. It's only four. Sun's supposed to be up for another hour."

"Somebody better tell the sun that," Dean said. Sam turned the radio on, and they both listened as the radio reported a dramatic, "unprecedented" acceleration in the blizzard. Apparently it was going to hit within the hour. A "Severe Weather" warning had just been issued for all of north Kansas.

But they only had another thirty miles to go! Just half an hour! Dean really raced the car then; the roads were still dry and driving conditions still good, so he gunned it, still feeling pretty confident. They roared southward. Soon they'd zoomed right across the state line into Kansas and were approaching Lebanon. Only a little ways to go now; but then swirls of snow started to blow by, little squalls of snowflakes, and in the space of just five minutes the snow so thick, blowing around wildly in the Impala's headlights, that Dean could barely see ahead of him.

The snow began to cover the road. The wind was getting strong, too, the Impala even veering sideways sometimes when a particularly strong gust hit it broadside.

But they reached Lebanon successfully. Dean heard Sam sigh in relief as they passed the town line and began to drive through Lebanon's tiny downtown.

"Practically home," said Dean. "Just a couple miles. In a pinch we could even walk from here."
"Yeah. We'll be fine. Whew. I was getting worried for a minute there."

They both began to relax.

But then the Impala skidded. And skidded again. The snow was already an inch deep on the road, and the Impala starting doing erratic short skids, the tires gripping and sliding, gripping and sliding. "Damn," said Dean, fighting for control. "Damn, damn, damn." But he kept control, and actually managed to turn onto the bunker's rutted driveway.

"Made it, Sam!" Dean crowed triumphantly. "What'd I tell you!"

"Great job with those skids, Dean," said Sam appreciatively. And right then the Impala completely ground to a half.

They were only halfway along the long driveway; still a hundred yards from the bunker.

Dean gave it some gas, and heard only the disheartening sound of the wheels spinning in place. He tried again; just another whining spin. The snow looked like it was some three inches deep already, and Dean knew the Impala wasn't good in that kind of snow. Cas had been right; you needed a car with all-wheel-drive, and ideally snow tires, for conditions like this.

"Spoke too soon," said Dean. "Well, at least we got here. Might have to leave the car out, though. Dammit. C'mon, we can tromp a hundred yards."

Dean got the engine and turned off the headlights. Without the car's headlights it turned out to be surprisingly dark, the sun so completely blotted out so that it seemed like a very dim twilight, the sky dark overhead, the distant fields almost invisible in the gloom. They got out of the car to find that the wind was absolutely howling now. Snow whipped Dean's face as he stepped out. The wind was icy, too, biting effortlessly right through all Dean's winter clothes and raking right across his skin.

"It's like goddam Antarctica!" yelled Sam from across the car.

"Antarctica in the middle of the night," Dean yelled back.

Dean reached back in the Impala and pulled the headlight knob on again, to help light the way back to the bunker. Driving snow was lashing sideways through the glare of the lights, looking almost like just a solid sheet of diagonal white lines, stinging Dean's face and getting down his collar and practically blinding him. Dean could barely even see Sam, who was trying to untie the tree on the car.

But they were practically home and Dean wasn't really worried. It was kind of fun, actually.

"A real white Christmas, huh, Sam?" Dean shouted, nearly laughing, as a big gust nearly blinded them both with what seemed like a solid white wall of swirling snowflakes.

"All I can say," shouted Sam back, "is, Rudolph's nose is going to need to be extra bright to get through this."

"Yeah, Santa's gonna need a whole Rudolph army!"

They got the tree untied and managed to carry almost everything in one load, Sam carrying all the grocery bags (and the booze) while Dean staggered along with the tree over his shoulder. Slowly they made their way through the snow to the bunker, commenting to each other about how fast the snow was building up. ("Four inches, now, I'd say." "Nah, five, I bet it's five. This is amazing!")
Now and then the wind would drop off briefly, a burst of light somehow sneaking through a crack in the clouds, as if the sun had suddenly been turned back on. Then they would briefly get a wide view of the landscape: snowy fields all around them, the road a featureless strip of white, the leafless tree branches whipping in the wind. These little views only lasted a moment; the wind always picked right up again pretty quick, and the wall of snow closed in on them again.

But it was only a hundred yards to the bunker, and they got there just fine. And glory hallelujah, the bunker door was wide open and there was Cas, waiting for them in the doorway! He was backlit by a glowing rectangle of yellow light, and with the snowstorm howling around him he looked like...

... well, like an angel from Heaven, actually.

He looked like a storybook, fairy-tale angel. Straight out of a Christmas play. Standing there backlit, practically halo'ed with golden light all around his body, with his right wing half-flared.

"Hello, Christmas angel!" Sam called out.

Cas snapped, "You should have gone north. This was very unwise."

"Hello, irritated pissed-off Christmas angel," Dean said, and Sam busted out laughing.

Cas rolled his eyes and shoo'd them inside, ordering, "Get inside and warm up!" He ushered them in through the door. Dean propped the tree just inside the door, while Sam carried the groceries down toward the kitchen.

Cas started to lock the door, but Dean said, "Shit. There's one more bag in the trunk. I forgot. I'll go grab it." It was the bag with his presents for Cas and Sam; he'd hidden it under the blanket in the trunk, hoping to hide it from Sam.

"Dean, no, it's really getting bad," said Cas.

"The car's a hundred yards away, Cas. It's not like I'm hiking to Canada. Plus I gotta turn the headlights off. Back in a minute."

Over Cas's protests, Dean darted out again, staggering to the Impala through the wind. He turned the headlights off, and grabbed the bag with the presents, and shut the car door. But when he turned to head back to the bunker the wind almost tore the bag away from him. The wind had really picked up. It was almost getting hard to breathe. Dean finally managed to stuff the bag down his jacket front, zipping his jacket up tightly around it, and he started staggering back toward the bunker.

The wind was insanely strong now. Dean had to physically lean right into it, leaning almost thirty degrees forward and lurching forward with every step. The snowflakes were hitting him with such force he felt like he was being sandblasted. It was almost pitch black now, but Dean could still see the little rectangle of glowing light where Cas was standing in the open doorway. Even that little rectangle of light kept getting faint and even sometimes disappearing, the snowflakes were that thick in the air. The howling of the wind was changing in tone, too. It was a deep, thunderous roar now. Sort of growling. And getting louder, and deeper.

It dawned on Dean that the storm was getting much worse, very fast.

A flicker of fear raced down his spine, and Dean picked up his pace as much as he could.

He was only about twenty yards away; he could see Cas more clearly now. Fifteen yards. Ten. Five. From five yards away Dean called out to Cas, "See? I'm fine!" when he noticed Cas wasn't even looking at him. Cas was staring off in another direction, out across the open fields. And something in
Cas's expression made Dean's blood run cold.

Dean turned to follow Cas's gaze. He didn't see anything at first but driving snow, but then one of those strange pauses in the wind occurred, the snowfall lightening and a tiny bit of late-evening sun somehow seeping through a crack in the clouds. Dean was suddenly able to see all the way across the fields.

For a moment he couldn't even understand what he was seeing.

There was a huge, black, squat thing sitting on the horizon. Some kind of enormous black wall had appeared.

Dean finally realized it was an absolutely gigantic wall of pitch-black cloud, a couple fields away. It looked a mile wide, and a mile high; it seemed to fill up half the goddam horizon. And the whole gigantic thing seemed to be turning slowly. Little twigs were spinning lazily in the air at its sides, hundreds of feet up.

Dean's jaw dropped as he realized the 'little twigs' were full-size trees.

It was a tornado.

It was a goddam tornado. It was an absolutely massive tornado.

It was coming toward them. Fast.

The driving snow closed in all around them, and then Dean couldn't see anything at all.

A/N -

Just call me "Cliffhanger Sparrow." Heh heh heh.

Hope you enjoyed this! Please let me know if you liked it!
Stick Together

Dean just ran, right into the blinding freezing wind. Toward what he hoped was the right direction. A moment later he nearly crashed right into Cas—Cas had run out to meet him. Cas grabbed Dean, hauled him bodily down the little stairs at the front stoop and practically threw him through the door, scurrying through right behind him. Together they tried to close the door, but it was simply impossible—the door just wouldn't close, the wind unbelievable now. Dean could hear Cas shouting something, but couldn't make out what he was saying; the roaring was so loud it sounded like a freight train was barreling down on them. Cas abruptly gave up on the door and switched to trying to drag Dean down the curving stairs, but Dean was still certain he could close the door if he only pushed hard enough (though he'd made exactly zero inches of progress). He felt absolutely desperate to close it, but finally Cas flung himself at Dean in a sort of sideways tackle, nearly hurling Dean down the stairs. Dean gave up and scrambled down the stairs, Cas just behind him.

Dean saw that Sam had just run into the map room from the kitchen with his pistol out. Dean tried to wave him back, yelling, "TORNADO! TAKE COVER!" but Sam couldn't hear him. The lights began flickering, the whole building started shaking, and the a massive gust of wind walloped Dean from behind with such tremendous force that Dean had to cling to the stair-rail with both hands just to keep from being flung headfirst onto the floor at the base of the stairs. Cas managed to hang on to the other railing.

Dean had a brief moment of thinking, very calmly, "Cas better not fall and hurt his wing again." There was a weird, groaning sound and a sensation of sudden pressure, as if the whole bunker were being pressed inward. Sam dove under the map table. Cas reached out and grabbed Dean, whipped his right wing out and around both of them, and pressed his head down with one hand as both of them cowered together on the stairs. Dean's ears popped. All the windows overhead exploded.

Most of this part of the bunker was buried underground but there were a few high, skinny windows at the tops of the walls, as well as a skylight that was high above the map-table behind a metal-grate ceiling. The skylight and the skinny windows all shattered, completely, all at once, and shards of glass swooped down and whirled around the room for a horrifying moment. Dean staggered, but Cas's wing shielded him from the worst of it. In the next second an absolutely tremendous blast of wind hurtled down through the skylight, and this time it did knock Dean clean down the stairway onto the floor, Cas on top of him, as a friggin' gigantic tree branch came hurtling down into the room and crashed on the floor right in front of them.

It was far too late to get down to the dungeons or to a back room, or to cower in a bathtub or a closet, or whatever the hell you were supposed to do in a tornado. They had to take shelter here. Dean and Cas scrambled under the map-table to join Sam.

Once again all Dean could think was "Cas better not bump his wing," as if protecting Cas's wing from being bumped was more important, or at least more feasible, than trying to get any of the three of them to simply stay alive at ALL. Dean and Cas then got into a weird little wrestling match about who would shield who: Cas was trying to get on top of both Dean and Sam, Dean kept trying to get on top of Cas and Sam, and meanwhile Sam was trying to drag them both further under the table. Then the freight train hit the bunker head on.

The roar took over the world; there was nothing but noise. The lights flickered and died. It was absolutely pitch black. All the air seemed to suck away for a moment; Dean couldn't breathe, and was baffled to find himself almost weightless for a moment, the tornado somehow sucking them right up off the floor. Cas, Sam and Dean all abandoned any attempt at a plan, all three of them just
clinging together desperately (though Cas had at least managed to get his good wing wrapped around both brothers). Dean could feel (but could not hear) that Cas was yelling something, but had no idea what he was saying.

Then the wind crashed back into the bunker like a tidal wave. Dean squeezed his eyes shut and kept clinging to Cas and Sam. It sounded like a nuclear explosion; Dean had never imagined wind could be so loud. Through the unbelievable roar he also distantly heard huge terrible THUNKS reverberating here and there, the floor trembling below them and the table giving occasionally sudden shudders above. Was the building collapsing? Was a tree falling on them? Were they being buried alive? Or carried away? Dean couldn't even tell.

Dean thought, *Maybe we'll go Oz.*

Or, what had Cas said that one time, Antarctica? With a bunch of cows?

"I DON'T WANNA GO TO ANTARCTICA! PLEASE!" Dean yelled, hopelessly. But he couldn't even hear himself yelling.

They were helpless. Like ants in an avalanche.

At last the noise began to lessen.

It faded further. The wind lightened. There was a moment of near-silence that seemed astonishing, almost magical. Next came a series of loud thumps and crunches, some from nearby and some from far away, as objects that had been whirling in mid-air hit the ground.

It was still pitch black; the lights were still all out.

The sound faded, more and more, and died away. Dean's ears were ringing.

They huddled there for a few moments longer. Sam was pressed up next to Dean's side and Cas was now pretty much lying on top of them; he'd managed, somehow, to keep his good wing wrapped almost completely around both brothers through the entire thing.

Dean felt snow hitting his face, soft little dots of cold in the dark.

Cas's wing slowly relaxed its hold.

"You guys okay?" Dean said.

"Uh. Yeah," said Sam in the darkness.

"I'm all right," said Cas.

It took a moment to sink in. *We're all alive. We're all okay.* Dean felt such a rush of relief he had to just put his head down for a moment. He tightened his grip on Sam's arm, and felt a hand on his shoulder— Sam's hand, apparently— tighten back.

"I guess that was a snow-nado?" said Sam in the dark. "One of those hybrid blizzard-tornadoes they were talking about last month? I forgot all about those."

"I am not going to forget about those again," said Dean.
Cas shifted his weight off of them, and lifted his wing off. Dean suddenly remembered the broken-wing issue, and he said, "Oh, god, Cas, your wing, is your wing okay?"

"It's all right," Cas said. "Some scratches, I think. But I think the bandages protected it pretty well. It feels all right. It was the other wing I was worried about, actually, but it's okay too."

Then Dean felt Cas suddenly tense. "Meg!" Cas said, and Dean felt him scramble around a little, obviously trying to find his way out from under the table in the dark. There was a clunk sound that had to be Cas's head hitting the underside of the table.

"Hold on, Cas, wait, wait, I got a light," called Dean, managing to grab hold of Cas's arm to slow him down. They crawled out from under the table, fumbling their way through the snow and twigs in the darkness, and finally Dean managed to get his phone out and turned on its little light.

And then they all just gaped for a moment.

There was an entire friggin' full-size spruce tree lying across the map-table.

A gigantic spruce tree, just lying there in the room. And the poor lovely vintage glass top of the table had been split right down the middle. The room was completely full of sticks and branches and shards of glass and snow. All the loose equipment that had been against the walls— the old headphones, the gas masks, some of the sound equipment— was simply gone. Only the things that had been bolted in place were still there.

Thick flurries of snow were drifting in from above, swirling around in a light breeze from the door, and beginning to pile up on the floor.

Cas said "Meg," again, and began running through the bunker, Dean and Sam trailing after him.

Sam groaned in dismay as they went through the library. Books were all over the floor, jumbled everywhere, chairs upended, the little desk lamps all shattered. There was also a huge tree limb— perhaps the one that had come crashing in so dramatically when the skylight first broke— sitting peacefully right in front of the fireplace.

Further back in the bunker there was less damage. The kitchen was kind of a mess, but nothing they couldn't clean up. Further back still, the bedrooms all seemed okay.

And Meg was okay. She was cowering under Cas's bed in the corner in a terrified little ball, her eyes huge and dark, all her fur sticking up in such alarm that she'd turned pretty much spherical. But she was okay. Cas laid on his stomach and reached his hand over to her, but he couldn't reach her, and she wouldn't budge. Then he extended his right wing, which reached her easily.

She sniffed the feathers. And sniffed again.

Gradually her fur settled down, and the wild look began to leave her eyes. Cas petted her for a minute, with the flight feathers of the wing, till she began to look a little calmer. Then he rose, led Dean and Sam out and closed the door.

"She's safest in there," he said. "Let's go check on the damage."

They walked back to the kitchen and got some flashlights, and then went back to the foyer to study the damage. They all looked at the spruce tree on the map table for a long moment. It looked truly bizarre lying there in the glow of their flashlights.

Cas said, "That species doesn't grow here. Those only grow in the Rocky Mountains."
Sam said, "What? You mean... the storm carried it all the way from Colorado?"

"Probably," said Castiel. Sam and Dean gazed at the tree for a while longer, and then started looking around at all the other tree branches, and the broken glass, and all the snow, and the broken windows. Cas went up to the front door to look outside.

"We're lucky it missed us," called Castiel, from just outside.

Dean panned his flashlight around the room and said, "You call this a miss?"

"Come look," said Cas, and Dean and Sam clambered up the stairs to take a look.

There was now just a pleasant little snowfall going on outside. It looked almost peaceful now, and there was no wind at all. And now that the tornado-part had blown by, the sky was actually faintly grey instead of absolutely black. Dean could even see the end of the retreating storm, a distant black mass on the horizon, moving further and further away.

They climbed up the little steps right outside the door to see what Cas was looking at. The light was pretty faint, but even so they could see a tornado-track carved into the earth in the field opposite outside the bunker. The track was huge, a big swath gouged into the earth that looked a quarter-mile wide. It had scoured the earth completely clean, down to the bedrock. Every single tree and bush and rock and twig was simply... gone.

It had missed the bunker by no more than two hundred yards.

"Dean. Sam," said Cas, turning to them. "You can't do this again. You have to either free the elementals, or get out of their way. You can't just come back into their path like this. Especially not for me. You should have gone north."

"And leave you here alone? Not likely," said Dean.

Cas sighed and shook his head. He looked back over at the tornado's swath of destruction.

"I tried to talk to it as it went over," said Cas. "I was asking it to change its path."

Ah. That was what he had been shouting, in the middle of the chaos.

Cas added, slowly, looking at the dead-straight path the tornado had cut across the landscape, "But it didn't change its path. Actually... it wouldn't even speak to me, Dean." He paused a long moment, and added, his voice a little soft, "I won't be much help after all. Maybe you're right, Dean. Maybe it's better if you work without me. I just won't be much help anymore."

It took Dean a moment to understand what Cas was talking about, and why he looked so solemn. Then he remembered:

*Air elementals only talk to flying creatures.*

And this one had refused to talk to Cas.
Now that the adrenaline was fading, the cold was really starting to bite. Dean gave a little shiver, pulled his jacket tighter, and suddenly he thought of Sarah saying, Bundle up that angel, Dean. He looked over at Cas then, and realized Cas was shivering too, pretty hard actually. In fact he was bare-chested—the toga-blanket he'd been wearing originally had totally vanished. He also seemed to have a whole set of cuts that Dean hadn't fully noticed before in the darkness. Only then did Dean remember Cas that had been lying on top of both of them, bareskinned from the waist up, exposed to every branch and piece of glass that had been whirling around the room.

Dean shoo'd Cas (and Sam) back inside, saying, "Okay folks, nothing to look at here. Time to warm up and clean up. Sam, get the first aid kit, would you? And maybe see if you can get us something to drink?"

Dean lit a fire in the fireplace (both for heat and for light), using the dead branches that were helpfully scattered everywhere. Then they both made Cas stand still by the fire for a wing-inspection and cut-inspection.

They ended up picking a lot of pieces of broken glass out of his feathers. The right wing looked surprisingly good, given that it had taken the brunt of the falling glass; the feathers on that wing were a bit frayed and muddy, but everything looked intact and Cas said nothing was hurting. And it turned out the cuts on his back and arms weren't all that bad; Cas said he'd still had one of his blankets on for a while, though later it had blown away later (never to be seen again, apparently).

And, happily, Cas's broken wing really was okay too. The bandage was now a torn-up wad of muddy, soaking vet-wrap, though, so Sam fetched Cas's movie-chair (it was upended in a corner in the tv room, but was intact), and made Cas sit in front of the fire, while Sam cleaned his broken wing thoroughly and re-did all his bandages. Dean also made Cas change from his muddy, wet jeans into some warm pants. Then Dean and Sam changed their clothes too. They all bundled up in another layer of winter clothes now, with two new blanket-togas for Cas.

Everybody's okay, thought Dean. We're all okay.

Sam heated up some more cider (fortunately the gas stove was still working), and they had cider laced with a little whiskey. Or whiskey laced with a little cider might have been more accurate. Then, with all three of them at last somewhat warm and dry and cleaned up, they took a tour of the rest of the bunker.

The power was out; this was a relatively minor problem that they could fix tomorrow once there was enough daylight to assess the bunker wiring. The heat was out too; this was a more urgent problem, as it was still snowing and pretty damn cold. The cell phones weren't getting any service, which probably meant that Lebanon's one-and-only cell tower had not survived. That meant no phone, and no internet. The skylight and all the skinny windows needed to be boarded up immediately, and there were branches everywhere, and a ridiculous amount of snow (laced with broken glass, just for fun) in the map-room. And the poor map had been shattered and there was that fifteen-foot-tall spruce tree lying across it.

But they had the fireplace, the stove worked, they still had all their food. All the damage was repairable, given a little time.

And when they made a tentative foray outside, Dean was astonished, and thrilled, to find the Impala sitting peacefully in a little snowdrift, completely intact. It had been an extra hundred yards farther away from the tornado, and there wasn’t a single scratch on it.
With the discovery that the Impala was unscathed, the mood turned almost festive. They'd had a lucky escape! They were all okay! Even the Impala was okay! Soon all three of them had plunged into work, Cas setting candles everywhere to light things and then helping to shovel out the snow, while Dean went outside to board up the skylight with some leftover sheets of plywood. Sam, under orders from Cas, went around picking books up so that they wouldn't get wet in the melting snow. ("The books are fine right now, Sam, just disarranged," Cas had advised. "But if they get wet the older ones will be destroyed.") Sam soon reported that the virtually all the books were still there and were even intact, just all jumbled. The skylight didn't take Dean very long to board up—turned out you could just walk right up to it, from the outside—and soon he and Cas were circling through the upper floors, doing what they could to seal off the remaining broken windows with the rest of the plywood, scraps of lumber and a few tarps. Most of the glass-splinter-filled snow was shoveled out, and then they gathered all the loose branches and heaped them into a pile near the fireplace. Dean set the water dripping in all the bathrooms, every faucet and shower running slowly, to try to keep the pipes from freezing until they could get the heat back on. And Cas whipped up a batch of cookies to keep them all going.

As midnight approached they had got the worst of it under control. Pretty soon Dean was standing in the map-room, his hands on his hips, surveying the room, while Sam and Cas picked up the last of the small branches. This room had taken the worst hit. It would need a thorough cleaning, and there would have to be some real window repairs later, of course, and the map-table needed fixing; but for now things looked remarkably good.

"Hey," said Dean, "I just realized. The elemental took my Christmas tree. It was by the door. Haven't seen it anywhere."

Sam laughed and said, "Maybe the elemental wanted its own Christmas tree. It's probably halfway to Ohio with it by now."

"But look," Dean said with a grin, pointing to the huge spruce tree that was still lying across the map-table, "the elemental brought us a better tree! You know what... I got an idea."

Dean went and fetched a winch from the garage, and after a great deal of struggle, they managed to wrestle the spruce tree upright, first sawing it off flat at the base and then propping it up against the metal staircase. Cas pointed out that it was actually just a small spruce tree, only fifteen feet tall, which apparently was small by Colorado spruce tree standards. But it still seemed absolutely enormous in that little room. It was also pretty heavy, but Dean wouldn't rest till he had got the thing upright and tied it to the metal staircase for stability.

"Check it out!" Dean said, as he tied off the last rope. "That is the biggest Christmas tree I've EVER put up!"

"Wait, wait, the decorations are almost done," said Sam. Partway through the tree-winching effort Sam had gone and grabbed some leftover popcorn from last night, and now he was stringing it onto a piece of string. Soon he produced exactly 1 strand of popcorn-on-a-string, all of two feet long, to put on the gigantic spruce tree.

Sam put it on the tree, Cas watching curiously, and then Dean and Sam backed up to look at it. They both started cracking up. (Cas just looked puzzled.) Maybe it was just giddiness from having survived at all, but it really did look funny: the tree seemed simply gigantic, wide branches sticking out practically filling the room, huge and impressive, while Sam's one little string of popcorn barely
reached across one branch.

"Like it?" said Sam, still laughing. "Are the ornaments evenly spaced? Did I miss a spot? Should I adjust anything?"

"It's perfect," said Dean. "It's just missing one thing. Cas, um, could you just go up there, for a sec? Just walk up on top of the staircase? Oh, and, um, can you hold this candle?"

Cas gave him kind of a narrow look, but he took the candle and walked up to the top of the stairs. Right by the top of the tree.

"Could you put your wing out a little? Perfect! Yes! Hold still!" Dean said. "Stay right there." He got his phone out and took a picture, in the dim flickering light, of Castiel standing there right at the top of the staircase, by the top of the tree, holding the little candle.

An angel on top of their Christmas tree.

Cas was still looking a little puzzled, but as he saw Sam's and Dean's expressions, he began to smile a little bit. Dean took one more picture while Cas was smiling, and looked at it.

Sam was leaning over Dean's shoulder to look, and he said, "Ha! That came out great!"

Dean had to agree. In the photo Cas looked downright majestic, standing there at the top of the enormous tree holding the candle. The photo had even captured his half-confused, half-pleased smile.

"Cas, just so you know, you make a totally kickass Christmas-tree-angel," Dean said, "Best one we've ever had. Come on down. Merry Christmas, everybody. Sorry, Sam, but I think your presents are on their way to Ohio. Actually they were completely ruined and full of broken glass anyway."

"It's the thought that counts," said Sam with a grin. "Your present got ruined, too."

"What was it?"

"A bottle of tequila. It's totally gone. Guess it got shattered somewhere. It was the good stuff, too."

"Dammit," said Dean, with feeling.

"Both your presents are still intact," said Cas suddenly. "I made some pies while you were gone. I put them in the fridge and it turns out they're still okay."

"Well, Cas," said Dean, "Just for that, your present is actually still here too, since I had it zipped up in my jacket. It still needs some work, but here it is."

Dean grabbed the bag that had been stuffed in his jacket during the entire ordeal— it had been sitting on the map-table while they worked— and he handed it to Cas.

Cas pulled out a wad of black fabric, looking at it curiously. He shook it out; it was a black polarfleece jacket.

"Oh," said Cas, "Um. Thank you, Dean, but... I'm afraid I can't wear this. But it was very thoughtful of you."

"No, no, it's not done yet," said Dean, "I had a plan. See, I was talking to this lady in the sewing store, which is a terrifying place on Christmas Eve just by the way. There were ten million ladies there doing all these lady things. But anyway, I was telling her about my friend who'd had
back surgery and needed a special jacket and she said, the awesome thing about polarfleece is, apparently it's super easy to cut and sew. So she recommended I buy a whole jacket, not just fabric, and then modify the jacket. So— here, actually, we can just do it right now! Sam, go grab scissors and some safety pins, would you? Here, Cas, come over to the fire.”

He dragged Cas over to the fire again and began fiddling with the jacket, holding it up and eyeballing it against Cas's wings. Sam came back in a second with the scissors and pins, and a ruler as well— he'd seen right away what Dean was up to.

Together, Sam and Dean cut two big slices up the back of Cas's polarfleece jacket, dividing the back into a central vertical strip flanked by two side strips.

"Now put it on, Cas," said Dean, handing it to him. Cas suddenly got the idea, and there was soon a hopeful little half-smile on his face. He carefully slipped it on, with Sam and Dean's help.

It fit him perfectly. The sleeves were even the right length. And Cas had simply slid it right on over his wings. The central back-piece hung down between the wings, and the side pieces came down around the sides of the wings. Dean fiddled a little bit further, trimming here and there, till the strips fit around Cas's wings perfectly.

"My idea was to put velcro on the bottoms of the strips here," said Dean. "See, then you can put it on easy, like you just did, and then velcro the pieces together below your wings. For now we can just pin them closed or something." In fact Sam had already figured this out and was already fastening the sides with some safety pins.

"Dean, it's so warm," Cas said. He zipped up the front and immediately looked warmer than he'd looked in weeks. It was kind of startling to see him wearing actual clothes on his top half, actually, instead of the familiar blanket-toga look. He suddenly looked very dressed up.

Cas ran his hands over the front of the jacket and repeated, "It's so warm."

Dean grinned at him. "We'll make you more later. A flannel shirt for tonight, for sure, since it'll be a chilly night— we can cut up one of mine. Then later, more shirts and maybe some vests and stuff. This is just a start."

Cas was actually smiling. Despite the elemental; despite their terrifying experience; despite everything, Cas was smiling.

They had a strange little dinner at one in the morning— more cookies, some pieces of Cas's pies, and some soup that Sam warmed up.

"Not the Christmas dinner I was planning for you all," said Sam, "But it works."

"Not the Christmas I was planning for you all," said Dean. "But it works." And as he looked around the three of them, huddled around the fire, he thought, They're NOT going to die. I won't let them. They're my family. We're going to stick together, like those three lost animals, and we'll be okay.

He looked over at Cas, who was dunking a chocolate chip cookie in his chicken noodle soup (Sam
was obviously itching to say something about that, but was valiantly refraining from comment). As
the night's work had worn on, it had become clear that Cas had started to accept that maybe he
couldn't come on hunts; the way the elemental had refused to listen to him must have rattled him, for
already he'd made a few comments already about "your" (not "our") trip to Florida. But now Dean
found himself reconsidering. Having Cas at their side during the tornado had just... felt right. It had
felt right.

So now that Cas seemed determined to think he wasn't useful, Dean felt increasingly determined to
prove that he was. Could there possibly be some way to get him to Florida after all? Maybe in a
second car or something? Maybe they could fit his wings in the Impala after all, if Dean modified the
back seat a bit?

They'd work something out.

*The three lost animals gotta stick together,* Dean thought.

It was getting damn frigid and they were going to have to get through a night without heat; there was
really no way they could find and fix the power problem in the darkness. So that night they all slept
together in Cas's room, which was the bedroom that was deepest into the bunker and farthest from
the cold windows. Dean dragged his mattress back in and they pushed the two mattresses together on
the floor, and then heaped practically every blanket in the entire bunker on top of the two mattresses.
Sam joined them, and little Meg nestled between them all.

Cas insisted on lying so that his right wing could spread across both Dean (closer to Cas) and then
Sam (farther from Cas) to add a bit of warmth. The temperature dropped down to near zero that
night, really brutally frigid, but with the wing and the blankets they were actually quite comfortable.

And all Dean was thinking, when he finally drifted off, was, *Gotta stick together. We gotta stick
together.*
Early the next morning — Christmas morning — Dean and Sam dug the Impala out and managed to get to town, through the just-plowed streets. They were both relieved to find the town mostly intact. (They'd both been pretty sure the tornado had missed the town, judging from the path it had been taking, but just the same it was awfully reassuring to see Lebanon still standing.)

The hardware store had opened up, despite the holiday, so that Lebanon's citizens could get the tools they needed to clean up from the tornado damage. The store employees informed Sam and Dean that nobody had died. Nobody was even hurt, and the damage was mostly restricted to a lot of broken windows.

A number of cows were missing, though.

Dean and Sam glanced at each other at that news, and then bought what they needed to start making repairs.

The next week passed in a flurry of work. Dean ended up learning far more about generator-repair than he'd ever really wanted to know; Sam got all the jumbled books retrieved from all the far corners of the bunker, though it would take ages to sort them out (for now he just piled them in huge stacks on the library tables); and Cas spent many long hours scrupulously sweeping and wiping every surface in the bunker, till all the millions of infinitesimal glass shards had finally been removed. And over the next days, Sam, Dean and Cas all developed a fair amount of skill at repairing glass and re-glazing windows.

Sam and Dean both eventually got used to being high up on a ladder by a window, asking Cas for a tool, and having the tool delivered a moment later by a gigantic shining wing.

It was nice to have so much physical work to do, actually. Good ol' manual labor. It gave them something to focus on.

Especially, it was nice to have something to focus on other than the elemental problem. Because once the euphoria of survival had started to fade, reality had started to set in: Not one but five elementals were cutting vast swaths of destruction across the continent.

Dean and Sam discussed it several times, but decided they couldn't do anything immediately. For one thing, they still had no idea where to go. Even in the case of that hurricane elemental, the one Cas that thought was being controlled from southern Florida... well, "southern Florida" was a pretty big target when you started thinking about planning a realistic battle strategy. Also they still had some gear to replace: Sam's pistol, various other weapons, some jackets and some other equipment had all gone missing in the storm.
But most of all, there was Cas.

They couldn't leave Cas till Mac came. Dr. Mac was due to fly in on the ninth of January, a Friday, and Sarah was coming too. (Dean had bought them both plane tickets to Lincoln, Nebraska). Mac had said he was prepared to take the pins out that Saturday if all looked well.

No way were Sam and Dean going to leave Cas alone for that. No way.

Plus, Dean was starting to develop a plan for how to bring Cas along to Florida—assuming Mac cleared Cas for travel. Dean was already working on the plan. But he needed a little more time.

One night that week, just before New Year's, Dean awoke to find Castiel sitting on the barstool in Dean's bedroom.

Little pressure points seemed to be moving slowly all over Dean's feet, and he finally realized it was Meg. She must have come in with Cas, and was walking all over Dean's feet now, looking for a place to settle down; it was this, actually, that had woken Dean up.

"Cas?" Dean called softly, to the dark Castiel-shape on the barstool. "Is that you? Is that Meg?"

"Oh," said Castiel softly. "Sorry about that. I didn't mean to wake you. I forgot she followed me in."

"Something wrong, Cas?" Dean said, flipping the bedside light on.

"No, nothing wrong," said Cas. "Just thought I'd come in here and sit for a while. Just for a change of pace."

It turned out Cas just seemed to want to hang out a bit. Maybe chat a bit. So they chatted, about nothing much. About how the window repairs were going. About the movies they'd seen; turned out Cas had a number of thoughts about the fate of the misfit toys from "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer."

Dean avoided any mention of wings, of feathers, or elementals. No point worrying Cas unnecessarily till Mac got here and they really saw how it was healing.

At last Dean said, "Probably time for you to get back to bed, huh? It's late. You need some sleep."

Cas nodded easily. He slid off the stool, picked up Meg, and left, with just a quiet "Goodnight, Dean," as he slipped out the door.

But a couple times after that, Dean woke to find Castiel back in his room in the middle of the night. Sometimes Cas wasn't even on the stool, but was just perching on the very edge of the corner of Dean's bed, a bit awkwardly, so that his broken wing could slant diagonally over the corner of the bed. And occasionally Dean heard footsteps in hallway in the night, and when he poked his head out the door he spotted Cas walking through the hallway to Sam's room, apparently to check on Sam as well. (Later Sam reported he'd had a long talk with Cas in the middle of the night about the flight capabilities of the flying monkeys from Oz.)

Dean realized it was much like how Cas used to visit Dean back when they'd first met. Back before
the Apocalypse, Dean had sometimes woken to find Castiel standing in his room, or sitting on the edge of his bed. Eventually it had become clear that Cas had a habit of wanting to "watch over" Dean — and now, apparently, Sam too.

*Some angel thing*, Dean decided, when he woke once more in the night to realize his own door was closing, Cas apparently having just left. There was a faint meow from Meg, a rustle of feathers, and then Cas's soft footsteps padding down the hall to Sam's door.

Could Cas possibly still be thinking of himself as the Winchesters' guardian? Was he, perhaps, instinctively acting as a guardian angel, even now, after all this time?

Or did he just want some company? Some reassurance that he wasn't alone?

Eventually it stopped happening, and Sam reported that he hadn't been woken up in a while either. But Dean wondered, now and then, if Castiel might still be visiting them at night, patrolling diligently and watching over them both, and had simply gotten better at not waking them up.

Finally every window had been repaired, and the bunker was spic and span again, the heat and electricity on. There had only been one thing they really couldn't fix: Sam and Dean just couldn't figure out what to do about the map-table. The gorgeous map on the top was totally shattered, and replacing that would involve a custom-cut, custom-painted glass job that was beyond their abilities. Finally Dean decided to just cover it up with wood for now.

It got a little more involved than he'd planned, and he ended up making quite a nice pine tabletop, fitted to the shape of the table. Just as a stop-gap solution, really, but Dean did a fairly careful job with it anyway, and when it was finally finished, Sam helped him put it in place, Cas watching from the side.

It fit perfectly on top of the shattered glass. Of course it was just plain, light-colored wood, with nothing like the retro-cool style of the classic old world map, but it would do.

"Hey, that looks all right, doesn't it?" said Dean. "Not bad for a stopgap!"

He felt pretty pleased with how it looked. Then Cas walked over to the table, touched it lightly, pulled a black Sharpie out of his pocket, took the cap off, and started *drawing on Dean's brand-new pine table-top* with the Sharpie. Drawing a big black squiggly line.

It happened so fast that Dean just stood there blinking, too confused to stop him. Sam said "CAS! What are you doing!" But it was too late, the big squiggly line was already done. Cas had ruined Dean's tabletop! And then Cas added another squiggly line.

And one more squiggly line, and suddenly it was the outline of North America.

Cas said, "I thought I'd put the map back on it." He took a step to his right and started another squiggly line. This one looked like just a messy circle at first, but it soon resolved into a perfect outline of Australia.

Sam and Dean stood there gaping as Castiel drew a *perfect* map of the world right onto Dean's tabletop. *Freehand*. With such precision it looked as if he were tracing from an invisible satellite photo that only he could see. Cas was moving fast, too; in just a few minutes he'd sketched in all the major continents.
"Thought it might be a useful reference," said Cas mildly, as he started adding the bigger islands—Madagascar, the UK, New Zealand, Cuba, and more, all rapidly sketched in, perfectly shaped and perfectly placed. He peppered the seas with precisely placed smaller dots for places like Hawaii and the Bahamas. Everything in perfect position. He switched to a blue pen to add some major lakes, and then started putting little upside-down V’s to represent the Alps and Himalayas, saying, "That's about what it looks like from above...Well, with the usual problems of fitting it on a two-dimensional surface, but, close enough." He finished the Alps in about twenty seconds and moved to the Rockies, saying, "Of course, the continents keep shifting round but this was about my last view of it all. And I admit I haven't bothered to keep very close track of the political boundaries; they just change so rapidly. But this is what the continents look like from above."

He stepped back and took a look.

The map was perfection.

It was a work of art.

"Cas," said Sam slowly, "I didn't know you could draw."

"Can't everybody?" said Castiel, looking up.

"Not like that, Cas," said Dean. He exchanged a bemused glance with Sam.

"But you just draw what it looks like," said Cas, puzzled. "It's easy." He paused a moment in thought, and then shrugged, looking back down at the map. He started drawing in little sea-serpents in the open-ocean parts, saying, "I thought I'd add in some of the known elementals. Just for reference as you start to plan for your trip."

"Sea serpents?" said Dean, startled. He leaned in for a closer look. Cas switched to a finer-point Sharpie to delicately add in a filigree of scales on the tail of a gigantic sea-serpent that he'd just added by the California coast.

"Elementals, yes," said Cas, working away.

Sam said, sounding equally startled, "Sea serpents are ... elementals?"

"Marine elementals," said Cas, pulling out a green pen to add two large green eyes to the serpent. "A sea serpent is the usual physical form of a marine elemental—a elemental that lives in salt water. And I think this one here, the one I'm drawing now, is probably the one that's been affecting the western coast." Cas paused, and said, "I've seen it a few times before, right here. It's quite large."

"Oh, that's great," said Dean. "'Quite large.' Just great."

Cas finished that elemental, and added a few more. Finally he straightened up and turned to look at Sam and Dean.

"You need to start planning your strategy," he said.

Dean and Sam looked at each other.

Cas was right. The repairs were all done; Mac and Sarah would arrive in just a few days. It was time to start getting some kind of elemental-strategy together. Some kind of battle plan.

"Thing is, Cas," said Sam, "We don't even know where to go. How do we even find out where each 'cowboy' is? We just have no idea where to go."
"Then let's get to work," said Castiel, "and figure it out."

Over the next couple days, Cas and Sam worked together on plotting all known elemental activity on a series of large maps. Cas whipped off another set of stunning maps, these ones of North America only, as pencil overlays on thin tracing paper that could be laid across the permanent map on the wood table. One overlay had all the hurricane tracks and windstorms, another with all the water activity, and third for the fires. It took only a day to get all the maps done, Sam reading out the locations of all known elemental-damage to Cas, and Cas unerringly plotting it all on the maps.

The next day they mostly just sat around staring at the maps glumly.

It was pretty obvious where each elemental was being controlled from. The paths of destruction were clumped in certain areas, as Cas had noticed for the hurricanes. But there was still the same problem they'd noticed with the hurricanes: each of the "clumps" was just too damn huge to know where to go. Hundreds of miles wide, in some cases.

How could they find a single "cowboy," an elemental-controller, within a several-hundred-mile-wide region?

"If we got close enough," said Dean, "maybe we could use that spinning thing that you gave us in Wyoming." Cas had given them a special silver crucifix that, when held suspended from a silver chain, spun counter-clockwise if it was in the presence of "evil intent." It was still in the glovebox of the Impala.

"Not a bad idea, actually," said Castiel, "But that's a short-range tool. You'd have to get to within less than a mile for that to work."

It was Dean who finally spotted something, later that night, as Sam and Cas were listening to the news and adding in the latest hurricane track.

"The Bahamas has been lucky, huh," Dean said. "Look, every single hurricane that zoomed past Florida has dodged the Bahamas." He leaned in a little closer, adding, "Folks on this island here must be counting their lucky stars." He tapped one little island in particular that had been missed by every single hurricane.

Sam and Cas looked at him, and stared down at the map, studying the Bahamas. The Bahamas, of course, were the little group of islands just off of southern Florida, right in the likely control-region for the hurricane elemental. On the map, hurricane tracks veered all around the little Bahamas islands, but none had hit the Bahamas head on. In fact it seemed to be the only spot in all of the eastern seaboard that hadn't been hit.

Looking closer, it was apparent that there was almost a bubble of non-hurricane that was centered directly on the northern part of the Bahamas. Centered on one little island in particular.

"That's Great Abaco Island," said Cas.

Sam pulled his laptop out and typed in a few things. "Ha," he said a minute later, "The media's noticed it too. They're calling it the Lucky Island, or the Hurricane-Proof Island. The folks there swear it's because God blessed them."

"The hurricane cowboy?" said Dean.

Cas said nothing for a moment, looking down at the map. Then he leaned over to study at the air-
elemental activity further west on the continent: the blizzards, snow-nadoes, and windstorms. The
elemental that had nearly destroyed the bunker.

There was a clear clump of activity from that elemental in the Midwest and Rockies, all the storms
clustered together in the middle of the continent. (Their own Christmas-Eve snow-nado track was
marked in red pencil.) Yet in the middle of all the storm-tracks that Cas had drawn, there was, again,
one little bubble of space where he hadn't drawn anything. A bubble right in the middle of all the
destruction, that hadn't been hit by a single storm. The empty bubble was centered near Fort Collins,
Colorado.

"Dean," said Cas. "You may have noticed something important. It may be that the elemental-
controllers—"

"Cowboys," said Dean.

"Yes, the cowboys— it may be that they prefer not to actually be hit directly by tornadoes or
blizzards or hurricanes."

Dean snorted and said, "I can kind of understand that."

Cas went on, "So they steer their elementals all around them, but the elemental never actually hits the
cowboy's home base directly. Dean, this might really be useful. We might be able to pinpoint each
cowboy's location by looking for these bubbles of inactivity."

They got back to work, now looking for "bubbles of inactivity", and very soon the pattern had come
clear. Great Abaco Island and Fort Collins had both been spared by their respective air elementals.
The Mississippi River had similarly avoided flooding one precise little spot near Memphis,
Tennessee. And the freakishly gigantic, tsunami-like waves from the Pacific Ocean, which had been
pummeling almost the entire west coast, had mysteriously avoided hitting Point Reyes National
Seashore, right by San Francisco. In fact Point Reyes was the only coastal park that had managed to
stay open through all the storms.

They'd pinned down four out of five. The fifth, the fire elemental, was hardest to get a handle on.
The fires had been hitting very erratically, somewhat parallel to the path of the Pacific Ocean
elemental, hopscotching up and down the coast through northern California, Oregon, and
Washington State. But there just wasn't enough information on it yet to draw a good map.

Sam stuck some pieces of red tape on Cas's main map on the pine table-top, at the exact center of
each of the four "bubbles of inactivity", and they then they took the overlays off and looked at the
five points marked in red. Great Abaco Island. Fort Collins. Western Tennessee. Point Reyes.

Cas said, "You should set out immediately."

"We will. Early next week," said Dean. Mac was due to visit this very weekend. And Sarah too.
"Once Mac's gone."

"You should set out now," said Cas. He added, quietly, "People are dying, Dean. And, from a
broader perspective— if this Elemental Queen succeeds in taking over this whole continent, surely
that's only the beginning. This is only going to escalate further."

Dean considered that, and gave a little half-nod, saying in partial concession, "We'll pack and get our
gear together and get ready. But we're not leaving before Mac checks out your wing, Cas, and that's
final. We'll get ready, and then we'll see what Mac says and then we'll hit the road. Okay?"

Cas nodded slowly. He looked over at the map, and said, "Well, at least you know where to go now. I believe that's the most I can do for you." He paused a moment, and looked down at the colored pencils in his hand, that he'd been using on the tracing-paper. He set them down on the table, his fingers resting gently on them for a moment.

He looked a little pensive, and Dean had the uneasy sensation that Cas was almost laying down his last weapons, as he put down the colored pencils. As if he felt he'd done all he could, and could do nothing more.

But all Cas said was, "I'll go set out the plates for dinner."

Sam and Dean glanced at each other as Cas walked away.

"You don't want to tell him that we're gonna try to bring him along?" Sam asked softly.

Dean shook his head and whispered, "Gotta wait and see what Mac says. What if he needs another surgery or something? I don't want to get his hopes up till we know for sure exactly what the deal is with his wing. But..." He paused a moment, thinking. "You know that idea I had? I'm going to go make a couple phone calls, right now. Line up a few options. Just in case."

Finally it was Friday, January 9th. Mac and Sarah were both due to arrive in early evening. It had been six weeks to the day from that awful Friday after Thanksgiving, when Ziphius had stolen Sam and Dean away to Zion.

And tomorrow, Saturday, it would be precisely six weeks since Ziphius had broken Cas's wing. And six weeks from his midnight surgery.

Cas was doing a pretty pathetic job hiding his nervousness. All that day he kept walking back and forth all around the bunker, flicking his right wing open and shut almost constantly, in some sort of nervous little wing-tic. Whenever the wing wasn't flicking, it was folded up very tightly.

Dean finally announced, "Cas, you better make some cookies. Sarah and Mac might be hungry when they get here." He pushed Cas off to the kitchen. And strode off to the library to drink some whiskey.

Next morning, Dean and Sam headed off to pick up Mac and Sarah in Lincoln, Nebraska. Then they made a quick swing by the vet school (the University of Nebraska, and its vet school, were in Lincoln) to pick up some equipment that Mac had somehow arranged to borrow, and finally they headed back to the bunker.

Dean and Sam had long ago concluded they'd have to let Mac see the bunker. It was always a little worrisome bringing new people in, but it couldn't be helped, and of course Mac was deeply involved by now. But when they opened the door and ushered Mac in, he wasn't spooked in the least; he was just delighted.

"Wow!" Mac said. He came trotting down the stairs, tugging Sarah along behind him with a hand on one of her arms. "Sarah, I know you said this place was cool but you didn't say how cool. Jake—" (he had been calling Dean "Jake" ever since they'd picked him up at the airport. Dean had tried to correct him three times and had finally realized he was doing it on purpose.) "Jake, that is an extremely cool map! Whoa, check out the telescope, do you ever use it?"
Mac went trotting right through the library, dragging Sarah along and headed right for the telescope, when Cas came into the library carrying a plate of cookies, with his right wing half-opened at his side.

Mac stopped dead and stared at him.

Sarah said with a grin, "He's looking a lot better than the last time you saw him, isn't he?"

"My god, Eagle," said Mac to Cas. "You're looking a hell of a lot better."

Cas said, "I'm feeling better, too. Thank you. It's a pleasure to finally get to meet you properly."

Castiel held out his hand, and after another moment of stunned silence, Mac took a step closer and shook his hand. He couldn't seem to take his eyes off Cas's right wing.

"Cookie?" said Castiel, holding out the plate of cookies in his other hand.

Mac was still just staring at him.

"They're chocolate chip," said Cas.

"Ah. Okay," said Mac at last, taking a cookie slowly and then completely forgetting to eat it. (Sarah seemed to have no such problem, grabbing two cookies and downing them instantly.)

"Forgive me for staring," said Mac finally, making a visible effort to get back in gear. "To be honest I was sort of starting to think I'd imagined the whole thing. Even though I've been checking in with Sarah every day. But, uh. Wow. Wings. I didn't imagine any of it, did I?" He couldn't seem to take his eyes off the right wing, especially when Cas lifted it up a little bit and flared it out slightly. Dean realized it must be the first time Mac had seen Cas moving the wing voluntarily.

Mac was clearly riveted by the wing, which seemed to be particularly shining and glorious just at the moment, the golden lights of the library gleaming off of it. "Your wing," said Mac, "Wow. It's... It's..."

Cas glanced over at the wing, frowning a bit. "It's a little frayed— is that what you mean? And dusty. I know. To be honest, I've had some trouble preening." He actually looked a little embarrassed.

"Actually 'frayed' was not the word I had in mind." said Mac. "More like 'mindblowing.' Okay, anyway..." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, let's get a look at that other wing."

They got the luggage in and set up Mac's borrowed equipment, which included a portable x-ray machine on a wheeled cart that Mac had managed to borrow from the large-animal clinic at the vet school.

But first Mac got Cas to sit down in his movie-chair for a full exam of the wing. Sam and Sarah got the bandages off, and Mac took a look.

Mac spent a few minutes in maddening silence, peering at everything closely.

Dean looked over at Cas's face. Cas looked slightly rigid, a bit still maybe. He was quiet, just staring at the floor, but Dean noticed he had never seen Cas's right wing folded so tightly. It was pressed almost flat to his back, so close to his spine that it was actually starting to bump the other wing. Sam and Sarah even had to pull it back a little to get it out of the way, so that Mac could get a clearer look at the bandaged wing.
Mac took his time saying anything. Sarah looked calm and professional, but Sam was biting his lip and Dean felt like he was about to explode. But Mac just checked the incision silently, and the titanium pins and screws, palpating everything all over, seeing the joints, and occasionally asking Cas if anything hurt.

"Good job here, Eagle," said Mac at last. "This is actually looking very good, from the outside anyway." Dean heaved a sigh, and shot a big smile at Cas, who glanced up at him a bit nervously, his right wing still folded pretty tight. Mac went on, "Incisions are fully healed, swelling's down, and you weren't flinching at all on palpation, which is a good sign. Okay, let me get the x-ray set up and then we'll see how it looks on the inside."

It took a little time to get the x-ray machine all set up. There seemed to be lots of attachments and wires. Partway through the setup, Mac paused and asked, "I borrowed a couple of lead aprons, but if any of you get a lot of radiation exposure, you shouldn't be in the room when we actually start doing the x-rays. How much radiation exposure have you all had? Sarah, you've been a nurse for how long?"

Sarah said, "Nine years. So, some occupational exposure, yeah. Starting when I was twenty basically, when I started nursing school."

"You should clear out of the room then," said Mac. "How about the rest of you?"

"I've had a few," said Sam. "We tend to get a lot of broken bones. Like, several a year."

"Ton of broken bones," agreed Dean, nodding. "We end up in emergency rooms maybe four times a year? Or so? Just little bones, though."

Mac was giving Dean kind of weird look when Castiel piped up with, "I'm exposed to cosmic radiation quite a lot when I'm flying around the Earth. And I used to go to Mars now and then, back when it looked like life might be starting up there. That's a high-radiation trip. That was a while ago though."

There was a little pause. Everybody looked at him.

Cas added, "Well, not as a human, obviously. And usually I just stay in the etheric plane."

"Ri-ight," said Mac. "Of course. Of course. Okay, um, sit over here, Eagle. The rest of you, I'll tell you when to leave."

Cas got settled on his movie-chair and Dr. Mac fiddled with the x-ray machine for a moment. Mac had an odd look on his face, and suddenly he looked up and said, bursting with curiosity that he was completely unable to contain, "I'm sorry, Eagle, I just have to ask, what the hell is the 'etheric plane'?"

"Oh," said Cas, looking a little surprised that Mac didn't know. "It's the dimension next to this one. It's full of ether; hence the name. " Everybody looked at him again, and Cas straightened up a little and began to launch in on one of his professor-type lectures. As Mac continued slowly setting things up, obviously highly distracted by what Cas was telling him, Cas said, "You can think of this dimension and the etheric plane as adjacent pages of paper in a book. There are three dimensions right in a row, actually, right next to each other, like three pages of paper pressed together: the ghostly plane, where souls go right after death and where they sometimes become trapped; then this Earthly dimension, where we're standing now; and then the etheric plane, which angels use to travel
in. And you can sometimes see one from another. You can see the Earthly dimension quite well from the etheric plane, but not vice versa."

Mac's hands were moving more and more slowly, and he had rather a blank look on his face now, but Cas just went on, "Anyway, angels usually keep their wings in the etheric plane. When we fly, what actually happens is, the wings pull the vessel— the human body— into the etheric plane. From Earth it looks like we become invisible, but we've just moved to the etheric plane. And then we fly from one place to another in the etheric plane. Flying through the ether. Then when we get to where we want to be, we drop the vessel back down into the Earthly dimension, and from your perspective it looks like we become visible again. It's simple, really."

Mac had ground to a complete halt and was staring at Cas now, holding a couple of x-ray attachments in his hand.

"Simple," said Sarah, with a faint laugh.

"So," said Mac, "Sorry but this is just incredibly interesting— um— just one more question if you don't mind— um— why don't you just fly in this dimension? Why go to all that trouble?"

"It's easier to fly there. The ether supports the wings a bit better. Also gravity is less, obviously, because you're slightly removed from the Earth. You still see the Earth but it affects you less."

"Right," said Mac. "Gravity's less. Obviously."

"Otherwise my wing-loading would be insufficient," said Cas. "Obviously."

"Obviously," said Mac yet again. "The wing-loading. I was wondering about that." Mac shook his head, and stared down at the x-ray attachment in his hands as if he'd entirely forgotten what he was doing.

"Wing-loading?" asked Sam.

Mac looked up and said, "That part I actually did understand. Wing-loading is the body weight divided by the surface area of wing. Basically, are the wings big enough to support the body. I'm guessing you couldn't fly in this dimension, then, Eagle?"

Cas nodded. "This human vessel is far too heavy. If I used my power," — here he hesitated, stopped, and restarted with, "If I had some power, Heavenly power I mean, I could fly with these wings right here on Earth. But with no Heavenly power, if I have to rely just on ordinary physics that is, these wings are not quite big enough for the weight of this vessel."

"But they're huge!" said Dean.

Cas and Mac both gave him a sort of "you-don't-know-about-wingloading-do-you" look.

Mac explained, "They are indeed huge. But a human body is very heavy compared to a bird body."

Cas added, "Though... I have been wondering if could just glide a little bit? I don't know." He looked uncertain. And his right wing had tightened up again.

Mac considered that. "Possible. Or at least break a fall, maybe." He gave a little sigh, and murmured, "This is so fascinating..."

"Fascinating, Captain," said Dean. "Look, we're all fascinated, and I hate to break the mood, but it's actually getting kind of late and we might have to do the x-rays sometime this month."
"Right, right. Sorry," said Mac, shaking himself back into action. "You're right, we've got limited time. It's just... wow. Angel wings. Okay, we're almost in business, folks."

Mac finally kicked everybody else out of the library (with a "Heigh ho, heigh ho, away from x-ray you go!"). He took all of Cas's x-rays by himself.

Mac called them all back in fifteen minutes later. He was peering at some x-ray images digitally displayed on the computer monitor. Cas had gone back into his glum worried state, sitting very quietly in his chair staring at the floor.

Again there was a rather tense minute of silence while they waited for Mac's verdict.

Then, to Dean's absolute delight, Dr. Mac said, "This is healing fantastically. Look at all that mineralization! Eagle, take a look." Cas's eyes opened wide and he sprang up out of the chair and hurried around to the monitor. Dean, Sam and Sarah all crowded around behind him, and Mac pointed out Cas's wingbone on the x-ray.

It looked perfect. Solid white, all in one piece, no fragments at all. The only clue that it had ever been broken was the series of titanium pins and screws sticking into it.

"This is really good, Eagle," Mac said. He sounded very happy. "See here, see how clean and white everything is. It's really remineralized incredibly well."

Cas said, "My... wing's... healing?" He sounded amazed.

"You bet your angel-booty it is," said Mac, "You know what, this actually looks to me like it's healing up on a bird schedule. Great apes often need more than six weeks for a fracture like this to fully heal; but birds have faster metabolism and can usually heal up a fracture in just three or four weeks. I bet you're healing on bird time."

"Hear that, Eagle?" Dean said with a grin, nudging Cas. "Bird time! You're doing great!" Cas was staring open-mouthed at the screen.

"This is the outcome I was hoping for," said Mac. "This is really good." He studied the x-ray for a long moment more, and then he made Cas sit down, and started to bandage the wing again. Mac went on, "I'm only bandaging it to keep the pins from getting bumped overnight. Here's what we're going to do. I'm going to take those pins out tomorrow morning. That means another surgery, but a more minor one; I think we can get this done with you just under local anesthesia, with just the wing numbed, rather than fully under. And I brought all the stuff I thought I might need. Eagle—" Mac leaned around to look at Cas's face. "You on board with this?"

Cas nodded eagerly.

"Oh my god, thought Dean. It's a HAPPY-Puppy look."

He'd never seen that look on Cas's face before. Ever.

Mac nodded back. "Then it's a go. Jake, Sam, Sarah, let's get everything laid out — probably your kitchen would be best, Jake, where we can boil things if we need to. We'll do it on that low kitchen table tomorrow. But. Eagle. One more thing," Mac leaned over to look at Cas again. "I need to warn you. You'll still need to move it very gently for six more weeks at least. No flapping. Absolutely no flapping. You could strain a ligament or even tear it if you stretch it too hard, too fast. Got to take it gentle. Got it?"

"No flapping, yes, I understand," said Cas, nodding again.
They began setting up for tomorrow's surgery.

It was a pretty quick surgery this time; it only took about half an hour, with Cas's wing numbed and Cas just given a mild sedative. (Dean was a little sorry that he wouldn't get to chat with loopy-Cas again, but life had these little disappointments, didn't it?) The whole thing was done without cutting into Cas's wing at all. Mac un-bolted all the exterior hardware and then took some time carefully removing each little pin from its position in the bone, but he never had to cut anything. It went smoothly, and all that was left was a series of little holes through Cas's skin where the pins had gone. Sarah dressed each of the little holes with antibiotic ointment, put a tidy band-aid over each one, and gave strict instructions to Cas (and Sam, and Dean) about keeping the tiny wounds clean and watching for signs of infection. And that was that.

The bone was healed! The pins were out! Of course, the wing still had some healing to do. The little holes where the pins had been, deep in the bone, would have to "mineralize". And there was a whole patch of exposed skin, almost like a section of arm, where the fluffy little overlying feathers had been removed. Not to mention the missing tertials, which of course would have to be completely regrown. And Cas still hadn't tried to move the wing. Actually Cas hadn't even gotten a good look at it yet.

But the bone was healed. That had to be good news, right?

By afternoon Cas had got some feeling back in his wing as the local anesthetic wore off. Mac gave him some painkillers (apparently, unscrewing titanium pins right out of a bone did have its downside, no matter how gently it was done). By evening Cas reported he was able to move the wing a little bit, so Mac had him stand up in front of a big mirror (Sam and Dean had wheeled one from the back bedrooms into the library) for one last checkup to assess how the wing was working.

"There now, try and open it," said Mac. "Gently now. Very gently. I'll warn you, it may not have much range of motion yet. Now, go ahead, open it up."

Cas looked hesitantly over at his wing.

"Open up the wing, Eagle," said Mac again.

"I'm trying," said Cas. "It won't open."

"Okay. Relax, let me open it for you a bit."

Mac carefully took hold of the wing and opened it a tiny bit, just unfolding it an inch or so. Cas gasped.

"Is it sore?" asked Mac.

"Yes," said Cas. He was gritting his teeth.

"Where exactly?"

"The... the joints. And... here." Oddly enough Cas gestured to his chest, not the wing at all; he even rubbed the front of his shoulder, right by his collarbone.
Mac's eyebrows went up. "Fascinating," he said yet again. "Extremely interesting. Your pecs may be connected to your wings. That's actually the same muscle that birds use, and that spot you're rubbing is, I'm going to guess, the major wing tendon. Which is just so completely cool. But anyway, the bone's not hurting?"

"Uh... no," said Cas, who seemed a little confused to hear that his wing-tendon was "completely cool."

"It's normal for your joints and tendons to feel sore at first, as long as the bone itself isn't hurting. Try again now."

Cas closed his eyes and gritted his teeth again, and at last the wing slowly opened... a few inches, then a few more. Very slowly. It got only a third of the way open and then Cas took a sharp breath and bit his lip. The wing stopped there.

"Okay, that's great," said Mac.

"It's barely opening at all," said Cas, looking over at the wing with obvious worry.

"That's actually pretty far," said Mac mildly. "Remember what I said before, about how it would probably have a reduced range of motion. In fact wings often get constricted like this after a few weeks of immobilization. The tendons shorten up. But this is pretty good."

"It's not opening enough," insisted Cas. "I can't fly if I can't get it fully open!"

He was beginning to sound distressed, his voice tight, and Sarah leaned in and said, "Cas, I bet it'll open more eventually. You may have to be patient."

"She's right, Eagle. It'll take a while," said Mac. "That turkey vulture whose wing we fixed, last year? Roger's been working with him every morning— Roger trained him to open his wings just before he gets fed, so the vulture kind of gets a little wing-stretching every morning. It's been slow, over a year now actually, but there's steady improvement. He can get it almost the whole way open now."

Cas looked at him sharply.

"Can he fly?" asked Cas.

Mac paused. "Well," he said. "My prediction is that—"

"Can the turkey vulture fly?" Cas interrupted him.

A moment of silence.

Mac confessed, "Not yet. But I'm hopeful."

Cas stared at him a moment, and looked back at his wing.

"Hey," said Dean. "Cas. You have to remember something. I'm gonna go out on a limb here and take a guess that you're probably smarter than the average turkey vulture. You're going to be able to work on this more than the vulture can."

Sam nodded and put in, "If the vulture's stretching his wing once a day, well, you can do two or three times, right? Ten times. Whatever. You can really focus on it."

Cas considered that, and gave a grudging nod. But he still looked pretty worried.
"In fact," said Mac, "Look in the mirror here. I think it's actually more open than you're thinking. You can't fully see it from your angle. Come over here to the mirror." Cas glanced at him, and walked over to the mirror and spread the wing, gritting his teeth again, opening it as far as it would go. A third of the way open. Just barely open enough to see all the flight feathers.

"See, Cas?" said Sarah. "That's really pretty good."

Cas didn't reply.

Cas was staring at his half-open wing in the mirror.

"Cas?" said Sarah again. But Cas didn't seem to be listening.

Slowly he turned around, till his back was to the mirror, his head craned over his shoulder, obviously trying to get a look at the back side of the wing.

His face had gone pale.

"Cas?" said Dean. "You okay?" Mac and Sarah moved in swiftly and grabbed his arms. They tried to walk him back to his chair, but Cas resisted, still staring in the mirror.

"Cas?" said Dean again, "What is it?"

Cas murmured, still looking in the mirror, "They're all gone..."

"What's all gone?" asked Sam.

"The tertials," said Cas. "All the tertials. All of them..." He shook free of Mac and Sarah, shifting around, trying to look at the wing from different angles. He even felt under his wing with one arm. Dean watched as Cas ran his hand along the bottom edge of the wing, where the tertials had been, and saw him freeze as his fingers found the sharp little stubs of the cut-off tertials.

Cas ran his hand slowly along all the little stubs.

He closed his eyes.

Mac looked pretty grim. "I had to cut them off. I'm really sorry, Eagle. It didn't occur to me no one had told you." He shot a dark glance at Dean and Sam, and then said, to Cas, "How big of a problem is this?"

Cas was obviously struggling to regain his composure. He took a few more breaths, and said, "I knew... I knew a few were gone. I just didn't realize it was... all of them."

"There's no way the bone would have healed otherwise," said Mac sadly. "I couldn't get the pins and the external fixator arranged around them, and also they were really pulling the bone-pieces around pretty badly. Just the weight of the feathers alone was pulling the bone-pieces out of position." Mac hesitated, looking at Castiel. "I tried not to cut them, but I couldn't see another solution. Eagle... please tell me angels can grow new feathers."

Cas took another breath, and swallowed. He finally managed to tear his eyes away from the mirror, and he folded the wing up. At last he said, "Yes. Um. Of course. Angels do grow new feathers."

Mac looked very relieved. "Oh, so you do molt, then? You'll molt in new tertials?"

Cas hesitated a moment before answering.
Finally Cas said, "Angels generally molt all the flight feathers once a year. Primaries, secondaries, and, yes, tertials."

"Primaries?" asked Dean. "Secondaries?"

Mac explained, "Primaries are the flight feathers on the outer third of the wing. These ones." He pointed to the longest flight feathers, the tremendous long black ones, on the outer part of Cas's wing. Mac went on, "Secondaries are the flight feathers in the middle of the wing, this section of really sturdy straight flight feathers here in the middle, these white ones. And tertials are the inner third. A mix of white-and-grey, in his case. In birds, tertials do... well, some lift, mostly; I'm not sure what they do in angels. Eagle? Are the tertials important? They seemed awfully strong when I cut them. I was worried, but couldn't find any other way. Do they have some special function?"

"Oh... some lift... like in birds," said Cas. "It's... not a problem."

It's a problem, thought Dean.

Dean asked, "If you molt once a year, then how come you never mentioned it?"

Cas hesitated yet again, and then said, "I didn't think you'd be interested. And it's... it's trivial, really. It's not a big deal."

It's a big deal, thought Dean.

But whatever it was, he would have to worm it out of Cas later.

"Okay, Eagle, it sounds like you only have to go without the tertials for a little while then, right? And then you'll regrow them?" asked Mac. He still looked worried.

Cas looked at him. And for the first time in several minutes, he seemed to notice how worried Dr. Mac was.

Cas lifted his chin.

"I'll be fine," said Cas to Dr. Mac. "I was just startled. Don't worry about it. Doctor, you saved my life, and you put my wing back together. I'm very grateful." Cas looked much calmer now, and he said, "The tertials are... a minor issue."

"Oh, thank god," said Mac with feeling. "You had me worried there."

Cas smiled at him, and said, "It just took me by surprise. I'm really very grateful."

He even shook Mac's hand again, and thanked him again. Mac looked very relieved.

Dean was about ninety-five percent sure it was an act, on Castiel's part. But it was a pretty good act.

Dean tried to ask Cas about it later, but Cas just repeated what he'd said to Dr. Mac; angels molt their tertials every year; he'd just been taken by surprise; it wasn't a problem. Dean still had his suspicions, but didn't get a chance to quiz Cas about it further, for they had to have a big group dinner next, and then Mac sent Cas off to bed, giving everyone else strict instructions that Cas not be disturbed.

Sarah and Mac spent much of the evening touring the bunker, Sarah showing Mac around while Sam and Dean chimed in with the tornado story. Then they sat and talked over physical therapy
ideas for Cas (Sarah and Mac both had a lot of ideas; Sam took reams of notes).

Predictably, Mac was fascinated by all the science-related stuff — the back lab, and the telescope. And when they got back into the library, which still had the stacks and stacks of jumbled books all over the table, Mac made a beeline for a book he'd spotted at the bottom of a stack.

"Check this out, Sarah. Some sort of a joke textbook?" he said, pulling it out and showing the title to her.

She read out loud: "An Introduction to the Biology of Werewolves and Other Metamorphosing Creatures. Seriously?"

Mac flipped it open. "Wait," he said, paging through it. "Is this for real?"

Dean peered over Mac's shoulder at the book. "Probably," said Dean. "Put it this way, there's a lot of species out there that I'm pretty sure you don't have in your zoo. And there's all kind of crazy science books here that we haven't catalogued yet."

"I've been trying to catalog this library for years," put in Sam, bringing over another stack of jumbled science books. "But it's huge. I gotta admit I never got to the science section. I've mostly been working through the history and mythological lore."

"Told you you'd love the library, didn't I?" said Sarah to Mac. "I was kind of busy with Cas when I was here but I found some great stuff. Every bunch of books has something amazing—" (she pulled out another book from the stack Sam was holding) "Like, check this out, 'The Nutritional Needs of Vampires and Vampire-Bats.' You could spend a lifetime going through this library."

"And whoa, check out this one here," said Mac, grabbing another from Sam's stack as Sam set it on the table. Mac read from the spine: "The Anatomy of Chimeras: Minotaurs, Griffins and their Kin... Oh man." He flipped through both books a little, and said to Sam and Dean, "Do you two mind if I look through these a bit more? I've never seen anything like this. My god, check this out... The number of species!" He'd already burrowed into the chimera book, muttering "This is extremely cool," the book spread open in one hand, while Sarah grinned at him from across the table.

Dean and Sam had to smile, too, at how mesmerized Mac seemed to be by a pile of weird old biology books. Sam pushed a chair over to Mac and said, "Take a seat." Mac sank down slowly, already lost in The Anatomy of Chimeras, as Dean added, "Sorry it's all a total mess right now. The tornado totally ripped the library apart and we haven't had a chance to get it sorted out. Here, you know what, why don't you have a drink while you go through them?" Dean went over to the bar and poured out a few glasses of whiskey.

"Let's put 'em in order!" said Mac. He set down The Anatomy of Chimeras and was started flipping through some of the other science books. Sarah joined in too, clearly in her element, saying, "How about, botany here, weird species here, alchemy books over here..." as she rapidly sorted them into neat little stacks.

"Yes..." murmured Mac, "I'll just sort these out, put 'em in order." Though already it seemed like Sarah was doing the sorting, and Mac was more doing the sitting-and-reading. Mac went on, "Then we get to look at them, Jake, and you get your books sorted. It's the least we can do."

Sam laughed at that, and said, "You don't have to do a damn thing, Mac. You saved Cas."

Mac looked up at him.

He set down The Anatomy of Chimeras and said to Sam, "Treating your friend Castiel has been the
greatest privilege of my life."

Mac swiveled a bit to look at Dean too. He said, "Sam. Dean." He'd suddenly gone all serious, which seemed to also involve switching to Dean's real name. "You might have noticed, my bedside manner isn't the greatest. Actually it's nonexistent." Sarah, standing beside him, rolled her eyes, but Mac said, glancing up at her, "It's true, Sarah. Because, all my other patients are wild animals, and they're always trying to kill me and none of them can talk anyway, so my usual bedside manner is to wrestle my patient to a standstill and muzzle him." He turned back to Sam and Dean. "What I'm getting at is, I don't really have any practice at all at breaking bad news gently and cheering patients up and and giving them hope. I could see that Castiel was rattled by those missing feathers for some reason, and also by the wing not opening. I'm sorry I had to tell him about the vulture not flying, but he asked, and he deserves the truth. And he doesn't even know the worst of it." Mac was silent a moment, and then he said, "The truth is that it's not just the vulture. The truth is... virtually all big birds that have injuries like this will never fly again. But Dean, Sam, can you both please convey to him, he's not a bird. Dean, what you said was exactly right: he can think. He can plan, he can work, and most of all he can do physical therapy, and you guys can help him. And he's a whole different species anyway! What I mean is, he definitely shouldn't give up. So... can you keep him going? Give him some hope, maybe?"

"We're on it," said Sam.

"Sam and I both. We'll keep him going," Dean added.

"On that note—" said Sam, passing around the glasses of whiskey. Mac raised his glass.

"To our imperial eagle," said Mac. "May he fly again."

They all clinked glasses, and took very big swigs.

_A/N -_

I know I know, the tertials still aren't explained! I ran out of room. That's coming in the next chapter.

Please let me know if you are liking this! (And if you REALLY want to make my day, tell me a scene you liked. Bless those of you who tell me something like that every time, you keep me going!) More soon.

Flight readers - you probably have already picked out what Sarah's new trajectory is going to be in this fic. What do you think? You probably can see the potential: TFW stays nonromantic, but Sarah can still be heavily involved in the Winchesters' lives, and a certain other character now gets to be involved with the Winchester family as well.
A/N - OK, I'm just resurfacing after a spectacularly catastrophic summer & fall that had me in & out of hospitals and almost losing my job. It turned out I had some compressed cranial nerves due to... wait for it... WAY TOO MUCH TIME WRITING (plus extreme stress at work caused by a hell boss, which eventually resulted in me going to HR. Cue MASSIVE WORK DRAMA all through Sept-Oct that went right to the CEO. I am now free of my hell boss but I have never been such a mess in my life).

I managed to keep Into The Fire going, but Broken had to be paused entirely. I'm going to try to pick Broken back up now but updates will still be sporadic since the compressed-nerves thing keeps flaring up whenever I spend too long on my laptop. Thanks for bearing with me!

They were all sorry to see Mac and Sarah go the next morning, for it had been far too short a visit. Sarah, of course, was practically one of the gang by now, and Mac had settled right into the bunker as if he'd been a Man of Letters in some previous life. But they had to go; Mac apparently had an important, long-scheduled "elephant foot trim" to do on Monday morning, of all the things. And Sarah had already burned through all her vacation time during the previous weeks of helping care for Cas right after his wing had first broken.

And, of course, there were the elementals anyway. The Queen and her cowboys.

It was time to get to work.

Sam and Dean decided to both go with Mac and Sarah to the Nebraska airport. All four of them would be going, was the plan — all piled into the Impala together. This was so that Sam and Dean could drop off Mac and Sarah at the airport, and then go do some shopping in Hastings.

It was a calm, clear winter morning, mild for January. They were all standing around in the driveway watching Mac pack his medical equipment into the Impala's trunk, when Castiel thoroughly startled Sarah by asking if she could take Meg back to Wyoming.

"What? Why, Cas?" Sarah asked, staring at him. "You love that cat!"

"I do," he said, nodding, as if this were a given. "But I might be, um, leaving soon, traveling, and I can't take her with me. I know it's a lot to ask, Sarah, but, I was worried about who'll feed her when I'm gone. Because, Sam and Dean will be gone too. Could you possibly take her? I've got a little money for her cat food. I know it's not much, but, would it help?"

He held out two dollar bills, and a little handful of pocket change.

Dean looked at the tiny bit of money that Cas was holding out. He happened to know that was all the cash Cas had in the world. It was all he'd had left after paying to board Meg at that kennel, six weeks ago.

Cas is planning to come to Florida with us, Dean realized. There was no other reason Cas would even consider sending Meg away. Cas must have come up with some plan of his own to get to Florida. Some plan that didn't involve needing any cash, obviously. Probably some hare-brained scheme, some crazy idea that would hide his wings, maybe walking across the country at night or hiding in a truck or something.
And of course Cas had not quite gotten around to actually *discussing* this with Dean or Sam, or mentioning it *at all*, or anything rational like that. But that was about par for the course, right? That was the Castiel way. Actually, it was the Winchester way, too, come to think of it.

It was good news, actually. Because it meant Cas wasn't giving up.

*Well, Cas, I just might have my own secret plan,* thought Dean with a little grin.

Though Cas did have a point about the cat. Who would take care of Meg? This was a complication that Dean had totally overlooked.

Sarah was still trying to resist taking Cas's two dollars and change, when Dean said, "Hey Sarah, sorry Cas sprang this on you at the *last second*, with *no warning,*" — he gave Cas a glare— "but, I just realized, he's right, Meg actually *is* going to need someone to take care of her. We could board her again, I guess, but it'd be better if she were with someone she knew. Is it at all a possibility for you to take her? She knows you, and it actually really *would* help us out. We didn't know till just yesterday that Cas's wing was healing up so well, and, he's right, we've got some travel coming up. So... it'd be a huge help, actually. And I've got more than two dollars for the cat food. Cas, keep your two bucks, I got it."

Cas reluctantly put his two dollars (and change) back in his pocket as Sarah thought it over. She started nodding slowly. "It'll work, actually," she said. "My landlady allows cats, and Meg's a sweetie. And I like cats. Though..." She added nonchalantly, "Mac, you're a vet, I might need a little cat advice, about bringing her on the plane? And maybe I could call you about some other questions? I haven't had a cat before. It'd be nice if I could call you up." Here she directed an innocently wide-eyed look at Mac.

Dean had the distinct impression that she was having to restrain herself from batting her eyes.

For maybe the first time ever, Mac looked a little flustered.

"Uh, of course," said Mac. "Of course. Call any time. Any time."

Sarah grinned. And so did Sam and Dean, both of whom knew that Sarah already knew perfectly well how to take care of a cat. She'd already had Meg for a week or so in Wyoming, back when Cas had been on the run.

"Oh, Sarah, *thank you*," said Cas, oblivious to all the grinning. "Thank you so much."

So Dean called the airline to doublecheck about bringing Meg along.

"Oh, too bad, Sarah," said Dean when he got off the phone with the airline, "I had to change your flight to several hours later. Same time as Mac's, actually. But Sam and I already have an appointment in Hastings, so we gotta take you both out to the airport right now. That means you two are gonna have to hang out in the airport together. Really sorry. You'll probably have to tolerate each other for a few hours. Maybe have lunch together. Sorry about that."

"That's okay," said Sarah brightly.

"We'll manage," said Mac.

Dean couldn't help laughing.

Mac said, "All right, if that's all sorted let's get the kitty settled— she'll have a long journey. I can give her a tiny bit of tranquilizer, just to keep her calm on the drive, and a tiny bit more at the airport.
Just enough to take the edge off, so she won't get too stressed. And, Sarah, actually I do know a few tricks for setting up her carrier so she'll feel safer and can even have a teeny litterbox. Usually it's lions that I'm shipping, but, same idea."

Soon they had a very-slightly-dopey Meg ready in her little cat carrier.

The cat issue had been rapidly settled; Meg was all set; and the car was all packed. It was time to go.

But then Cas suddenly launched on a long series of hugs. He'd only really gotten the hang of hugging over the past few months, and now he seemed determined to use today's departure as an opportunity to practice, for he started in with a big long hug to Sarah, and then gave a just-as-tight, just-as-long hug to Mac too. (Dean muttered to Sam, "Oh god, he's turning into a hugger," and Sam whispered back, "It's allowed, Dean.")

Mac, for his part, actually seemed pretty touched. Then it was Sam's and Dean's turns, even longer hugs now, each of these hugs so tight that neither Sam or Dean could quite get a breath in.

The whole time, Cas kept telling everybody over and over, "Thank you. Thank you all, for trying to take care of me."

Last of all Cas gave a Meg a little scratch through the bars of her cat carrier, as best he could reach, while telling her, "Sarah will take care of you. She's very nice, Meg. Please don't be afraid. You'll be fine, I promise." He suddenly got worried about Meg's cat food all over again and tried once more to give Sarah the two dollars, so Sarah had to assure him several more times that she didn't need the two dollars, and that Meg would be fine. So Cas gave her another hug. This seemed to launch him on a whole second round of hugs, and suddenly Mac was getting another hug, and then Sam. Sam met Dean's eyes over the top of Cas's wings, almost laughing. It was kind of funny, actually, this sudden onslaught of angel-hugs; it was sweet.

*He just can't believe his wing's really healing*, thought Dean.

But then Dean noticed that Cas's right wing was folded up unusually tight.

That was the "worried wing" position, as Dean had come to think of it. The left wing looked similar, actually. They were both folded in so tight that they were overlapping each other at his back.

So when Cas got around to Dean and started in on Dean's second nearly-asphyxiating hug of the morning, Dean said into his ear, "Remember what I told you that night? Told you to hang in there, didn't I? Told you I wouldn't give up on you."

That awful night. When Cas had been lying there in the Impala, at the door of Mac's vet clinic, nearly on the verge of giving up, and Dean had made him promise to hang on.

Cas broke the hug and pulled back, giving Dean a very sharp look.

"You just keep on hangin' in there, Cas," said Dean. "Cause you are gonna use that wing, I swear."

"Listen to your friend, Eagle," said Mac. Cas gave him a very sharp look too.

Dean clapped Cas on the shoulder and said to the others, "Planes are waiting, folks, we gotta hit the road!" They managed to get into the car before Cas had a chance to start a third round of hugs. Dean looked in the rearview mirror as he drove away; Cas was standing in the snowy driveway watching them leave.

Cas stood there a long time, watching the Impala drive all the way down the long driveway.
Both wings were unbound... *at last.*

But both were still folded up tight.

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Sam and Dean finally got back to the bunker in the middle of the afternoon, to find that Cas had left two new pies sitting out in the kitchen, along with a cryptic little note that read: "These are for you both. I am going outside. Don't worry about me."

This was a little concerning. Where had he gone? What if somebody saw him?

Dean sighed, waving the note at Sam. "No clue about *where*, of course, or *how long*, or anything *useful*.

"Probably just wanted to feel the wind in his wings, don't you think?" said Sam, starting to put away the groceries they'd bought. "This is the first day he's been out of the bandages. And he's been cooped up so long."

"But he *knows* he shouldn't go out in public. He really can't let himself be seen." Dean flung the note down, a little irritated. And a little worried. Dean thought a moment, staring at the note again while Sam put the food away. Had Cas already launched on whatever crazy plan he had dreamed up for getting to Florida?

Dean tried to call Cas's cell (Lebanon's little cell tower had finally been fixed) but Cas didn't answer. "Dammit," Dean muttered, shoving his phone back in his pocket.

"Relax," Sam said. "He knows he needs to stay out of sight. He probably just went around the bunker in the trees or something. He must want to just stretch that wing out, don't you think? Out in the open air? And it's not that cold out today, and he's got the jacket AND the vest." (They'd made him a variety of "wing-ready" shirts by now, plus a polarfleece vest that could go over the polarfleece jacket.) "Look, give him an hour to turn up and then we'll panic, okay?"

Dean still felt a little worried, but he agreed. "An hour. Okay." He thought a moment more, and brightened, saying, "Actually, this might be perfect. I can spiff up his presents and have them all ready for him when he gets back."

Dean had gotten two presents for Cas. Two things he'd picked up in Nebraska. They just needed some modifications.

Sam grinned. "He's going to love 'em. Want any help?"

"Nah, I got it," said Dean, already gathering up his stuff to head out to the shop in the garage. "But if he doesn't turn up in an hour, I'm sending out the dogs."

"And I'll send them out with you," Sam said. "But, wait a sec, Dean, wait." Sam beckoned him toward the library, saying, "Before you get to work, I just remembered there's something you might want to see. This morning Mac showed me a book that might be useful— Sarah ran across it last night. Let's see, it should be over here..."

Sam started poking through the stacks of books on the end of the library table, the books Mac had sorted out the previous night. Sam said, "Jeez, look at all the progress they made... Oh, here it is."

Sam picked up a large leather-bound book that was sitting by itself. It looked like it was probably
from the first half of the twentieth century, maybe the 1930s or so. Sam held it up at Dean, and said, "This morning Mac and Sarah and I were talking about ideas for Cas's physical therapy and they suggested we give it a read."

Dean came closer and looked at the big book. The front cover read, in silver-stamped letters on smooth black leather:

*The Physiology of Angels*

*With Notes on Behavior*

*and*

*Additional Observations*

*by*

*Knut Schmidt-Nielsen*

Sam flipped it open and began flicking through the pages. Pages and pages of text riffled by; Dean caught sight of tantalizing headings like "Flow of Heavenly Power" and "What is the Angel's True Form?" and "Holy Fire and Other Weaknesses." The middle of the book had a series of magnificent hand-drawn color plates separated by fine translucent rice-paper: gorgeous hand-drawn illustrations of wings, and close-ups of flight feathers, and complex diagrams of "grace flow", along with diagrams of different types of angels and all their "true forms".

"Whoa," said Dean.

Sam said, "I had no idea we had anything like this." He flipped back to the wing illustration and they both gazed at it for a moment. It was a lovely pen-and-ink drawing done with exquisite detail, every single feather delicately drawn in. The wing looked just like Cas's, the proportions exactly the same — though in the illustration the wing was all white. Primaries, secondaries and tertials were all neatly labeled, and there were several other tiny ornate labels for the many rows of little sleek feathers that covered up the flight-feather roots and the leading edge of the wing. There was even a little inset illustration of the alulas— Cas's little winglets.

Sam flipped back to the table of contents, Dean still looking over Sam's shoulder, and they read:

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*Author's Preface*

1. *The Variety of Angels*

2. *The Angel's True Form*

3. *Dimensions, Wavelengths and the Etheric Plane*

4. *Vessels and Possession*

5. *Grace and Power*
"Dean, this is a big find," said Sam. "We don't have that many books on angels, and none of them cover half these things. Mac was thinking it might have something useful about how to exercise wings or stretch them or anything. You know what, I'll start right now." Sam was already pulling up a chair. "While we're waiting for Cas to get back."

"Sounds great," said Dean. "So, Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"Look up tertials, would you?"

Sam grimaced. "Yeah, my first thought too. I'll start with this wing chapter here. Chapter 6."

"Hope you find something," said Dean, "Because I'm pretty damn sure there's something our imperial eagle isn't telling us."

Sam shot Dean a glance and nodded, settling down at the table. He pushed *The Anatomy of Chimeras* out of the way and put *The Physiology of Angels* in its place, and Dean headed off to the garage.

Twenty minutes later Sam came striding into the garage, walking very fast. Carrying the book.

"You need to read this," said Sam, slapping *The Physiology of Angels* down on Dean's workbench. "Right now."

Sam pushed the book over the workbench at Dean, shoved Dean's inevitable whiskey glass out of the way, and pointed to one particular section in the book. Dean looked up at Sam for a second, trying to read his expression, but Sam was unhelpfully stone-faced. Dean frowned, set down his tools, pulled up Cas's barstool to the workbench, and sat down.
"I'm getting our coats," said Sam, rather mysteriously, "Be right back. You read." He walked away.

Dean looked down at the open book and saw a section that started with a bold-print heading:

Tertials - Form and Function

"Oh," said Dean, looking up at Sam, who was almost out the door already.

"Just read it," called Sam, heading off to get the coats.

Dean read.

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Tertials - Form and Function

Every child knows that the primaries provide thrust (forward acceleration), while the secondaries provide lift. What, then, of the tertiary flight feathers, the "tertials"? In birds the tertials have a relatively minor role, but in angels the tertials are critically important.

Power. Recall that wings have not one but two functions in angels. Wings are essential to flight, of course, but they have another function as well: they are the means by which angels gather and store the power of Heaven, which gives them all their angelic abilities (see Chapters 5, 8). Put succinctly, when wings are in the etheric plane, the flight feathers continuously collect Heavenly power, which streams continuously through the surrounding "ether", the filmy cosmic substance that permeates all space in the etheric dimension (see Chapter 3). It is the tertials that actually collect and store this power in the grace, rather like a solar-cell storing the power of sunlight in a battery. It is for this reason that angels tend to leave their wings in the etheric plane whenever possible, for only with the wings in the etheric plane can an angel collect power, i.e., re-charge the grace.

The tertials do the great majority of power-collection. Why the tertials? We know that grace enters and exits vessels through the mouth and occasionally through a cut in the throat (see Chapter 5). This tells us that grace is primarily housed in the respiratory system, i.e. lungs and throat. To understand the role of the tertials, one must merely recall the well-known fact that in winged creatures, angels as well as birds, the respiratory system actually extends into the center of the humerus via a slender air sac. These simple facts tell us immediately that the roots of the tertial feathers, and the tertial feathers only, are in direct contact with grace. Thus only the tertials can re-charge the grace with Heavenly power.

The essential role of tertials in gathering power has some consequences of significance should an angel lose tertials in battle. An angel who has lost too many tertials cannot collect power. Even if some tertials remain, power bleeds out of the grace through the severed ones as quickly as it is collected by the remaining tertials.

Control in flight. Tertials also play an important role in flight, particularly when angels inhabit vessels. An angel inhabiting a vessel cannot use his natural tail for braking and steering, as he would in his true form. Instead, the tertials take on this job. Tertials on both sides can be flared down simultaneously to act as a brake, or the tertials can be flared down on one side only to turn the angel. Tertials are very strongly rooted due to the tremendous flight-forces they must withstand during such maneuvers. Tertials are also used in the transition of wings or vessel in and out of the etheric plane, a maneuver that requires delicate control.

Tertialing. It should be clear that loss of too many tertials can cripple an angel. If half or more of the tertials are gone, the angel will typically be unable to recharge power and will also be incapable
of controlled flight. There is, in fact, a form of angelic self-exile termed "tertialing" in which the angel severs the tertials of both wings and then embarks on one last (uncontrolled) departure into the etheric plane. Such angels are never heard from again. Given the extreme loss of flight control that must occur in such a scenario, we may speculate that such angels may, perhaps, be flung off the planet entirely; or perhaps they fall, down through the ether, to the planetary core. The fate of tertialed angels remains unclear.

This was almost too much to take in. Dean had to stop reading halfway through, muttering "Oh man. Oh no," and then had to start all over again from the top.

Sam reappeared by his side so suddenly that Dean jumped. Sam was holding both their coats.

"Did you read it?" said Sam, his voice low.

"Yeah," Dean managed to say, still trying to understand what he'd just read. "Yeah, okay, it sounds a little bad." Sam made a rough little huff sound that wasn't quite a laugh, and Dean said, "Okay, more than a little. Okay. It's bad. BUT. He can grow them back. He can grow them back. He said so."

Sam silently reached out to the book and flipped a few pages ahead. He stopped on a certain page, and Dean saw the heading "Molt," and his heart sank.

Sam didn't say anything; he just put his finger by one particular sentence. Dean read:

Molt, the growth of new feathers, is an energetically expensive, exhausting, and hazardous process; an angel must be at full power in order to molt.

Cas had said, about molt, "It's trivial. It's not a big deal."


But Dean didn't understand why Sam thought it had any connection to Cas's tertial situation. Then it hit him. Dean flipped back to the "Tertials" section, and read:

an angel who has lost too many tertials cannot collect power

and then he flipped forward to the "Molt" section and read again:

an angel needs to be at full power in order to molt

Dean had to flip back and forth several times, comparing the two sentences in numb confusion, before it fully sank in.
Sam said, quietly, "He can't get power without new tertials, and he can't grow new tertials without power. One hell of a catch-22."

Dean had to fight down a sudden urge to fling the stupid book in a nearby trashcan, and actually had to get up and walk away from the workbench to stop himself from doing this. He got all of three steps away and then had to take three steps back, because he'd forgotten his whiskey glass, and he suddenly really needed to chug down the entire rest of the whiskey. Which he did.

"Let me just get this straight," said Dean, starting to pace back and forth, the empty glass clenched in one hand, his voice gruff. "He can't grow new tertials because he has no power, cause he can't molt without power. And without the tertials... he can't collect any more power, so... he is... just... stuck like this, isn't he. Stuck with no tertials. Which means he can't friggin' fly, not even if he gets that wing working, because, because, let's see, he can't fly here because he's too heavy here, and he can't fly in that friggin etheric plane either, cause without the tertials he can't brake or steer, and he'd either crash into the goddam core of the friggin' planet or he'd fly off into space. AND he probably can't even just put the wings away cause if he tried, he'd probably lose control and just zing off into outer space or something." Dean ground to a halt and swung around at Sam, saying, "That about sum it up?"

Sam nodded. "I think so." Dean stared at the book for a moment, as Sam summarized, "Mortal, powerless, flightless. And with the physical wings. And stuck that way."

"He knew this," Dean said, setting his glass down abruptly with a loud clunk on the table. "He fucking knew this. He didn't tell us. He didn't tell me."

"Probably didn't want to worry us," said Sam. "You know how he is."

"DAMMIT!" said Dean. He was seized suddenly with an intense need to... do something—hit something, smash something, knock the workbench over or the barstool or... something, anything; he snatched his whiskey glass up again and was a split second from smashing the glass onto the floor, when he hesitated, the glass up in his hand.

Cas had done such a careful job sweeping up all the shattered glass after the tornado. He'd worked so hard at it.

Dean felt all the energy drain out of him. He set his glass down on the table very gently, and sank down onto the stool.

"Dean," said Sam, suddenly straightening up. "Oh shit. I just realized something."

"What?"

"Dean, he gave Meg away."

Dean stared at him.

Sam said, "He said he might be leaving. He hugged us all. Twice. And—Dean," Sam stalled a moment, and finished, "He left that note, he said, 'don't worry about me'—"

They were both sprinting out of the garage before they even got their coats on.

Outside, of course, they had no idea where to go. They both burst out of the garage and then just
stood there, looking around in the bright afternoon sunshine.

Dean had to take a breath to make himself calm down. Sam handed him his coat and scarf, and Dean got them on fast and then rubbed his forehead with one hand, staring around, trying to think of a plan. For once he couldn't seem to get any kind of a plan together. Where was Cas? What was he up to? Had he run away? He couldn't possibly be thinking of " tertialing" himself or some damn thing, could he?

Dean didn't know. But he felt miserably certain of one thing: that strange double round of hugs this morning had been a goodbye.

"CAS!" Dean called.

There was no answer.

Sam said, "I'll check the bunker— he might actually still be in there somewhere, we haven't even looked— and how about you check the trees around the bunker, from here to the road, cause if he tries to stay out of sight of people, he'll stay in the trees, right? And look for tracks in the snow, as you go. Maybe try the phone again, and prayer. And then we'll meet at the road and regroup."

"Yeah, yeah, okay," said Dean as he turned around, searching the trees now for any sign of Castiel. "Yeah, that's good. I do outside, you do inside, meet back here in fifteen minutes. Dammit, Sam, he gave up Meg. I should've known right then."

"Don't panic," said Sam. "Probably he just took a walk. Probably he just wanted to think things over. Get going, see you in fifteen." He clapped Dean on the shoulder and disappeared inside.

Dean started walking. But all he saw was trees, and fields, and snow. No sign of those big dramatic wings anywhere he looked. No footprints, and no sign of an angel.

Castiel was gone.

A/N -

Here's my original A/N from when I wrote Flight:

...so... you remember that "depressed Castiel" tag? Yeah... this is what that tag was actually about.

About the Schmidt-Nielsen chapter: Sorry for writing practically a whole book about the wing headcanon, but I just had to lay out how well it hangs together. Yes, the humerus (the innermost bone of the wing) actually IS connected to the respiratory system in birds, and if you think about it waaaaay too long, as I have, you come to this inescapable conclusion that tertials MUST be how angels collect power; and you also end up concluding that since angels don't seem to have tails while in vessels, the tertials MUST also have taken on the "rudder" role of braking and steering too. (Because flying creatures must have a rudder system to steer, and it's best if it's close to the body.) And then it logically falls out that loss of the tertials would be disastrous. I swear this has to be correct; it all hangs together so perfectly!

ahhhh, poor Cas....
Next chapter up on Thanksgiving weekend. Thanks for your patience!
Dean started out walking around the bunker, on the unlikely chance that Cas really just had gone for a walk through the trees. He began by looking for tracks, but realized almost immediately that it was going to be impossible to do any tracking. The snow was too criss-crossed and trampled with all the tracks they'd made earlier, after the storm, when they'd been repairing all the windows and dragging fallen branches around.

So Dean just walked. He sent out a worried prayer as he went, muttering out loud: "Castiel, can you hear me? Cas, we know about the tertials. Where are you? I know you probably just took a walk—" (Dean couldn't help clinging to this theory) "—but, if you're hearing this, could you please come back? We're kind of worried."

He started a full perimeter walk all the way around the bunker, pushing his way through the snowy bushes and past the trees to follow the bunker walls. He kept calling Cas's name as he went. And kept looking for tracks, just in case.

No Cas. No tracks.

*Dammit,* Dean thought, as he finished the circuit around the bunker. *Dammit, dammit, DAMMIT.*

Dean came out onto the driveway, looking around in the chilly air. The driveway was empty, the rutted tire tracks long since frozen. Bare-branched trees stood on either side of the driveway in long, silent rows. Dean looked nonetheless, walking down the driveway toward the main road, periodically working his way into the trees on either side to see if he could find any tracks.

No tracks. No Cas.

At the end of the driveway, Dean peered down the main road in both directions. He could see a good stretch of straight empty road in both directions. The road north to Lebanon's downtown... the road south, through the empty winter fields...

No Cas. There was nobody in sight at all.

It was an incongruously pretty winter afternoon. There wouldn't be too much longer till sunset (at this time of winter, the days were very short) but the sky was still a bright bowl of blue, the snow on the fields almost blindingly white. In any other situation Dean might have enjoyed the wide-open starkness of the snowy winter scene. But now the bright sun just looked menacing, the blue sky depressing. The whole shining winter world seemed pitilessly empty. *Where was Cas?*

A throaty rumble behind him announced the approaching Impala. Dean turned to see Sam driving toward him from the bunker. Sam pulled up next to Dean at the intersection with the main road, rolled his window down and said, "Any luck?"

"Nothing."

"Well, he's definitely not in the bunker," said Sam.

"Hey, what about Charlene?" said Dean, in a sudden burst of inspiration. "Let's call Charlene!" (Charlene was a friend of Sam's who had a special knack for locating missing people. She'd helped them find Cas a few months before.)

But Sam shook his head. "Already tried. Couldn't reach her. I'll keep trying." *Damn.* "So... how
about I drive to town and check the bus station?" continued Sam. "And the library and the minimart and everything. And you walk the other direction down the road here, just in case he went for a walk that way? If I don't find him in town I'll come pick you up."

Dean nodded. They traded another grim look— this was getting very disturbing— and Sam drove off toward town, while Dean started walking down the main road through the fields to the south, still calling Cas's name, and praying to him occasionally.

The prayers degraded over time. The first one started off as, "Cas, we know about the tertials, please let us help you," but about six prayers later Dean had ended up at a gruff, "Dammit, you idiot angel, where the fuck did you go?"

He made himself shut up with the prayers then, thinking, Gotta get hold of myself. He's probably fine. I just gotta find him. I just gotta think. Where would he go?

Cas might have just taken off entirely, of course — out on the roads, maybe trying to hitch his way out of Kansas, maybe hiding in the back of a truck or whatever crazy idea he'd come up with. (Dean refused to consider the possibility that Cas might be planning anything more serious than just running away.) If Cas had tried to hitchhike or catch a bus or anything, hopefully Sam would track him down. But if he hadn't left... if he was still nearby... where would he have gone?

Dean paused. He was standing almost right in the tornado-track now, at the point where it crossed the road. From here the track looked rather like a long, very straight, snowy river, lumpy with snow-covered branches and debris. It cut right across the road. Dean looked back and forth along the tornado-track. No Cas.

Where would he go?

Sighing, Dean looked up at the sky to check how much time he had till sunset. The sun was starting to sink toward the horizon.

And just then a flock of little birds flew by.

They were the type of little "snowbirds" that always showed up in winter in Kansas, the kind that had black-and-white wings. Almost like Cas's, in fact, and so of course they drew Dean's eye. The little birds flew very high overhead, rising till they were just little specks, wheeling in the sky and then darting down. Dean watched them till they disappeared far into the distance.

"Ah, Cas... you must miss flying so damn much," said Dean aloud. "Even just the view up there must be so cool...."

The view up there, thought Dean. The view.

Cas had been stuck inside for so long now. He'd just had his wing unbound... and at almost the exact moment that he'd learned that his wing was healing, he'd also discovered he would never fly again. What would he do then?

Dean thought of Sam saying, "He probably just wanted to feel the wind in his wings."

Dean watched the little snowbirds wing their way into the distance, thinking, The view up there. The view up there. Once the birds were out of sight he began turning in a little circle, looking all around, scanning the horizon intently.

This area of Kansas near Lebanon had some rolling hills that fringed the edges of the fields. The bunker was set into the side of one of those hills, in fact, and there were a few bigger hills not too far
off from the bunker. One in particular drew Dean's eye now: A nice-sized wooded hill, about a half mile southwest of the bunker, on the other side of the tornado-track. Sam and Dean had noticed it before; they used it as a landmark sometimes, when they were heading home after a long hunt. It was the first hill that came into view when they were returning to the bunker. It was a good landmark because it was the highest hill around.

The highest hill around. The highest place... with the highest view.

Dean headed straight for the hill, tromping west along the frozen tornado-track as far as he could and then cutting south across a field. The snow had melted and refrozen since the storm, and Dean could almost, but not quite, walk on the skin of icy snow on the surface. On about every third step he broke through the crust into about a foot of soft snow beneath. It caused him a bit of struggle and soon he was panting, but he kept up as brisk a pace as he could manage, and soon he'd reached the hill and he started trudging up it.

Up, up, up, all the way up, skidding occasionally in the snow, floundering up to his hips in thicker snowbanks a couple times.

A sense of urgency came over him as he worked his way higher. The sun was definitely getting low now, the evening light starting to slant over the fields, and a terrible sense of limited time became to gnaw at Dean. Where was Cas? What was Cas doing right now? Dean tried to hurry, and the closer he got to the top of the hill the more worried he got. A tight panic started to grip at his heart, and Dean began to think, Please be here, Cas, please be here, please be here...

And please be okay. Please be okay.

He was gasping hard as he neared the top of the hill. Snow had gotten into his boots by now and there were ice-cold clumps of half-melted slush trickling down to his feet, but Dean barely noticed as he hurried. There was a little open spot up ahead. Dean floundered up through the last snowbank and shoved his way through the last bush —

And there was Castiel.

He was fine.

Cas was standing with his wings spread, facing away from Dean. He was looking out at the west toward the late-afternoon sun, with the wind in his face. And he was fine.

Dean sagged with relief. Then he had to put his head down and gasp for breath, for he'd actually been nearly racing up the hill, much more frightened than he had dared admit to himself. His heart was absolutely pounding, in fact, the cold air searing his lungs as he took in huge lungfuls of air. Dean had to bend over with his hands on his knees just to pant for a while. He stood there bent over, panting, his head twisted up so he could keep his eyes on Cas.

Cas hadn't even noticed Dean yet. He seemed to have not even heard Dean's somewhat-noisy panting arrival. Dean was still about thirty yards behind him, and it was pretty windy up here on the hill, an icy breeze blowing steadily. Cas was probably only hearing the wind.

Castiel was standing on the very, very highest part of the hill. The top of the hill was almost bare of trees, with just one gnarled old maple tree off to the side, twisted from the continuous wind. Next to
the maple tree the ground rose in a slight mound of earth that was dusted with snow, and Cas was standing on the very highest point of this little mound of earth. In fact, it looked like he'd even found a largish rock, about four inches thick and a few feet wide, and had dragged the rock over to the mound (Dean could see the drag mark). He'd put the rock on the very highest point of the mound, and then he'd stood up on the rock. 

Presumably just so he could get another four inches of extra elevation. 

The wind was blowing in Cas's face, and he had his right wing almost fully extended, tilted forward so it was parallel to the ground, the long flight feathers splayed out. The whole wing looked like a perfectly engineered construction. Angled into the wind; ready for takeoff. 

Built for the air. Ready for flight. 

But attached to the wrong body. 

And his left wing, of course, was only about one-third open. It wasn't quite angled like the other one; it seemed that Cas couldn't quite rotate that wing enough to get the feathers parallel to the ground. The awful gap in the feathers, where the tertials had been cut, seemed terribly obvious; even from where Dean was standing, he could see the long bare patch of skin all along that part of the wing. He could even make out the long surgical scar, and the little band aids. 

And the short stubs of the missing tertials. 

Dean finally caught his breath enough to stand up. He took a moment to tap out a quick text to Sam: "Found him. He's ok. Meet at bunker."

He got a reply almost instantly: "Motherfucking hallelujah." Sticking the phone back in his pocket, he glanced back up at Cas. Cas still hadn't seen him. 

Dean walked a little closer, inching around to Cas's side. Cas's eyes were closed. 

"Hey Cas," Dean said gently.

Cas jumped and gave one sharp flap with his right wing, and even a little flap with his left. The asymmetrical flap seemed to shove him off balance and he stumbled off the rock, twisting around to face Dean. 

"Oh, sorry," said Dean. "Didn't mean to startle you,"

"Dean," said Cas, catching his breath. He folded both wings in partway, the right one coming in till it matched the left. "I didn't hear you coming."

"You went out for a walk, huh?" ventured Dean. "We were sorta looking for you. Um... we got kind of worried. I tried praying to you but I guess you didn't hear."

Cas's eyes slid away, and he turned his head to gaze out over the fields again. "I heard."

"Oh," said Dean. "Um. Sorry about that last prayer, um, I..."

"It's all right, Dean," said Cas. He flicked a brief look back at Dean and then turned back to the view again. "I'm sorry you had to look for me. I didn't think it would worry you so much. I just wanted..." He paused, still looking out over the fields to the west.
"I just wanted to come up here and... look around," Cas said.

Dean glanced out over the landscape. "Yeah, nice view up here, huh," he said.

They both stared out at the fields for a moment. Gray clouds were scudding by overhead now, thin patches of shadow blowing by on the snowy fields below. It was getting increasingly cold—the sun was really getting pretty low—but Cas didn’t seem to notice.

"Kinda chilly up here, huh?" said Dean.

Cas didn’t answer. He was just staring out over the fields.

"Cas..." began Dean, "Why didn’t you tell us? About the tertials?"

Cas gave him one quick, sharp glance, and then returned to looking at the view, his mouth tight.

"We found this book," said Dean, "This 'Physiology of Angels' book—" Cas looked back at him then, with a distinctly surprised look. He shook his head with a faint laugh, and looked away again.

"I should have guessed you two would find a copy of that book somehow," muttered Cas. "It's just like you."

"Why didn't you tell us, Cas?" said Dean. "You've known about this all along, haven't you?"

Cas said, "Dean... " He stopped a moment, his shoulders dropping as looked down at the snowy ground. He said, "I knew as soon as I woke up. After the surgery. I knew I'd lost some tertials." He paused. "I knew this was a possibility; I'd just somehow managed to convince myself it wasn't that bad." He gave a little sigh, looking down at his left wing.

"Mac tried not to cut them," Dean said, "He really tried, Cas, he asked me about it—"

"He had no choice," said Cas, and he actually gave a little shrug. "If he hadn't got the bone back together I'd have died. The grace eventually bleeds out completely if the bone's broken, and then it becomes impossible to breathe. Mac saved my life. And he couldn't have done it any other way. It's just that... I..."

He paused, staring at the ground, and then said something so softly that Dean couldn't hear him.

"What?" said Dean. "Tried so hard... at what?"

Cas raised his head, and looked out again over the fields. At the view, from on high.

"To learn to be human," said Cas.

"And you did great, Cas," Dean said, confused about where this was going, but wanting to be supportive. "You did awesome."

"I did mediocre," said Cas steadily. His eyes met Dean's briefly and then he looked back at the view.
"I did mediocre. But I did learn. I survived, I learned. I learned enough to take care of myself. Even if at just a low level, but, still, I managed to get a job, earn some money, buy my own food... I had my own place to live, that cabin, remember?... I could take a bus. Buy a toothbrush. Buy food. I even made a few friends, Dean. Not friends like you and Sam, of course, but... I could talk to people. I could say hello to someone. Learn their name. Have a conversation... " He stopped again.

Dean was starting to see where this was going.

Cas drew a deep breath. "I can never function again as a human now, Dean. I will never fit in. Well... I suppose I wasn't exactly fitting in before; but I could pass. I could pass as human. But now..." A harsh laugh. "I can't even go to the library. I can't borrow a book. I couldn't even go buy a loaf of bread if I needed to. I can never get a job again. Even that Gas 'n' Sip, Dean, the job you scorned so much—"

"I was a jerk," said Dean softly.

"Well, you laughed at me then, Dean, and if you laughed then, you should really be laughing now, because I could never work that job now. I could never even arrange to rent a place to live. Or use a homeless shelter. I can't even just walk into a store and buy my own food. I can't let people see me. At all. You were right about that." Cas glanced at his right wing, and then the left, and when he started speaking again his voice had gotten uneven. "Everything I learned — everything I did, all that work, Dean, it's all useless now, I've lost it all. Before, I'd lost my life as an angel, I'd lost Heaven, but at least I'd gained a life as a human. But now I've lost that too."

Dean stared at him, thinking, Why didn't I think of this before?

Of course. Of course.

It had been rough enough for Castiel when he'd been exiled from Heaven. But now Cas had also been exiled from humanity too. The human race that he loved so much, that he had been so fascinated with, that he had given up everything for...

Castiel was excluded from humanity completely now.

"I lost Heaven, and now I've lost Earth," Cas said quietly. He was gazing out at the fields again. "Where do I go now? What do I do? I don't even know what I am. What am I now, Dean? Not angel, and not human either. I think Ziphius was right; I'm a freak." He added, slowly, "I'm the kind of thing you hunt."

"No, Cas, that's not true—" Dean began, but Cas wasn't listening. He went on with, "Where do I go? Where can I possibly go? I can't possibly stay with you and Sam; you need to travel. And after you leave... last night I realized I won't be able to feed Meg. Once you and Sam leave, I won't be able to buy more cat food for her. I counted up my money last night and I realized I only have two dollars and forty-two cents, and no way to earn more, and I can only buy two cans of cat food with that and it would only last till next week. But then I realized I can't even go into the store! I can't even buy her the two cans! I was trying to think of some way I could get more food to feed her, and I just couldn't think of anything. I thought about it for a long time... Finally I thought of begging Sarah to take her."

Cas was lying alone in his room last night, thought Dean, lying there in the dark worrying about how to buy food for his pet cat. Cas was lying there awake, worrying...

Cas had actually thought that Sam and Dean would leave him and Meg to starve? He'd actually thought they'd leave him all on his own?
Perhaps because Dean had left Cas all on his own before. A few times, in fact. And not even that long ago.

*He was probably awake all night,* thought Dean, sick at heart. *I should have stayed with him. I should've stayed with him.*

Cas was saying, "But even after I thought of giving Meg to Sarah, I realized that *I'll* starve, too, because I can't even buy food for *myself*. And I can't possibly come along with you, either, Dean. I can't possibly, because I don't even fit in your car! And besides, I'm just... I'm completely useless now, Dean. I'd just be a problem."

Dean reached out to Cas then, setting one hand gently on his left wing, and drew a breath to say, "There is no way we would have let you OR Meg starve to death, you idiot." But he hadn't even gotten the sentence out when Cas added, almost casually, "So I decided it would be best if I ended my life." Here he drew Dean's ivory-handled pistol out of one pocket of his polarfleece jacket with one hand, and shook his angel-blade out of his jacket sleeve with the other hand.

Cas looked down at both with complete calm and said, "I was undecided between tertialing and the pistol. Another method is to break both wings, of course, or cut them both off — either of those will kill an angel— but that's a little difficult to do by yourself."

Dean froze still, his hand still on Cas's left wing.

Cas went on, still perfectly calm, looking back and forth between the pistol and the blade, "But once I got up here I found I was a little uncertain. Mostly because of what you said, but also because, well, everybody tried so hard to repair my wing. Dr. Mac, Sarah, everybody. I didn't want to seem ungrateful. So I changed my mind. But I still can't figure out where to go once you and Sam leave."

Cas winced suddenly, looking over at Dean, and his wing flinched in Dean's hand. Dean discovered his hand had tightened down on Cas's winglets in an iron grip. He had to force himself to relax his fingers.

"Dean?" Cas asked, frowning. "Is something wrong?"

Dean let go of the wing and snatched the pistol and blade out of Cas's hands, so suddenly that Cas jumped in surprise, both wings twitching. Dean checked the pistol while Cas stared at him. The pistol was loaded; *fuck*. The safety was off: *double fuck*. Dean hastily put on the safety and ejected the magazine, and checked the slide. He tucked the pistol in one jacket pocket, and the ammo in the other, and tucked the blade in the back of his belt, and realized, as he did all this, that his hands were shaking.

Cas said, "Dean, what's wrong?"

At that Dean felt a surge of almost blinding anger. He grabbed Cas by both shoulders, yanking him around so that Cas was facing Dean directly. Cas stumbled on the edge of his little rock and almost fell, both wings flaring out suddenly, but Dean wouldn't let him go and hauled him back to his feet, yelling at him, "Don't you EVER do that, Cas, don't you EVER! Don't you even THINK of doing that! Don't you DARE! You BASTARD!"

Cas looked completely confused. He went into his classic head tilt now, and said, "Well, I decided not to, Dean, I already told you that. Partly because of Mac and Sarah having worked so hard and come so far, but mostly, you reminded me of that promise."

"Promise?"
"The night my wings were broken, don't you remember? You made me promise not to give up." Cas was looking right at him, his blue eyes still strangely calm. He added, "You asked me to hang on, and I promised I would. You reminded me about it this morning. I didn't want to break my promise to you."

Dean stood there staring at him, still gripping Cas's shoulders tight in both hands, thinking, *If I hadn't happened to say that... If I hadn't noticed his wings were folded so tight...*

A moment later Cas added, "Dean, you're shaking. Are you okay?"

"No, Cas, I'm NOT OKAY," said Dean, still just holding onto his shoulders. "Holy fucking shit, Cas! Don't you have *any idea* what that would do to me? And Sam? Don't you even know?"

"Well," Cas said, still looking pretty puzzled, "I estimated that, were I to kill myself, it would cause some disruption to your lives for about three days. Because you would have to clean out my room. I wanted to do that myself, but I didn't have time." He looked even more puzzled at the expression that crossed Dean's face then. Cas said hesitantly, "More than three days?"

Cas watched Dean for another moment and added uncertainly, "A week?"

Dean had just been staring at him blankly, still gripping his shoulders, and now he found himself yanking Cas closer, pulling him close so swiftly that Cas stumbled again. Dean pulled Cas's head right down onto Dean's chest, till he had Cas's head tucked right under his chin, and got one arm wrapped tight all the way around Cas's head, and the other around the tops of both the wings. And there Dean stood, breathing in long uneven gasps, just holding Castiel with both arms, trying to somehow wrap him up completely.

*Bundle up that angel, Dean. He looks cold.*

"More than a week?" Cas asked in a tiny voice, his voice muffled into Dean's collarbone.

Dean managed to say, "More than a week, Cas."

Dean finally managed to release him, adding, "You need to understand something, Cas: I wouldn't get over it. I would not get over that. Not in a million weeks. Not ever. *Not ever*. And neither would Sam. You're family, Cas, you truly are, and we need you. Don't you get it?"

Cas took a step back, lifting his head so he could get a clear look at Dean. He still looked very confused. "But," said Cas, frowning, his head still slightly tipped, "I've been such a lot of work for you, Dean. You and Sam both. I've been so much trouble all along — such an awful burden. Sam's had to make me all that food, you had to buy the chairs, all sorts of effort, and... Dean, the problem is, now I'll *always* be a burden! Even if I could fit in the car you'd *always* have to take care of me, you'd *always* have to buy me food. And— and— I'll need *more* help, more than you even know, I, I, I haven't told you, there's another problem, I can't... I can't... I need... I need help with..." Cas paused, his face screwed up with tension. Dean braced himself; Cas was clearly working up to telling Dean something awful. There must be some terrible problem he hadn't them yet.

*I can't preen my feathers!* Cas burst out.

Dean blinked.

"What?" said Dean.

*I can't preen *my own feathers!*" Cas said, sounding almost desperately ashamed as he gestured from one wing to the other. "I can't reach the feather-ends at *all* and I can't reach the upper side and they're
fraying and I can't keep them clean and when the tips get crossed I can't even uncross them, and they're dirty and it's, it's just so shameful, it's so frustrating, and I need your and Sam's help with it but it would be so much work for you, and—"

"Cas," said Dean, setting both hands on Cas's shoulders again, more gently now.

But Cas was just rattling on, all the worries suddenly just spilling out of him, his hands making tense gestures now to illustrate his points as he went on, "—and also I can't help you hunt and I don't have any powers any more, I can't even heal you any more, I can't transport you anywhere. I can't even fly you out of danger anymore, Dean! I don't even have any orbs left or any more of my old feathers or anything—"

"Cas."

"— I have nothing to offer, nothing, Dean, I'm just useless, and it would be so much easier on you both if I weren't here, and—"

"CAS, SHUT UP," shouted Dean, shaking him by the shoulders.

Cas finally fell quiet. He gave a slow, tired sigh, gazing up at Dean with perhaps the saddest expression Dean had ever seen on his face.

"I know you're hurting, buddy," said Dean, looking him right in the eyes. "I know. I know. I can see it. I can see how hard this is for you. How terrifying it must be, how much it hurts. But you are NOT in this alone, and you are NOT useless— my god, Cas, you know all about elementals, for cryin' out loud! You're, you're a cartographer, even! You're a friggin' sharpshooter! And you're a hell of a fighter, don't you know that? And, Cas, you are not a freak—"

"Dean, don't be absurd, of course I'm a freak," said Cas. "I'm the definition of a freak." He gestured at his wings again, almost scowling at Dean now. "I mean, just look at me. Look."

There Cas stood. The golden light of the western sun was shining across his tremendous wings now. The white feathers seemed to be glowing with the golden late-afternoon light, the black feathers sparkling too, both wings framing his body in stunning display.

He was magnificent.

Dean actually had to laugh. Cas frowned at him, and Dean explained, "I'm looking. And you are no freak. I mean, not the way you're thinking."

Cas narrowed his eyes, obviously unconvinced, and Dean tried to explain. "Sure you're unusual, yeah, obviously. You're absolutely unique, sure. But, Cas, your wings are awesome. You're a frickin angel, dude. The wings are the coolest thing ever!"

A baffled expression had come over Cas's face now, and he said, "But, Dean. They're all frayed. They're so dirty... look..."

He pointed to the end of a long feather on his right wing, lifting the wing a little and curling it closer so that he could run one hand along one particular long black primary. Dean looked a little closer. The feather was perhaps ever so slightly disordered, some of the feather vane clumped into separate little segments instead of being all one seamless piece. It had also gotten slightly crossed over a neighboring feather. And it was perhaps slightly less sparkly than its neighbor.

"It's so... dirty," said Cas. "And it's crooked." His voice had gone rough, as if the ever-so-slightly-less-glittery, very-slightly-crooked feather was such a shameful thing that he could barely stand to
look at it. Cas tried to run his fingers down the feather, and now Dean saw the problem: Cas simply couldn't reach his own feather-tips. His human arms just weren't long enough; he couldn't quite reach the very end of the feather, the slightly-less-glittery part.

Cas turned back to Dean. "I can't clean my own feathers," he said softly. He looked downright humiliated.

"We'll help you," said Dean immediately. "Sam and me."

"I should be able to do it myself—"

"Jeez, cut yourself some slack, you're healing from a *broken wing,*" said Dean. He added, again, "We'll help you," and he took two steps over and knelt at Cas's wing, right there in the snow, running his hands along the problematic feather. Cas froze, staring down at him, as Dean studied the feather. It just needed a bit of polishing; a bit of attention. He breathed on it lightly to give it a bit of moisture, and ran the sleeve of his coat down it, and then ran his fingers along it too, snapping it free of its neighbor and trying to iron out the disarrayed parts.

A moment later the feather-tip was whole and shining again.

"See," said Dean. "See. It's easy." Now that he was close up he could see what Cas meant. The feathers were hardly "dirty," as Cas seemed to think, but the tips were indeed a little disarrayed. Dean began straightening out some of the others. "It's easy, Cas. I'll help you."

"But you shouldn't... you shouldn't have to. " Cas whispered. "You shouldn't have to. An angel should be able to clean his own feathers. It's the very first thing fledglings learn, Dean, it's the very first thing we learn, I should be able to do it alone—"

Dean said, wiping down another feather, "Screw that. Screw doing it alone. You are *not alone* in this, Cas, we are a family. You and me and Sam." He finished that feather and moved to the next, saying, "You're not a burden, you're family. There's a difference. When Sam makes you food it's because he enjoys feeding you. When I got you the barstools it was because it made me happy, do you understand? Do you remember how Sam smiled when you liked that chair he made?" Cas was still staring down at him, his blue eyes wide now, as Dean started on yet another feather, saying, "I like helping you out, Cas. Sam *likes* helping you out. That's what it means to be family: *It means it's not a burden.* Because helping family makes us happy, Cas. It's what we live for, it's what human life is for." Dean looked up at him, adding, "Is it a burden when you make the pies for us? Is it a burden to pet Meg?"

"N-no," whispered Cas. "I like to see you eat the pies. And I like petting Meg."

"Same thing, Cas."

Comprehension began to dawn on Cas's face.

Dean stood then, and said, "And we would *never* have left you to starve! My god, Cas, how could you even think that?" Cas blinked at him, and Dean set one hand on Cas's cheek and said to him, almost cradling his face, "You *can't* ever do this again, please, man. This... " Dean gestured down to his own pockets, where the weapons were now hidden away. "This... *shit* with the blade and the pistol, this is *bullshit.* Promise me you won't do that. Promise you won't leave us like that, Cas. You gotta promise you won't leave us."

"All right," whispered Cas, nodding, his eyes dark. "I promise."

Dean pulled Cas's head down a little and kissed Cas on the forehead, as he had back when Cas had
been having all the nightmares. Then for good measure he wrapped both arms around Cas again, trying once again to get Cas's head and arms and wings and everything all in one armful. Cas was hugging him back now, both arms around Dean's ribs, the right wing wrapped firmly around him too.

"Don't do that again," Dean said at last. "You friggin' jerk."

"I won't," Cas said. "I'm sorry. I really didn't know it would bother you."

"Sometimes you really are an idiot, you know that?"

"You've told me that before, Dean."

Dean noticed Cas was shivering. Especially his wings. Especially the left. It was shaking pretty hard.

"Dammit, Cas," said Dean, releasing him, studying the wings. "Your wing's cold!"

"I know."

"It's the left wing, Cas!"

"I know. It's been getting colder."

"You should have said something! Dammit, Cas, you have got to learn to speak up when you need help. Seriously." Dean shook his head at him, and then stepped around to Cas's back. After a little inspection of the wing, Dean decided to take off his scarf (a long, soft, cream-colored one that he was rather fond of) and began wrapping the scarf all around the damaged part of the wing. Right around the featherless area, as if he were wrapping up an arm. Cas stood silently, looking back over his shoulder as Dean carefully folded the scarf up and around the surgical scar, right over the tertial-stubs, as gently as if he were wrapping up a newborn kitten.

"We're gonna solve this tertial thing, Cas," Dean told him, wrapping the scarf around and around. "You wait and see."

"Because we've pulled off some unlikely wins before?" said Cas, a faint smile on his face now.

Dean grinned at him. "Exactly." The wing looked nice and cozy now, the scarf neatly covering up the featherless area. Dean patted it (very gently) and tucked the ends of the scarf in.

"You are going to fly again, Cas," said Dean. "I swear. I swear to you. We are going to figure it out. Together. You got that?"

Cas nodded slowly.

"Now, c'mon," said Dean. "Let's go home."

Dean grabbed him by one elbow and pulled him down the hill.

Cas followed along, just beside Dean. They made their way down the snowdrifts, Dean keeping one hand on Cas's arm. Cas's wings spread behind him like great banners whenever the snow gave way beneath his feet.
Dean barely spoke at all as they scrambled down the hill. The horror was only now really starting to break over him, how close to absolute disaster this had come. What could have happened... what might have happened... if Dean hadn't said that one stray comment this morning...

Dean kept a tight hold on Cas's arm the whole way down.

As they started across the tornado-track back to the bunker, Dean said, nonchalantly, "You're coming along with us to Florida, by the way. Sam and I decided that weeks ago."

"But, Dean," Cas said, his voice quiet. "I don't fit in your car. You know that."

"Well, I got you a present today that you haven't seen yet," said Dean, "Two presents, actually. I got them up in Nebraska, and it would really have been a pretty serious bummer if I couldn't have given them to you." He dug his phone out of his pocket and called Sam to say, "Hey Sam. We'll be there in ten minutes. Open the garage doors and we'll meet you there."

Sam was waiting outside when they finally walked up the driveway. His face broke into a huge smile of relief when he saw that Cas was really okay, and he strode up to them to give Cas yet another hug. (The hug count's really getting up there, thought Dean.)

Sam said, in mid-hug, "Where the hell did you go, Cas? We were kind of worried."

Cas replied, only slightly smothered against Sam's shoulder, "I was up on the hill. I'm sorry, Sam, I thought it would only bother you for three days." Sam shot a confused look at Dean over Cas's shoulder, mouthing, "Three days?"

Dean couldn't even begin to explain, but Sam must have seen something in Dean's expression, for his face went a little stiff. He put his head down on Cas's shoulder, tightened his grip and wouldn't let him go for several long seconds.

"Everything ready in the garage, Sam?" asked Dean. Sam nodded, released Cas, and they all walked into the garage together.

Cas came to a halt right away. Probably because there was a baby-blue Volkswagen minibus directly in his way, sitting there smack in the middle of the garage floor. It was a classic old "hippie bus", the kind with the round headlights and the big round windshield and the little curtains in the windows. And it had not been in the garage that morning.

"Whose vehicle is that?" asked Cas, puzzled.

"Yours," said Sam, grinning. He dangled a pair of keys from his hand, and tossed them at Cas, who was so startled that the keys just hit his chest and fell to the floor. Cas looked down at the keys blankly and then looked back at the VW minibus.

Dean walked over to pick up the keys and hand them to him. Cas slowly turned the keys over in his hand, looking back and forth between the keys and the van.

"Mine?" said Cas.
"Registered in the name of Cas T.L. Winchester," said Dean, "Know anybody by that name?" Dean walked around the minibus and started opening all the doors— the driver's door, the big back door, and the wide doors on the right side. Dean said, "It's a '67! Just like the Impala. I figured it was a lucky year. Kind of makes them siblings, don't you think? Hope you don't mind a classic hippie van, it's all I could find in Lincoln on short notice and I had to jump on it. We can put peace signs on it if you want the total look. It's got a totally rebuilt engine, it's got the better transaxle, it handles pretty good, and I think it'll work out. Come around to the back here, Cas, check it out!"

Cas came slowly around to the back and peered inside.

There was a big foam mattress spread out in the back, made up already with sheets, a couple blankets and two pillows. The walls were lined with protective wards and sigils. There were neat cubbyholes along the sides with plenty of room for gear; the windows had little curtains that could be pulled shut; and there was even a sort of pop-up roof that could extend upwards for more comfortable camping.

"It's big enough for wings!" said Dean. "I figured we can take this van on hunts, instead of the Impala. You can't see it now but, that mattress folds up and your movie-chair is actually lying underneath, folded up. I just rigged up a way this afternoon to bolt it in place so you can sit in the movie-chair in the back while we drive. And at night, if we can sneak you into a motel we will, but if not you can camp right here in the van on this mattress; you'll always have this as a backup. And the curtains'll keep people from looking in. And, look—" Dean flipped up a corner of the mattress and lifted up a little trapdoor. There was the Impala armory, all laid out neatly. "And," Dean added, going around to the front, "Look!" Cas trailed him mutely around to the front seat and peered inside.

"Bucket seats!" said Dean. "The '67 model was the first with the bucket seats. That was my top priority actually when I went looking for some kind of van, it had to have bucket seats, because, that means, once your wing's healed up you can drive! You can put a wing on each side of the seat! I checked the wing-clearance, I think you'll be able to get in and out of the seat okay, if you do that thing where you put the feathers back horizontally. Maybe a little tight but it'll work. Not till your left wing's got some more flexibility, but, eventually. How about it, Cas?"

Dean beamed at Cas.

Cas was still just staring into the minibus. He looked a little uncertain.

Then he turned away from the minibus and studied Dean for a moment, his eyes searching Dean's face.

"But this isn't the kind of vehicle that you like," Cas said slowly. "You like the ones that are short and long, and that have longitudinal ridges."

Short and long? Longitudinal ridges?


Cas said, "You like the other car. The Impala. You like it a lot. It's very important to you. You'd never travel without it. You'd never leave it."

"It's not like I'm selling it," said Dean, "It'll be right here, safe and sound."

"But that car is important to you."

Dean shrugged. "Guess you're more important, angel buddy." He was amazed, actually, at how easy this felt. He'd felt very torn about leaving the Impala behind, originally, when he'd first thought of the idea. They'd had to do hunts without the Impala before on a few occasions, of course, but only when
they'd really had to.

But this was clearly one of those times when they "really had to." Because, come right down to it: Cas versus the Impala....

As much as Dean loved the Impala, it was no contest.

"But you love that car," said Cas, still sounding completely disbelieving.

Sam snorted, and said, "Cas, someday you really need to learn to put two and two together. Yeah, Dean loves that car. And you're more important." Cas stared at him for a moment.

"But I can't let people see me," said Cas, turning back to Dean.

"Nobody'll notice while you're driving. Oh and, that reminds me. Your other present's over here." Dean walked over to the workbench. The Physiology of Angels was still sitting there, and Dean had to stifle another surge of near-nausea as he remembered, once again, how close to disaster the day had come.

He pushed the book aside and picked up what he'd been working on previously: a long, big, empty backpack, the gigantic kind that serious backpackers took on overnight hikes. Dean had sliced it open right down the middle. Right down the part that was supposed to fit against the backpacker's back.

"This is your second present," said Dean turning around to show it to Cas. "It's not quite done yet, but, my idea was, I think we can hide your wings inside this. It'll look like you're wearing a backpack. The feather tips will stick out the bottom but we can drape towels over them or something. It'll fit in with the hippie theme! My whole idea was, you can pretend you're a backpacker criss-crossing the country in an old VW hippie bus. With your two crazy friends."

Cas gave him another long, searching look, and he picked up the backpack and studied it, turning it over and over in his hands. Then he walked back to the van, stood in front of it and considered it for a moment, studying its round lights, the wide windshield, and the baby-blue paint job.

He went around back, kicked off his shoes and cautiously crawled inside, still carrying the backpack.

He fit. His wings fit.

Castiel was motionless for a minute, just crouching inside the minibus on his hands and knees, the backpack still clutched in one hand, looking back at his feather-tips. They easily cleared the rear door.

He gently set the backpack to the side, and crawled forward to where he could see between the two front seats. Dean had put a sort of beanbag here where Cas could flop down and get a view out the front windshield. Cas lay there for a second, looking out.

"Do you think he likes it?" Dean whispered to Sam.

A moment later Cas was lying down on the bed. And trying out both pillows. And then opening all the cubbies. And popping up the camper top, and standing up to look out the camper-top's elevated window, and kneeling down again, and opening the curtains, and closing them, and opening all the cubby doors again, and looking at the backpack again.

Dean, watching him, thought, Oh my god. It's the Happy-Puppy look. Even despite the tertials, and everything that happened today... it's the Happy-Puppy look.
"We can bring Meg," said Cas, sounding a little breathless, "We can bring Meg, there's lots of room for her, she can sit right here—" He was already rearranging the pillows to make a little cat-sized nest.

Dean said, "Cas, Sarah's already got her, so, why don't we leave her with Sarah?"

"But Meg will fit! She could sit right here—"

Sam broke in, "Hey, Meg might enjoy a few weeks with Sarah, don't you think? Meg likes Sarah. Why don't we do Florida first and we can visit Meg later when we do the Colorado elemental."

Cas considered that and nodded. "I suppose. Yes... Sarah is very nice, isn't she? Meg likes her. Okay, she can stay with Sarah for a few weeks. I'll go get my driver's license, then. The one that says Cas T.L. Winchester. I'll go get it right now, it's on the table in my room. When do we leave? Do we leave tonight?"

Dean said, "Well, we've got to pack—"

"I don't need much. I'll just bring a change of clothes. And a toothbrush. I can be ready in fifteen minutes."

"Uh," said Sam, "Dean and I might need till tomorrow."

Cas was barely listening, saying, "Oh, wait, we'll need some cookies, and the pies need to be packaged so that we can take them. And some sandwiches, right? And a smaller map with the elemental locations marked. I'll go make some smaller maps. They can go right here," he said, flipping through the cubbies again. "Maps here, cookies and pie here, and perhaps we can bring some of the books for Sam to read. Sam likes reading, so, Sam, your books can go here—" Cas was rummaging through every storage spot now, flipping open every little drawer, talking out loud as he planned it all out— "Dean, your bag will go here and Sam's here and mine will go right here."

Cas backed rapidly out of the van, watching his left wing carefully, and he scrambled to his feet and trotted right past Dean and Sam, without even his shoes, almost at a run, still chattering over his shoulder at them, "I'll start the maps and then pack up the pies and then make the cookies and then the sandwiches." Dean and Sam both stood there bemused, watching him rush away.

Dean felt almost limp with the relief of it all. And he noticed, as Cas went charging away, that the right wing had a look to it that Dean didn't remember having seen before. The wing was held high, a couple inches higher than usual. And it was slightly arced open, and all its little feathers seemed to be fluffed up.

The left wing was maybe not quite as high, maybe not quite as spread, but its little feathers were fluffed up too. That wing was actually looking pretty cute, in fact, with Dean's scarf still wrapped all around the innermost third of the wing, and Sam even whispered, "Oh man. The scarf is adorable."

Cas skidded to a halt right at the door to the bunker, and came charging back and gave each of them another hug. Tight, long hugs, saying, "Thank you. Thank you." to both of them.

More hugs, thought Dean. He's going for the all-time hug record.

Dean didn't mind at all.

Two-winged hugs, too, this time. The left wing was pretty weak— it didn't have anywhere near the strength of the right, which was almost asphyxiating Dean again— but it managed to reach Dean's shoulder and even press a little lightly.
Cas released Dean and rushed away again, both wings still fluffed up.

There was a little pause.

Sam said, "I think he likes it."

A/N -

Poor Cas, he's been so worried and discouraged and scared, but at last his feathers are all fluffed up. The fic's far from over and of course he still can't fly, but at least he's got fluffy happy wings right now. :)  

Please let me know if you liked this! :)
The sun rose next morning on Sam, Dean and Castiel all hunkered down in the VW van in the driveway, doing their final travel arrangements.

Dean had moved the VW's mattress (it folded up rather cleverly to become a padded foam bench in the back), revealing a stretch of tiled flooring almost like a tiny kitchen. The little space was lined with a couple of tiny jump seats, several little book-cubbies and even a miniature sink. Dean was kneeling in the middle of the flooring, engrossed in the last stages of drilling in floor-bolts to hold Cas's movie-chair securely in place during the drive. Meanwhile Cas was arranging all the gear, including some careful packing of his new stash of cookie-bags in various cubbies. (Sam and Dean had managed to convince him to shift to a "one cookie per hour per person" plan, but that still added up to 75 cookies, which apparently required a lot of careful arranging.)

And Sam, meanwhile, was sitting in the passenger's seat plotting out a driving route. He had a hand-drawn paper map spread out on his knee — this was Cas's new smaller elemental-map, with red circles penciled in for each "bubble of inactivity" — and he was comparing the paper map with the GPS map on his phone.

"Whoa, Dean," said Sam, "Check out the route that my phone just plotted for us." He twisted around to hold out the phone out toward Dean.

Dean finished drilling the last hole for the last bolt for the movie-chair, and he took the phone, studying the little map. It was displaying a driving route that first headed east to Kansas City, and then cut southeast for a long, long stretch, clear across the southern states of Arkansas and Alabama, all the way to Florida, and then southward down the huge Florida peninsula.

"Looks good," said Dean, unsure why Sam had wanted to show it to him. He held the phone back out to Sam, but Sam didn't take it back.

"So pick out a good stopping point for the night," said Sam.

"Halfway," said Dean. "Twenty-four hour drive time total, to southern Florida, right? So, we should stop halfway. About Memphis or so, right here." He stabbed his finger at a halfway point near Memphis, and then noticed the squiggly blue line that was right under his finger.

Dean glanced up at Sam and said, "The Mississippi River?" Cas snapped to attention immediately, pausing from his cookie-stowing to swivel closer, leaning over Dean's shoulder and looking at the
phone. Dean glanced at him and asked, "The Mississippi's been flooding recently, right? You were thinking it's a freshwater elemental?"

Cas nodded, and said, "Flooding, yes. Except for one place." He exchanged a glance with Sam, who, without a word, handed Dean the paper map that Cas had drawn of the potential "bubbles of inactivity."

A quick look at the paper map showed that their driving route, and in fact their most likely stopping point for the night, was right next to the one and only place that the Mississippi River hadn't flooded.

Cas pointed out the spot on the map. "There's been no flooding here, even though the riverbanks are just as low here as they are anywhere else. It seems unusual. And..." He studied the driving route. "It's really only a few dozen miles out of our way. We could swing by on the way and get a look at it."

Sam said, "And maybe we try to pick off a freshwater elemental on the way? I mean, its controller, at least. Its cowboy."

Dean snorted. "Sure, just 'pick one off on the way', why not. Cause it's going to be so easy to "pick off" a psychotic elemental-cowboy. Y'know, cause Ziphius was so easy, and Calcariel too."

Cas glanced at him and pointed out, "Well, we have to start somewhere. And a freshwater elemental actually may be an easier start than the air elemental that's probably doing the hurricanes. Normally I'd have an affinity with air elementals, but..." He paused a moment, and finally repeated, a little quietly, "A freshwater elemental might be easier."

*Cas can't talk to air elementals anymore.*, Dean remembered. The blizzard elemental had stormed right on past when Cas had been trying to communicate with it. It had refused to talk to Cas.

A short silence fell as Cas looked down at the paper map, his expression unreadable now.

Sam finally said, "Maybe other air elementals will talk to you?"

Cas only shrugged. He gave a bit of a philosophical sigh, and said, one hand stroking the top of his left wing thoughtfully, "We can't count on that." Looking back at the map he added, "And now that I think about it, freshwater elementals usually are a bit easier to deal with anyway. They're highly localized; they usually don't move very far beyond their floodplain. Which means it's a bit easier to escape their reach if something goes wrong. Air elementals have more freedom of movement and can chase people farther. In comparison the freshwater elemental may be relatively easy."

"You know, Cas, I never would have thought of any kind of elemental as 'easy'," said Dean.

"Maybe if you take it out for a movie," put in Sam. Dean couldn't help grinning (even though it was a terrible joke), though he felt obliged to whap Sam on the shoulder and say, "That was just *bad*, Sam!"

Sam added, with a totally shameless grin, "Maybe it'd like 'A River Runs Through It. That'd get it in the mood."

"The River Wild," suggested Dean, laughing now.

"And take it out for a few beers after! Easy!" said Sam. By now Sam and Dean were chuckling. Castiel, though, seemed to be considering Sam's suggestion perfectly seriously, looking at him with a thoughtful frown, and finally he said, "That's actually not a bad idea, Sam. I don't think it would fit into a movie theater, but given that alcoholic drinks are freshwater-based, we could try giving it a
beer and see what happens."

Cas didn't seem to understand why Sam and Dean both broke up again in more snorts of laughter. He gave them one of his squinty looks, the classic perplexed-and-slightly-exasperated look that Dean had always mentally translated as "Humans... they're so young".

It was actually quite a relief to see Cas back in his familiar exasperated-angel mode. Dean couldn't help grinning at him. Somewhat surprisingly, Cas gave him a quick grin back (maybe he'd understood the "easy" joke after all?), and he returned to packing the cookies.

Soon the gear was all stowed, the cookies and pie-slices arranged exactly how Cas wanted them, and the cooler was within arm's reach, well-stocked with beer and water and sandwiches. They were ready to go. Cas swung into his movie-chair, Sam and Dean settled into their seats — Dean driving, Sam navigating — and they hit the road.

The baby-blue VW minivan rattled down the bunker driveway and out of Lebanon, and soon they were headed east to Kansas City. Their new destination: Dyersburg, Tennessee, on the shores of the Mississippi River on the far outskirts of Memphis.

It'd be a twelve-hour drive. Fortunately the weather was excellent. It was a beautiful sunny day, Lebanon's snowy fields gleaming an almost blinding white in the bright winter light.

Dean glanced at the white fields on either side, eyeing the hill where he'd found Cas yesterday. He had such an ebullient sense of freedom and optimism right now, heading out on the road on this lovely sunny day with Sam and Cas, that it was almost hard to remember how frightening yesterday had been. Yesterday, this very same winter landscape had seemed terrifyingly bleak and empty, when they'd been desperately searching for Cas. Today the exact same scene, with the exact same blue sky and the exact same bright sun, looked fresh, and exciting, and hopeful.

*There's probably still hard times ahead,* Dean reminded himself. *Who know how this cowboy-hunt was going to go. Maybe things would fall apart right away.*

But right now, today, at least, they were all together. They were on the road again, at last, and with Cas. A mostly healed-up Cas, even, on his feet and alert and active again. They'd even found a van that fit Cas's wings! Dean had never before thought he'd be happy to be doing a road trip without the Impala, but as they buzzed along the Kansas roads he found himself experiencing a surge of affection for the old VW van. He even reached out and patted its dashboard, his heart warming at the realization that all three of them — Dean, Sam, and Castiel — were at last able to travel together again.

Dean glanced over at Cas with a grin. "Comfy?" he asked.

"Very," Cas said. His movie-chair was positioned just behind, and exactly between, the two front seats, such that Cas seemed almost to be seated in between Sam and Dean, his head nearly level with Dean's shoulder.

"The visibility in this vehicle is extraordinary, actually," Cas added. Dean stole another glance at him to find that Cas was looking around eagerly. Cas peered out the VW's broad windshield, he checked
out both side windows past Sam and Dean, and periodically he twisted around to check all the side windows with the little curtains.

Cas said, "I can see so much! Look at the tornado-track — it's still quite prominent, don't you think? How many miles do you think it stretches? Oh look, it destroyed that shack, didn't it — what a pity. Oh look, another car. Where do you think they're going? How far to the next town? Sam, did you see that bird?" He paused a moment and added, "Dean, how's the vehicle handling? Do we need any gas?"

"Uh," said Dean. "The van's handling great. Decent pick-up. And she tracks pretty good on turns, actually."

"She tracks excellently on turns, yes, I noticed that immediately," said Cas. "She tracks admirably on turns. Excellent pick-up. She's really a superior vehicle. I also like her layout. And her curtains. And her expandable roof is ingenious."

He fell silent for about ten seconds.

Then: "Isn't that an attractive cow? Their coats get so furry in winter, did you ever notice that? Sam, did you see how furry that cow was? The weather's beautiful, isn't it? High cirrus clouds today — did you know those are very high clouds? Usually they're above fifteen thousand feet. What an interesting set of trees — cottonwoods, I think. Look, that cloud's pink! The last bit of the dawn colors. Good weather, isn't it? Good driving conditions, would you agree, Dean? Oh, look, another furry cow. Would either of you like a cookie?"

"Uh, not yet, Cas, but thanks," said Sam.

Cas immediately looked worried. "It's been half an hour since you've eaten, Sam. You're sure?"

"I'll have a cookie later, Cas, but thanks anyway."

"Okay, just checking. Dean, you ate a piece of toast twenty minutes ago, so you should still be okay. Look! Another furry cow!" Just then a small van happened to drive past heading the opposite direction, and Cas said, "Look at that van — it's all right, but this one's much better, don't you think? This one handles turns excellently. Also this one's a much nicer color. This shade of blue is really a superior color, I think. Also this one has curtains. Oh, check out THAT cow, Sam, look how furry it is! THAT'S THE FURRIEST COW YET!"

Sam and Dean both started laughing. Dean said, "Are you going to point out every single cow, Cas? Not that I mind. Just asking."

Sam added, looking back at Cas with a wide grin, "It must feel good to get out, huh?"

Dean realized, then, that Cas had been cooped up inside for months now. Most of that time he'd been in some pain, or at least discomfort, and (Dean now knew) he'd been seriously worried about his future, too. His only real foray outside, in all that time, had been that miserable trip up to the hill.

"You must have been going crazy cooped up," Dean remarked.

Cas nodded, with a little smile. "Yes, actually. Sorry about all the cow comments, Dean, I just keep noticing things. It's just... " He gave a happy-sounding little sigh, still looking around bright-eyed. "Honestly it's so nice to be out again. There's just so much to see! I feel like I'm seeing so much more than I have in weeks. And so much more than yesterday."

Dean and Sam traded a quick glance, and Sam twisted around to reach back and pat Cas on one
"It's really good to have you along, buddy," Sam said.

"I'm very glad to be along," Cas replied. He even brought his right wing forward, resting the big wing-joint on Sam's left shoulder, and Sam put his hand up and grabbed on to the little alulas.

It was a sweet little bonding moment, Dean thought. That is, till three seconds later when Cas whipped his arm out to point at something, so suddenly that he accidentally whacked Sam in the nose (pretty hard, too), saying excitedly, "Look at the HORSE! IT'S A FURRY HORSE! IT'S A FURRY SPOTTED HORSE! Oh, Sam, I'm sorry, are you okay? But did you see the horse?"

Cas finally settled down. But over the next hour, every time Dean glanced in the rearview window he saw that Cas was still in what seemed to be state of hyper-alertness, constantly glancing out the right and left windows, or twisting around to look out the rear window, or scanning the horizon ahead of them intently through the front windshield.

Looking at the big wide world outside, his eyes bright.

A thought struck Dean, and he said, "Hey, Sam, could you take a driving shift?" Sam glanced over, a little surprised, for Dean had only been driving for an hour. But Sam nodded, and after a quick stop at a gas station to change seats (and gas up, while they were at it), Dean was settled in the back in one of the minivan's little padded side seats.

Right next to Cas. With Cas's backpack in his lap.

And a ruler and scissors and a nice supply of odd-sized foam pieces that he'd brought along, and a needle and thread.

Dean spent the next half hour adjusting the pack, in close consultation with Castiel. First Dean sliced it fully open at the bottom to let the wingtips stick out, and widened the long slice down the back. Then Dean lined the inside with the foam. He tried it out repeatedly on Cas's wings, carefully sliding it over the injured wing (Cas winced a little, but insisted that it didn't "really" hurt — he said it was just stiff).

They spent a long time discussing the foam padding, with Cas trying the pack on repeatedly while Dean shaped and moved the padding around, and then cut and sewed and padded some more and adjusted various details. Till at last Cas pronounced it comfortable. Then there was some fiddling with the straps. In the end Cas still needed a little help getting the thing on, but once he had it on, it actually looked pretty convincing.

"There, I think that might work," Dean announced. "Sam, we'd better stop at the next gas station. We don't want to risk running out of gas."

"Um, Dean, we gassed up half an hour ago," Sam pointed out.

"But you don't want to risk getting low. And, you know, if you find a mini-mart, Cas could run in and get us some coffee."

"Oh... right," said Sam. He made a show of looking at the gas gauge. "Whoa, Dean, the gas tank's
down to just eleven-twelfths full! Practically empty! It really makes me nervous pushing it so close to empty like this. Yeah, we'd better stop."

Cas explained patiently, "Sam, eleven-twelfths is actually closer to twelve-twelfths than it is to zero-twelfths. But... if you both really want coffee or some kind of a snack... we could stop."

"I'm dying for some coffee," said Dean.

"I'm desperate for coffee," said Sam. "We'd better stop immediately."

Sam pulled off into the very next gas station—a Gas 'n' Sip, as it happened. Sam had barely brought the van to a stop when Cas popped the side door open, leaping out with his new backpack on. "I'll get the coffee!" he announced. "Stay right here. I got it."

"Hold on, tiger," said Dean, scrambling out after him. "Let me just get a look."

Cas paused (a little reluctantly), and Dean walked around in front of him, checking out the backpack with a critical eye. Sam clambered out of the driver's side and came around the side of the van to join him. Cas was still shielded from public view by the van, and both brothers took a moment to really study the backpack in good light.

It did look pretty convincing. The only problem was that Cas's feather tips definitely were sticking out visibly. After a bit of discussion, Sam bundled them together with a little towel from the van, and Dean tied the towel to the bottom of the pack with a few lengths of string.

Dean said, "Bit messy, maybe, but I think it'll look like a weird sleeping bag or something. Okay, let's see, lean forward a little so it looks like the pack's full." Cas leaned forward, putting his hands on the shoulder straps as if bracing himself against a weight.

"How does it look?" he asked.

It actually looked surprisingly convincing. Cas looked like a classic backcountry hitchhiker—just a little too clean, maybe.

"Pretty good!" Sam said with a grin. "Seriously, it really looks like a backpack. And not remotely like a pair of huge wings."

Dean added, "We'll have to dirty you up a bit— you should let that stubble of yours get stubblier, actually. Don't shave for the next couple days. And stop combing your hair. And we'll get you some hiking boots. But, Sam's right, it looks pretty good." He handed Cas a twenty-dollar bill. "Here, bucko, don't spend it all on booze and chicks. Oh and— one cream and two sugars, for my coffee."

"One cream, no sugar, for me," added Sam.

Cas nodded, and off he strode, into the Gas 'n' Sip. Sam and Dean both watched, a little anxiously, from the parking lot.

"I feel like I'm watching my kid head off on his first day to kindergarten," remarked Dean.

"He's an angel, remember," said Sam. "He's a warrior. And he's been back on his feet for weeks. He's all healed up — he's fine. This is just coffee."

"Yep," agreed Dean. "Just coffee."

Yet they both were glued to the scene, watching Cas advancing cautiously through the door of the
Gas-n-Sip. Dean felt poised for action, one hand fingerling the van's keys, the other hand hovering near his pistol holster.

Cas looked a little tentative at first, looking all around him as he stepped cautiously into the Gas-n-Sip, as if bracing for an ambush. But the attendant just gave him one bored glance and returned to reading a magazine. Cas watched him for a moment, almost visibly gaining confidence as the attendant's attention stayed on the magazine.

Finally Cas made his way over to the coffee counter (leaning forward, maybe slightly too obviously, against the "weight" of the empty backpack). He got three coffees and went up to the front desk to pay. But then he got into what seemed to be an alarmingly long conversation. Then Cas and the Gas 'n' Sip attendant both seemed to disappear behind another counter for a minute, Cas bending over some piece of machinery till just the top of the pack was visible.

Dean shifted his feet, restless. Sam muttered beside him, "Cool it, Dean, it's okay, he's fine."

Cas finally emerged several minutes later, with the three coffees in a little cardboard carrier. He walked back over, still looking every inch the backpacker, and delivered the coffees with exaggerated care.

"The sales associate's name is Tyler," Castiel reported, as he handed Sam his coffee, and then Dean his. "Nice guy, a bit inexperienced but trying hard. He looked for a job for three months before he got this one. He says the job market's really terrible here — here's your cream, Sam, here's your two, Dean — he's been very worried because he's in his first year of college and is trying to pay his own tuition because his father lost his job last year. So I gave him some advice about maybe switching to night shifts, because they pay better — here's your sugar packets, Dean — and also there's an employee tuition-reimbursement plan that I think he's probably eligible for — I brought you a stirrer, Dean, here, you don't have to use your finger — and also I showed him how to re-stock the slushy machine. They really need to update that slushy-machine manual, it's really not clearly written at all. He seemed very grateful, and, Dean, he offered to pay for our coffees himself, so, here's your twenty dollars back."

Cas held out the twenty-dollar bill.

Sam reached out and chucked Cas on his shoulder, saying, "Welcome back to humanity, Cas." Dean raised his coffee to him.

Cas had been acting perfectly matter-of-fact till that point, but at that point he suddenly gave them one of his rare half-smiles, one corner of his mouth twisting up. "It's... very good to be back," he confessed. "And thank you for the backpack, Dean. It's a great idea. I think it's really going to work."

Once they got back in the VW and Cas got his pack off, Dean wasn't surprised to find that Cas's feathers seemed to be all fluffed up.

The feathers stayed fluffed all the rest of the day.

It turned into one of the most peaceful and enjoyable road trips of recent memory. They admired
every cow and every horse they passed, they ate ridiculous amounts of cookies, and Cas insisted on
refilling their coffee cups at practically every Gas 'n' Sip they passed, dispensing slushy-machine and
employee-benefits advice to every Gas-n-Sip employee that he encountered.

In the past it had always been a pretty rare event for Castiel to smile, but today seemed to be
different. Cas smiled at the cows, he smiled at the horses, he smiled at the music on the radio, he
smiled at Sam and Dean's crappy jokes... he smiled at everything.

Once or twice Cas even gave a soft little laugh, a gentle huff of a noise that Dean could barely
remember ever having heard before.

A few hours after nightfall they finally crossed a bridge over the Mississippi (it seemed a very broad
stretch of menacing dark water), and pulled into tiny Dyersburg, Tennessee. Dean managed to find a
cheap motel with the sort of sprawling one-story layout where they could park in the back right by
their room door, out of view of the office. It then turned out to be pretty easy to sneak Cas in for a
take-out meal and a sponge-bath. (On Mac's orders Cas still couldn't do full showers, because of the
little titanium-pin wounds, but Cas said he had worked out a pretty decent routine involving sponge-
baths with a damp washcloth).

After dinner, Cas insisted on sleeping outside in the van. He seemed completely enamored with the
van (he kept referring to it as "my van"), and he also pointed out that he could help keep guard if he
were positioned outside the room. Dean felt a little nervous about this — Cas was only recently back
on his feet, after all — but the van was very well warded and Cas had a variety of weaponry right at
his side, along with his angel-blade, his cell phone, and a room key. He assured Dean over and over
that he'd be fine. "I'm a soldier, Dean," he reminded Dean — several times. "This is what I do. I
really am healed. You can stop worrying."

Dean still felt compelled, though, to go out to the van with him and help him Cas unfold the mattress
and settle down - partly just to doublecheck that Castiel's wings would really fit.

They did.

Then, while Dean was standing at the back of the van, about to close the back door and say good-
night, Dean noticed the tips of Cas's feathers were sticking out from under the side of Cas's blanket.
The feather tips were ever-so-slightly frayed.

"One more thing, Cas," said Dean. He sat down at the foot of the mattress, and started wiping down
the end of each long flight feather with the edge of the blanket, one by one, starting with the right
wing.

"But Dean, you need to get to sleep," protested Cas, his wing pulling away.

Dean kept hold of the feathers, trying to tug them gently back toward him, saying, "It'll just take a
minute."

"Dean, you don't have to—"

"Not a burden, Cas," said Dean, looking up at him.
Cas looked at him for a long moment.

Slowly he nodded, and he relaxed his wing, letting Dean tug the feather-tips closer to him.

Dean cleaned the ends of all the long black feathers. He wiped the end of each one, the last foot or so, wiping it down front and back with the blanket. Now and then he leaned over to breathe on the feathers softly, whenever it seemed a little moisture would help in wiping off the day's road-dust.

"Should I be using soap and water or something?" Dean asked. "I mean, what's the best way to clean feathers?"

Cas, reclining back on the pillows now, was still watching him. "Not soap." Cas said. When Dean glanced up at him, Cas elaborated with, "Soap would strip the natural oils out. There's a light oil that can be used. Holy oil. A very light coating — not too much or it attracts dust. But you don't have to —"

"We'll get some," Dean said. Then he grinned, adding, "It's just like the guns."

"What?"

"It's like cleaning my guns," Dean explained. "Same thing. Soap's no good for them; they need to be oiled. Gotta take care of my..." He paused, glancing up at Cas.

"Weapons" was what he'd been about to say. But Cas was not just a weapon, was he?

"Tools?" suggested Cas, his voice very even.

A memory surfaced from long ago: Dean, I'm not a hammer.

"You're not a tool," said Dean, looking up at him. "You're not. Stop thinking that way." Cas blinked, and Dean said, "My... favorite things, was what I was thinking." By now he'd finished wiping the feathers clean, and he began running his fingers down the end of each feather, pinching the feather lightly between his fingers and pulling his fingers gently down. "This what I do next?" he asked. It was a move he'd seen Cas do sometimes (with the parts of the feathers that Castiel could reach, that is). Cas nodded, and Dean repeated the move over and over, zipping the feathers back together till the "frayed" parts of the feathers reunited. One by one the feather-tips became smooth and shining once more.

For the first few feathers, Cas held his head up, watching Dean closely. Dean could feel the tension in his wing. But after the first few feathers had been "zipped up," Cas let his head sink back down on his pillow. As Dean continued working, the whole wing seemed settle a little further down, sinking down gently onto the mattress. Dean finished that wing and shifted to the other wing, and Cas relaxed even more.

"There," said Dean, finishing up the last feather. "See? Super easy, Cas. No problem at all. They all look great."

"Thank you, Dean," said Cas, in sort of a drowsy voice. Dean glanced up at him to discover that Cas's eyes had slid half-closed. He was still watching Dean, but with a rather muzzy half-asleep expression now.

Dean had to laugh at him. "So is preening like a sleeping-pill for you, or what?"

"Something like that," admitted Cas, blinking slowly. "It's very relaxing, to be honest. But... look, you're really sure you don't mind?"
"Not a problem," said Dean. "Sam'll probably want to help, too. We'll take turns." He peered at Cas's secondaries, and said, "Tomorrow I'll do the white ones also. And maybe I can do the whole length of the feathers, when we have more time. All the way from the feather roots. Send you right to sleep like a little angel-baby every night." Dean patted one of Cas's feet and stood up to close the door. Cas looked pretty comfortable now but Dean asked once more, "You really sure you're okay out here?"

"This is better than my cabin ever was, Dean," said Cas, looking at him rather solemnly. "And I loved the cabin."

There seemed to be no reason to stay longer, so Dean gave him a smile, said goodnight and returned to the motel room.

"He all set out there?" asked Sam, glancing up from his laptop.

"Think so." Dean shrugged off his jacket. "By the way — turns out he needs some help cleaning the ends of his feathers. He can't reach the very ends. I guess it's a whole thing, for angels, cleaning the feathers. I did 'em tonight. We should pick up some holy-oil for them apparently."

Sam nodded, and said (predictably), "I'll take a turn at that. Sounds easy. But..." Sam glanced toward the door. "I hate to leave him alone tonight, Dean, especially after yesterday. Couldn't you convince him to take one of the beds? I tried to tell him that I could sleep in the van and he could have a bed, but he was determined."

"Yeah, I tried that too," said Dean. "But he's really happy with the van. I think he's kind of in love with it, actually."

Sam smiled at that, but the worried look didn't quite leave his face. "Still though..." he said, "after yesterday... I don't know."

Dean nodded, turning around to gaze at the door.

It occurred to Dean then that he had forgotten to do something, out there by the van. Something important.

"Be right back," he said to Sam. "Forgot something."

Dean headed back out and knocked softly on the VW's side door, right near where he knew Cas's head must be.

A moment later the door popped open and Cas peered out at him, propped up on one elbow, both wings spread out behind him, one hand on the door latch.

Before Cas could say anything, Dean said, "Not ever, Cas."

Cas blinked at him, puzzled.

Dean repeated, "Not ever. You got that?"

Understanding spread over Cas's face.

Cas gave him one slow nod.

Dean said, "Promise me you'll still be here in the morning."

Cas nodded again. "I promise," he said. After a moment he added, "Thank you."
Dean patted his shoulder, gently closed the van door, and went back to the motel room.

A/N - I hope to do more regular updates now that Into The Fire is done. It'll still be somewhat erratic, but I'll generally be aiming for Friday updates. Thank you for your patience!
A Loop In The River

The next morning, as they looked over Cas's maps in the motel room, they realized that the "bubble of inactivity" around Dyersburg was actually several hundred miles in diameter. Searching the whole area would be no easy feat. But each cowboy was presumably somewhere in the center of its "bubble". That narrowed it down somewhat, to a search area maybe a few dozen miles in diameter. It was still a fair bit of land to cover, containing a surprising number of tiny little riverside towns.

They began the next morning, by methodically driving along the riverbank roads around Dyersburg, hoping to spot anything unusual close to the river. Dean drove, Sam helped scan the landscape, and Cas mostly watched the "spiny thing" (Dean's term), the specially-sanctified silver crucifix. They'd all been hoping the crucifix might pick up signs of "evil intent" and start its characteristic counterclockwise spinning. But they spotted nothing unusual, and the crucifix stubbornly refused to spin.

The whole morning went by with no luck.

The afternoon was spent driving the side roads farther and farther away from the river; still nothing.

They developed a pretty effective daily routine after that, to screen one riverside town after another. At each town they started in the morning by driving around the largest roads, to get oriented and do a quick scan with the crucifix. Then they split up. Usually Sam would go check out the town motels and hotels, looking for newly arrived residents who might be acting a little funny. Meanwhile, Dean would talk up various townspeople, in bars and elsewhere, hoping to pick up any local rumors about, say, someone who seemed to have an unusual interest in the river.

And Cas would put on his backpack and hiked the smaller dirt roads and foot-paths that stretched for miles right along the riverbanks, right by "Ol' Man River," the vast Mississippi.

They finished combing Dyersburg; they checked out Covington, and crossed the river to the Arkansas side and worked their way a little northward. Osceola, Blytheville, Caruthersville. Still nothing.

When they got to New Madrid, Castiel mentioned, "Oh, yes, New Madrid. This was the epicenter of one of the most powerful earthquakes in North American history in recent times, did you know that? Hm... wonder if that could have been triggered by the river elemental... Hm."

That was a little disturbing. But all they could do was keep on searching.

A whole week slid by.

It would have been frustrating... except that it was kind of pleasant. They were working, they were doing all they could, and actually it didn't even seem very scary.

"I'd feel guilty about not tackling the hurricane issue," commented Dean one night, as they were eating take-out pizza again in the little Dyersburg motel room that had become their home base. "Except that we can't even get to Florida now anyway." He gestured at the TV, which was showing a series of excited news reports about how the entire Atlantic side of the Florida coastline was being hammered, yet again, by yet another out-of-season hurricane. There'd never been hurricanes like this in January. All flights and boats to the Bahamas had been stopped due to the weather, and Florida's coastal communities all had been evacuated for what seemed like the twentieth time. There wouldn't be a break in the weather for at least another week.
Sam said, "Well, at least all the coastal folks know how to handle the hurricanes now. They've got a whole routine by now." And, in fact, Florida had swung pretty smoothly into what was becoming a "routine" coastal evacuation. Sam took one more pizza bite and said, waving his pizza crust at the TV, "See, no loss of life anymore in the last couple hurricanes; just houses getting damaged."

Cas, who was standing to the side finishing his own pizza slice, said, "But it's worrying. We still don't know what the plan actually is. There's got to be some kind of coordinated plan, with all these hurricanes."

"Sure, yeah," said Dean, grabbing another pizza slice and sitting down on his bed. "But we don't know what it is and we're already doing all we can do. Scoping out this river elemental's probably the best thing we could be doing right now."

Sam nodded, adding, "Especially given that we can't even get to the Bahamas. No way were you gonna fly there anyway, Dean, but we can't even take a boat there right now." He swallowed his last bite of pizza, tossed the pizza crust in the trash, stood, and walked over to the little sink in the back of the motel room to wash his hands. Drying his hands carefully on a towel, Sam said "Ready, Cas?"

Dean looked up, and glanced over at Cas.

Castiel sighed. He had just finished his own pizza, but he said, "Actually my wing's a little sore tonight, Sam. I was thinking perhaps we could skip a day? It seems to get sore if I've hiked a long way with the pack on all day."

"All the more reason to stretch it out," said Sam, walking to the open area by the front door, just past the motel's room divider. Sam laced his fingers together to stretch out his hands, cracked his knuckles and said to Cas, "Okay. Front and center, Buddy."

Cas got a sort of long-suffering look on his face, but he nodded, threw away his paper plate, and walked over to Sam, positioning himself so that he had a lot of room on his left side. Sam gently took hold of the injured left wing and stretched it out, as far as it would go, watching Cas's face closely.

Dean watched them while he finished his pizza. Sam had come up with this physical-therapy idea several nights ago, and now he seemed determined to help Cas stretch and strengthen his wing every single night. He seemed to have decided to appoint himself as Cas's personal physical therapist.

It had been a development in their nightly routine that had taken Dean a little by surprise, but after thinking about it he'd realized it made sense. Sam, of course, was the fanatic about daily exercise routines anyway. And it was actually Sam who had been the "Wing Maneuverer" on the night of the surgery; he'd been the one who had moved Cas's good wing all around that night, for Mac to assess how a normal wing worked. He'd even held the broken wing in position during the surgery itself. Sam had also been doing a lot of the bandaging in the first few weeks. Even now, weeks later, Sam clearly had a certain confidence about how to handle the injured wing. And Cas trusted him.

Sam had even been talking regularly with both Mac and Sarah about physical therapy ideas for Cas's wing. He'd even brought *The Physiology of Angels* in his duffel bag, and almost every night he'd been studying the text and the wing-diagrams.

Tonight Sam started with a gentle wing-stretch, pulling the wing out slowly as far as it would go. As always seemed to happen, once Sam got the wing to the "one-third open" point, Cas grimaced with a little hiss of indrawn breath. Sam immediately relaxed the wing a tiny bit, and then held the wing there for a long moment. Cas stood with eyes closed and his forehead creased; it looked like he was trying to let the stretch happen but wasn't quite able to relax.
Slowly the wing seemed to loosen. Cas's shoulders finally dropped a bit, and his frown eased a little. After a few more moments, Sam released the wing. He repeated the whole routine again, pulling it gently out to just shy of its maximum extent and holding it there.

Dean watched them a while longer, and then tossed the pizza-box away and ducked into the bathroom for a quick shower. When he came out a few minutes later, drying his hair on a towel, Sam was taking some measurements. Cas was standing still, holding the wing extended all by himself this time. He was actually gritting his teeth and scowling with the effort, trying so hard at it that the wing was trembling. Yet the wing was still only open about a third of the way.

Sam stretched out a tape measure and took a careful measurement from where the wing attached at Cas's back to the tip of the longest flight feather. He then announced, "Hey, Cas. You're opening your wing an inch more than when you got the pins out."

Cas opened his eyes and let his wing fold back in. "An inch?"

"Yeah, that's good actually—"

"Just an inch?" Cas repeated.

Dean spoke up with, "Cas, that's pretty damn good considering we've had to jam the wing into the backpack every day for the last week."

"Yeah," said Sam, "That really ought to be making it worse, but not only has it held its own, it's getting better. So remember, if you keep this up—"

Cas interrupted, "If I keep this up it'll be a year before I can get it open again. And even then..."

He stopped with a quiet sigh, staring down at the floor.

The unspoken sentence seemed to echo in the room: And even then I still won't be able to fly.

"So maybe it'll take a year," said Sam, ignoring Cas's unfinished sentence. He coiled up the tape measure and said, "But you'll get there eventually. And who knows what else might happen. Okay now, exercises. Ready?" Sam didn't even wait for Cas to say yes, but just took hold of the wing and said, "Same one as last night, Cas— push the wing forward, like you're doing a slow flap. Slow, but as strong as you can.

Nothing seemed to happen other than that Cas winced, but Sam said, "Okay, that's good. Now see if you can press it back. Press against my hand. Harder! Press it back!"

Again, the wing didn't seem to move all that much, but maybe Sam felt something, for he said, "Good. Now here's one that Mac and Sarah both thought you should start doing every day— try lifting it up. Lift it up toward the ceiling."

Dean was occupying himself flipping through the online TV guide with the TV remote, trying to not stare too obviously, but he couldn't help looking over at Cas now. "Lifting the wing up" was something new.

And it was something important. This was the wing-display move.

This was the wing-move Cas had done when he'd first met Dean, all those years ago. That night in the barn. That stunning moment when the thunder had roared and the lightning had flashed, and the black shadows of Cas's wings had spread so dramatically on the barn wall behind him.
Dean and Sam both watched. Cas had his eyes closed again, frowning in concentration, and the left wing was trembling slightly.

But it didn't move. Cas didn't seem able to lift it up at all. The right wing twitched up several times, as if Cas couldn't resist lifting that one, but the left wing didn't move at all.

Cas's eyes flicked briefly over to Dean's. He seemed startled to find that Dean was watching him, and his gaze immediately dropped to the floor.

_The wing-display move is important_, Dean thought suddenly. _Cas wants to be able to do it again_. He couldn't have said why he felt so sure about this, but he knew it was true. It must be something significant, for angels, to be able to spread the wings high like that.

Sam said, "Try again, Cas. You haven't used these muscles in a long time. They just need to wake up."

"It won't go up, Sam," snapped Castiel, folding both wings so suddenly that they both made a little _fwup_ sound as the feathers snapped closed. "It just doesn't... it doesn't seem to answer me."

Sam took hold of the big joint of the wing and started to try to lift the wing gently, saying, "Here, how about if I help you lift it up a little—"

But Cas reached out one hand, grabbed Sam's wrist, and pulled Sam's hand gently off the wing, turning toward him a little to look him right in the eyes.

"Sam," Cas said, still holding Sam's wrist. "I can't lift my wing up, and I don't want you to waste your time. I have to be honest: I'm not sure any of this is really worth doing. Because, even if I can get my wing moving normally again, I'm still not going to be able to fly."

Sam blinked, looking at him.

Cas held Sam's gaze for a moment and slowly released Sam's hand. He glanced over at Dean (who was sitting very still now, his hand frozen in mid-air holding the tv remote). Cas then looked back at Sam, saying, "We all know that I won't fly again."

He paused, and neither Dean nor Sam said a word.

Cas looked back and forth between them again and said, almost gently, "You must understand: I'm _so grateful_ just to be alive at all. Just to be able to travel with you both again. Just to be here at all is much more than I expected." He gestured around the room, and toward the van outside, and said, "Even just to be able to drive around and see some of the world again is... so... " He paused, and said, "It's good. It's very good. But I am not going to fly again, and I'm finally beginning to accept that, and you both need to as well."

Sam's mouth had thinned, his lips pressed together. (Dean recognized it as Sam's "stubborn look", a look he remembered very well from Sam's childhood days.) Sam put both hands on his hips and shook his head, saying, "Cas, don't be so sure—"

"You're spending too much time every night on me, Sam," Cas said. "This whole week, you've been spending a full hour with me _every_ night. Aren't there other things you'd rather do?" He gestured at the door. "You used to go outside and go in those circles, remember?"

Sam blinked. Dean raised his eyebrows and said, "Sam used to go in circles?"

"Big circles," explained Cas, looking over at Dean. "A mile or more in diameter. Sam would run
around in big circles around whatever town you were in. Well, sometimes it was rectangles. I've seen him do it many times."

"Oh," said Dean, finally identifying the activity Cas was describing, "Yeah, that's called 'going out for a run', actually."

"Well, whatever it's called, Sam did it a lot," said Cas, shrugging. He turned back to Sam, saying, "The point is, you used to do other things with your time—"

Sam interrupted him with, "Cas, this happened to you because you saved my life."

Cas fell silent, blinking at Sam. Sam reached out and took hold of the left wing again. Cas seemed too surprised to stop him, and Sam stretched the wing out gently.

*Whoa,* thought Dean, *Sam's right.*

It had been all too easy to lose track of how this whole broken-wing nightmare had all started. It had started in Wyoming, not Zion at all. Sam had been dying, in Wyoming, last September. He'd been dying after being nearly tortured to death by Calcariel and his demon cronies; and then Castiel, Sam and Dean had ended up lost in the high mountain woods together, stumbling through the cold, dark night. Lost in the Tetons, trying desperately to escape from the mountain valley before a furious magma elemental destroyed everything for miles around.

Sam had collapsed, weakened from blood loss and torture, utterly unable to keep walking. And Castiel had saved Sam's life.

Cas had used a spell. He'd used a slender black angel-feather for the spell, too. (Dean had since realized that it must have been from one of Cas's alulas, likely saved from some previous molt.) The spell had saved Sam's life, infusing him with some of Cas's own life-force, but at the price of thirty years lost from Castiel's own short human lifespan.

And *that's* why Dean had gone to Crowley to try to make that awful deal to find Cas's grace.

And *that's* how they'd ended up with Ziphius, in Zion... where Castiel had come to save the Winchester brothers for the umpteenth time.

And *that's* when Ziphius had shattered Cas's wing.

Reviewing the whole chain of events now, Dean realized he had actually forgotten, somehow, that it had all started with *Casiel saving Sam's life.*

Apparently Sam hadn't forgotten.

Sam muttered, "Range of motion, now." He started to stretch the wing gently in some different directions. He was looking only at the wing now, and carefully not looking at Dean or Cas.

"Sam," said Castiel in a low voice. "You don't owe me anyth—"

Sam cut him off, still moving the wing around gently, still not looking at Cas, saying, "Cas. I know we can get your wing opening all the way again. I just know it. I'm certain. Maybe you'll fly again, maybe you won't, but if you can't get the wing open you won't even have a chance. And you don't know for sure that you won't fly. You don't know that. You thought you weren't even gonna survive! But you survived! Then you thought you'd never get outside again, and here you are! You gotta keep working with me. I know it's frustrating. I know it hurts. But you gotta try.

Because... you tried to save me, Cas, you *did* save me, and... and... and I *really* think you could fly
again, Cas, I just really do."

Sam finally looked at Cas, meeting his eyes, and said, "Please? Just... try?"

Castiel looked at Sam for a very long moment. Dean just watched them both, sitting as quietly as he could on the foot of his bed, the TV remote forgotten in his hand.

Cas closed his eyes, and bit his lip. And he tried.

He tried for the next twenty minutes, Sam alternating him through stretching and other movements and coming repeatedly back to the "lift the wing" move. And at last Castiel managed to twitch the wing up a tiny bit. Only a couple inches; but Sam roared in triumph, and Dean cheered, and then Dean had to jump up to give both Sam and Cas a high-five. Cas, for his part, just looked astonished — he was just staring at his wing open-mouthed, and Sam had to grab Cas's hand and hold it up for Dean to high-five it. Then Sam clapped Cas on the back in such enthusiastic congratulations that Dean had to say, "Hey Sam, maybe don't break his wing again, okay?"

Cas managed to twitch the wing upward a couple times after that, before whatever wing-muscle was involved suddenly got so tired that the whole wing started to droop toward the floor. But Sam was glowing with triumph now (as was Dean, actually), and even Cas now had a tentative half-smile on his face.

Sam said, eyeing Cas's wing critically, "You've got a bit of 'wing droop' now, like Mac was talking about with that toucan. Probably just tired wing-muscles, but we should stop here, I think."

It seemed like an excellent time for a round of beers. Dean brought in the movie-chair from the van, and soon Castiel was ensconced comfortably on the chair, seated right between the two beds, sipping a beer (and periodically stealing little sideways glances over at his wing, with a very poorly-hidden look of hope in his eyes). Sam and Dean ended up taking turns holding a bag of ice to the base of Cas's wing, while they all watched a movie on the motel's little TV.

The movie was "A River Runs Through It." Dean had found it on a cable channel and hadn't been able to resist.

A few days later they were back on the Tennessee side of the river, working their way through a positively microscopic town called Tiptonville. Dean was catching up on the local gossip with a clerk in the local liquor store, and he'd just let himself be talked into buying a few more bottles of whiskey and tequila and a few more six-packs of beer (hey, it was keeping the clerk talking, and it was all in the name of research, right?) when his cell phone rang.

It was Castiel. Cas said abruptly, with no greeting at all, "There's somebody camping in a large tent here, and the crucifix is spinning."

"What? Where?" said Dean, grabbing his bags of booze off the liquor store counter and mouthing a quick "Gotta run!" to the clerk. He ran out to the VW with the bags, set them in the back and hopped into the front seat while he listened to Cas.

"It's an interesting location, Dean," said Cas. "I've been walking up Route 22 and a section of the
river doubles back on itself here. It's a huge river loop, so that the river's on both sides of the road. There's a big tent here on the southern shore, right on the riverbank, and the crucifix is spinning, and, Dean, I'm pretty sure it's because of the tent. I'm going to get a closer look."

"Wait, Cas, WAIT," said Dean, firing up the VW and pulling out of the parking lot. "Wait till we get there!"

With some difficulty he persuaded Cas to at least wait till Sam and Dean arrived. Dean gave Sam a quick call, picked him up from the town hall where Sam had been checking flooding records, and they headed up Route 22 to rendezvous with Castiel.

They found Cas walking slowly along "Route 22," which turned out to be only a barely-paved narrow two-lane road. Over the past week Cas had really settled into his role as "scruffy backpacker criss-crossing the country", and he looked every inch the part now: he was sauntering slowly along the shoulder of the road with his thumbs hooked in the backpack straps, sporting a scruffy three-day stubble on his face, along with a tried-and-true outfit that now consisted of a scuffed pair of hiking boots, a beatup pair of working-man's Carharts jeans, a flannel shirt and his black polarfleece jacket. And, of course, the big backpack. As long as there were a few towels tied to the bottom of the pack, it turned out that nobody ever seemed to give the black wingtips a second look.

Cas turned to look at them as they drew closer. The narrow road here was flanked on each side by little stretches of stubbly cornfield, with the wide loops of the river visible on both sides just beyond the little fields. The river seemed enormous, both loops consisting of vast, broad stretches of smooth shining water. "Old Man River," the great Mississippi, was so wide here that it seemed to stretch to the horizon in both directions. It almost felt like they were on a skinny little island in the middle of a smooth, shining sea.

As the VW pulled up, Cas nodded toward the closer riverbank, which was about a hundred yards away, across the field to Dean's left. There was a large faded-green canvas tent set up there, the old kind from Army-Navy Surplus that was almost the shape of a little house. It had slanted metal poles on the sides, a big square canvas door, and even a canopy for shade. There was a folding chair sitting outside by a firepit.

"One chair," Dean said, to Sam, as Cas walked closer.

"Only one person here?" remarked Sam. He sounded a little dubious. A single opponent seemed too good to be true.

Cas arrived at Sam's window and held up the crucifix. It was spinning counterclockwise, slowly but steadily.

"I've walked back and forth a few times," said Cas. "It's definitely only spinning in this region. And the closer I get to the tent, the faster it spins."

"Okay," said Dean, glancing around. "We're incredibly conspicuous here and we don't know who we're up against. Cas, get in the van, quick, we'll pretend you're a hitchhiker and we're just picking you up." Cas nodded, rolling open the side door and clambering in. Dean put the VW in gear again, saying, "We should probably come back at night. We've got to figure out if this thing is an angel or a demon or what, before they see us—"

"Too late," said Sam. Dean looked up from the steering wheel; there was a man walking right over to them. From the tent.

"Damn," muttered Dean. "Stay cool, everybody. Play dumb. We don't know anything about any
elementals."

Sam muttered, "We don't need no steenking elementals." Dean laughed a little at the old movie line as he pulled the VW a little further off the road. The man was still far enough away that Dean and Sam both had time to check their pistols and ammo, and Cas quickly passed them both some flasks of holy water and a couple little bags of salt. (Cas's elaborate packing job with the cubbies, back at the bunker, had turned out to be more practical than Dean had realized at the time. Along with the cookies and pie-slices, it turned out Cas had also stashed salt, holy water, bits of iron, guns, ammo, and angel-blades in about six different locations around the van.)

Just a few seconds later they were all armed and ready. Dean kept one hand on his pistol (hidden down below the window); in his other hand he now had an open flask of holy water. Sam had his pistol hidden in a fold of his jacket, and a fistful of salt in one hand; and Cas was sitting nonchalantly in his chair just behind them, armed with an angel-blade, and with a shotgun hidden just behind Dean's seat.

The man walked across the road toward Dean's door. He was an older guy, gray-haired, wearing jeans and brown rubber mud boots and a sturdy old canvas jacket, and he had a faded baseball cap on his head. Dean braced himself as the guy drew nearer, thumbing the safety off of his hidden pistol while simultaneously pasting a friendly smile on his face.

But all the man said, as he sauntered up toward Dean's door, was "Can I help you folks? You lost?"

He didn't seem very threatening. And when he set one hand on Dean's door, in a friendly sort of way, his fingertips brushed right on top of the edge of an angel-ward that was drawn on the inside of the door.

But nothing happened.

Not an angel, Dean thought.

Dean took the opportunity to "accidentally" spill a little of the holy water on the guy's hand.

"Whoops!" said the guy, laughing a little and shaking his hand dry. "Maybe you shouldn't have that flask out while you're driving, huh?"

Not an angel, and not a demon.

"Jeez, sorry about that," Dean said. "It just slipped out my hand somehow. Sorry."

"No biggie," said the guy, wiping his hand dry on his shirt. His hand brushed past a slender vial of water that was hanging from a little cord around his neck.

Water. A friggin' vial of water.

Dean peered at it as inconspicuously as he could. It was a little glass vial about two inches long, wrapped in an elaborate coil of silver wire and suspended from a black cord. There was something glinting in the water.

He heard Cas mutter, very quietly, right into his ear, "The vial, Dean." Dean gave an imperceptible nod.

"You lost? You need directions?" the man said again. "Can I help you?"

"Um," said Dean, "Actually our friend here was just out for a hike and he got lost and we were just
picking him up." Dean gestured back at Cas, and Cas nodded in confirmation. Dean added, deciding for the direct approach, "Um, hey, if you don't mind my asking, why are you wearing that little thing of water?"

The man didn't even seem bothered by the question. He looked down at the vial, touched it casually with two fingers, and gave a little laugh. "Kind of a funny story behind that, actually," he said. "I just was camping here and this lady from the state Fish 'n' Game came along one day and hired me to keep an eye on the riverbank. It's for some kind of fish survey. But... honestly she's kind of a kook. She said this was sort of a good luck charm, and said it's also necessary for some cockamamie experiment they're running. I guess it puts out satellite rays or collects fish ids remotely? Or it has a GPS or something? She was kinda vague, actually. I'm supposed to wear it at all times— I'll actually lose my job if I don't, can you believe it? — and she even calls me up now and then and makes me send her pictures to prove that I'm wearing the thing. AND, get this! She has me chant these weird little songs to the fishes." The guy broke into laughter. He added, "Some kind of goofy fish-behavior study, I guess. Pretty much a nutcase job to be honest, and a helluva a waste of taxpayer dollars if you ask me, but hey, money's money, right?"

Dean and Sam glanced at each other.

*This is too good to be true*, thought Dean. *A human? One guy?*

An INNOCENT human?

"And the funny thing is," said the guy, with another laugh, "This'll sound nuts, but, since I've been wearing the thing, I actually have had the most amazing luck fishing! Never caught so many fish in my life! Nice healthy big ones, too. Been eatin' pretty well. So it's sorta my lucky fishing charm, ha ha!"

Sam leaned over to ask, "And there's, um... There's nobody else here?"

"Nope," the man said, taking off his baseball cap and scratching his forehead, and re-setting the cap in place. "Just me. And it's just a short-term gig. Kerry— that's the Fish & Game girl— Kerry said the experiment only runs a couple months. It's supposed to wrap up on the full moon."

Dean heard Cas inhale softly behind him.

"The full moon," said Castiel. "The full moon two weeks from now?"

"Yeah, that's it," said the man. "I just have to keep chanting stupid stuff to the fishes for two more weeks, and keeping wearing this weird GPS thing, and then I'm done. Though... I did ask Kerry if they had any more jobs for me after that, and she said I wouldn't need to worry about looking for a job after that, so, maybe that meant she has another job?" He scratched his head and said, "Though she also said nobody would need to worry about jobs after that, so... I don't really know what she meant. She basically just said, her boss would be wrapping everything up then."

Her "boss"? The Queen, maybe?

"So where's this Kerry live?" asked Dean. "She local?"

"Nah. Out west I think? She's mentioned Portland and Napa and places like that. Somewhere out West."


Out west where the fire elemental was currently hopscotching its way from forest to forest, across
exactly those states. The one elemental they hadn't been able to pin down to a precise location.

Dean was exchanging a Significant Look with Sam when Cas suddenly said, "Do you mind if I look at your fishing charm?" A moment later he'd popped open the back door of the van and was clambering out. Dean and Sam exchanged an half-amused, half-exasperated look — Cas did have a way of jumping into action rather unexpectedly. So Dean stepped out too, saying "I'm Jake, by the way, and that's my brother Elwood riding shotgun." (Dean had never had a chance to explain to Mac that "Jake" was one of the two brothers from the Blue Brothers movie. "Elwood", of course, was the other brother.)

"Nice to meet you all. I'm Burt," said the man, shaking Dean's hand.

"We're on a mission from God," Sam piped up helpfully — the classic line from the Blues Brothers, but perhaps not the best thing to say in these particular circumstances, so Dean shot him a very stern glance. Sam gave him a completely innocent look back. Dean sighed, gesturing to Cas as he walked up and saying, "And this is... uh..." (Here Dean had to stamp down a sudden, powerful urge to introduce Castiel as "Sister Mary Stigmata," the nun from the Blues Brothers.) "This is our friend Buddy."

Cas shot a faint smile at Dean and then greeted Burt politely, shaking his hand. Then Cas said, "May I take a look at your fishing charm?" He took two steps closer, right up next to Burt, and took the vial of water in one hand, leaning close to inspect it.

Burt just let him do it, seemingly not worried at all. And a second later Cas flicked out his angel-blade and severed the cord.

"HEY!" Burt yelled, jumping back away from the blade. "Hey! What the hell's wrong with you! Hey!"

Cas paid him no attention at all, stepping a little away from Burt and inspecting the little vial of water. "Look. There's a fish scale inside," he said to Dean, holding the vial out toward him. Dean took it by one end of the cord (he didn't want to risk touching the vial unnecessarily) and peered at it closely. Inside he saw a glinting object that looked more like a large trapezoidal diamond than a fish scale, but Cas said, "That's from a freshwater sturgeon, I believe. It's one of the most ancient groups of freshwater fish. They go back hundreds of millions of years. Dean, this has to be it — this is part of the elemental's soul and this is what is keeping it enslaved."

"GIMME THAT BACK!" Burt yelled, suddenly snapping out of his slack-jawed confusion. He made a wild lunge for the little vial, yelling, "WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU GUYS ON! GIMME THAT BACK! I'M GONNA LOSE MY JOB!" A second later Burt had gone into a near-frenzy, flailing and groping at the little vial with one hand, and trying to punch Dean with the other, yelling, "I'M GONNA LOSE MY JOB! AND I HAVEN'T GOTTEN PAID YET! GIMME THAT BACK!"

Cas lifted his blade; Dean barked, "Hold off, Cas! I think he's innocent." Cas glanced at him a little doubtfully, but he did pause. Burt didn't actually have a very coordinated strategy and Dean was able to bat away his flailing punches pretty easily, while holding the vial high out of reach with the other. Within two seconds it had devolved into an absurd game of keep-away, Dean trying to hold the vial high out of reach and Burt (who was a little shorter) jumping and snatching at it. Sam was scrambling around the front of the van now, and Cas had soon jumped back into the fray too, trying to grab the vial with one hand, still holding the blade with the other. A moment later Sam had one of Burt's arms, and Dean and Burt were both yanking at the cord.

"DON'T DROP IT!" called Castiel. "It's dangerous!"
"It's MINE, and I'll drop it if I want to!" yelled Burt, who of course chose exactly that moment to yank extra hard on the cord. The cord snapped, and the little vial went flying up in the air.

They all froze, watching as it soared right over the hood of the VW, glinting in the sun. It shattered on the pavement a few feet in front of the van, in a little splash of water. There was an extra-bright glint that flew a few feet further away—the fish scale, presumably.

There was a sudden silence.

"That was unfortunate," said Castiel, walking over and crouching on one knee to peer down at the scale. Which he did not touch, Dean noticed.

"Aw MAN!" said Burt, stomping a foot in despair. "Why'd you guys have to DO that! I'm gonna lose my JOB! Kerry's gonna be so PISSED!"

"I'm afraid she's not the only one who'll be pissed," said Cas. In the distance there was a low rumble, and then a strange sighing, hissing noise. Cas stood immediately, looking over toward the river with a tense look on his face. Dean followed his gaze to the river; the water surface had been smooth just moments ago, but now it was full of little agitated white-capped waves, though there wasn't a breath of wind.

Dean looked in the other direction. Yeah... both loops of the river were suddenly full of angry-looking waves.

The waves got bigger.

"We should leave," said Castiel, and the water began to rise.

A/N -

BTW I have decided to not start any new fics till I get Broken finished. I want to give it its due, and make sure it hangs together well and is smoothly rewritten. There's quite a lot of little edits, btw - every chapter is being re-edited. Not just the Destiel parts but also just general rewriting and editing to smooth things out. I want to make it as good as I can get it, and hopefully give all you platonic-bromance fans a solid story that is fun to read. Let me know if you're enjoying it! :)
The water almost looked like it was boiling now, swirling up higher. It was already creeping forward over very edge of the lakeshore. "Into the van!" said Cas sharply. "Turn it around, Dean, immediately! We can't go forward, this road dead-ends ahead!" Dean jumped back in the driver's seat, and Sam scrambled around the front of the van. Sam yelled to Cas, "Why's it angry? We just freed it! Shouldn't it be happy?"

"It may think we were the ones commanding it," called Cas, running back toward the van now. He said as he ran, "Water elementals are moody! Not always logical!"

"Should we grab that fish scale?" said Sam, pausing halfway into his seat.

"Leave it! They don't like their scales touched!" shouted Cas. He ran up to Burt (who was still standing by the van, staring at the water with his mouth open) and grabbed him by one arm, trying to tug him, hard, toward the back of the van. "Burt, you've got to come with us," said Cas. "Now!"

But Burt fought him. Dean started steering the van around in a jerky turn, yelling out the window toward Burt as he did so, "BURT! The RIVER'S FLOODING! And there's something in the river and I'm pretty sure it's bad news!" The van was all the way around now, and Dean yelled, "GET IN THE VAN!" But Burt, of course, had no idea what was going on and actually was dragging Cas farther away from the van now, stumbling back toward the tent in his attempt to break free of Cas's grip. Cas let himself be dragged a little further away, still wrestling with him, almost begging now, "You have to come with us, or you'll die! PLEASE!"

Cas finally had to let go, and Burt went racing in a panic back toward his tent— just as a low, long stretch of roiling brown water crested over the riverbank, rolling right up to the foot of the tent and stretching lazily across the fields toward them. Within moments Burt's tent was surrounded by a foot of swirling brown water. But Burt didn't stop; he splashed right through the water and into the tent, perhaps trying to rescue some valuables. The water was surging toward the road with terrifying speed, and Cas spun and began racing back toward the van from some thirty feet away. Dean glanced down the road ahead, and cringed.

There was an advancing tide of dark, roiling water closing in on the road ahead from both sides. "Shit," Sam swore, scrambling out of his seat and worming his way into the back of the van to open the doors for Cas. But then Sam called from the back, "Road's flooding behind us too, Dean!"

Sam was right. In mere moments the dark water had closed over the road completely, both in front of them and behind them, swirling around the VW's tires. Cas was nearly at the van, splashing his way back to them at a flat-out run, yelling "GO! GO!" Dean waited, his foot poised over the gas pedal, till Cas hurled himself through the open back doors of the van. Sam hauled him in by both arms, Cas went sprawling over the folded mattress in a big splash of muddy brown water, Dean floored the gas pedal, and the van leapt forward.

Then Sam hollered, "Burt, run!" Dean spared a glance out the side window to see that Burt was desperately trying to struggle back to them now. His tent had collapsed behind him and he was staggering in their direction, waving his arms for help.

But he was more than fifty yards away now, the water was several feet deep, and he was struggling to keep his footing.

A wave of water washed over him. He stumbled and went down, and was instantly lost to view.
"Dammit!" Dean swore. He hesitated a moment, hoping to see Burt re-emerge.

But it was too late. Burt was gone.

"We can't help him," said Cas, a little quietly. "Go."

Dean floored it.

At first the water was only an inch or two deep on the road and the VW roared along at a pretty good clip. Far ahead, a half mile or more, Dean could see bare road, and he was briefly hopeful that they might make it. But then the water around the VW's tires got suddenly deeper as surges of water kept closing in from both sides. Four inches deep, then five, then six; and with each extra inch of water the van slowed further, till it was slowly plowing through a foot or so of brown water, casting a huge muddy wake up at its sides. *Don't flood, engine, please, don't flood*, Dean prayed, coaxing the van along as fast as it could manage. He glanced over his shoulder briefly to discover that Cas was hanging out the side door now (Sam was bracing him by hanging on to one of his arms), calling something in that strange language he'd used with the snow-nado— presumably trying to tell the elemental to leave.

But apparently the elemental either couldn't hear him, or didn't care, for the water kept rising relentlessly. Dean spared a glance to the left and the right and his heart sank.

The land was gone. It looked like they were *in* the river. In the great Mississippi itself. There was nothing but swirling water as far as the eye could see, in *all* directions. Dean wasn't even sure he was even on the road any more. They were still inching along very slowly, but he felt the current start to tug hard at the tires. Cas turned back from the side door to report, "It's angry. It got its scale back but it's still angry."

"I kinda figured that out already," said Dean. Sam said, "Is there anything we can do to make it less angry? Does it even know we freed it?"

"I told it. It just seems very irritated anyway," said Cas. "It wants revenge. Water elementals get like this sometimes."

"Friggin' water elementals," said Dean, finding that he was developing some pretty strong opinions about the different types of elementals. He said, "Magma elementals are way cooler." A sudden wave of water made the van tilt, the VW tipping and turning slightly. Dean said loudly, "I MEANT, WATER ELEMENTALS ARE AWESOME!"— kicking himself mentally as he remembered that some elementals like Mr. Magma actually knew English. And had "very good hearing," Cas had said once.

Sam picked up on Dean's thinking immediately, saying, "Water elementals are SUPER IMPRESSIVE! ESPECIALLY THE RIVER ONES!"

Dean added, "Water elementals are my FAVORITE kind of elemental! Especially the FRESHWATER ones!"

Whether it was coincidence or not, the water seemed to back off slightly, and Dean felt the tires briefly grab the road again. The van settled down, slightly askew, and slewed a little as the tires began to grip again. It kept going, but Dean knew he wouldn't be able to drive it much farther— the water was lapping at the van's sides now, almost up to Sam and Cas's feet in the back.

Cas said softly, "It's coming." Sam gave such an alarmed-sounding gasp that Dean twisted around in his seat to look out the back doors, to see that a *massive* wall of water, a gigantic friggin' tsunami,
was bearing down on them.

A... tsunami. It was a tsunami. An enormous wave of river water. It must have been at least forty feet high.

They cringed as it raced right up to them. Dean's foot slipped off the gas and the van drifted to a halt; there wasn't much point trying to drive farther, for the wall of water was far faster than the van's sluggish pace, and the wall of water was relentless. Unstoppable.

Unstoppable, except that it stopped.

It stopped some thirty yards away. It came to a perfect, sudden halt, a huge wall of clear water forty feet high and at least half a mile long. It was simply—impossibly—hanging there in midair, right across the road where they had been just a minute ago. Stretching from one loop of the river to the other. It had even swallowed up a tall cottonwood tree by the road, and the tree was now swaying lazily in the clear water, its branches waving, looking rather like a gigantic piece of seaweed.

"Oh no," said Castiel, for there was Burt.

Poor Burt. Poor doomed Burt. He was floundering his way up to the surface of the wall of water. He reached the top, gasping for breath, and he screamed for help.

"No no no no—" said Sam, pointing over toward where Burt's tent had been. There was a huge dark shape moving toward Burt, swimming up from the river channel and over the field directly toward him.

Sam, Dean and Cas all had a hideously clear view, and there was absolutely nothing they could do but watch.

The huge dark thing grew closer to Burt, who was treading water at the top of the wall of water, hollering for help. Soon it was right under him.

It was a fish.

It was a hundred-foot-long, dinosaur-sized fish, cruising smoothly across the road inside the impossible wall of water. The fish had a great long pointed snout like an enormous crocodile. Its body was adorned with three long rows of huge, sharp, shining spikes, one row running along each side and the third going right down the center of its back. The thing looked at least as well-armored as a prehistoric Stegosaurus.

"Holy friggin' hell," said Dean.

"Holy crap," said Sam.

"That's a sturgeon," said Castiel calmly.

The gigantic sturgeon swam right toward Burt and opened a pair of immense jaws. It seemed larger than a whale, its mouth gaping wider than a barn door, and Burt didn't have a chance. He didn't even have a moment to react, and—one last saving grace—it seemed he didn't even see it coming, for he was looking toward the top of the cottonwood tree, trying to swim over to it, and he didn't even notice what was approaching him from below. The fish simply closed its massive toothy jaws shut around him, like a whale engulfing a tiny piece of krill, and Burt was simply... gone.

The sturgeon swallowed.
It turned slightly toward them, rolling one eye to look at the van.

"Oh, that's not good," said Dean. He tried to give the VW a little gas and heard its tires spin weakly in the water, but the van was barely in contact with the road now and just shifted sluggishly, not really moving at all.

"Not good at all," agreed Castiel.

The fish flicked a long tail that looked a good forty feet long. Slowly the wall-of-water began moving again, swinging around till it was parallel to the road, and then moving right up next to them along van's right side, till it seemed the van was parked next to the world's biggest aquarium. The wall-of-water trembled in the air beside them, parallel to the road, a mere five yards away. The immense fish swam slowly up next to the van.

It towered over them.

"Did... did I mention how amazing water elementals are?" said Dean hoarsely. "How handsome they look?"

The fish rolled a gigantic round black eye that seemed at least a yard across. It drifted a little closer till it was looking directly at Dean. Dean swallowed.

Sam said shakily, "That's... a... very... impressive... sturgeon. It's... so... uh. So big."

"That's because it's fifty million years old," said Castiel. He was leaning out the side doors, looking right out at it, and he said, "That is a river elemental. And, Dean, I believe you're onto something. I believe that this excellent, very impressive, extremely handsome elemental here may understand English. It certainly must have heard it a lot over the past couple centuries."

Then Dean heard a strangely familiar sound: the popping of the tab on a can of beer.

Dean managed to take his eyes of the sturgeon for a moment, to look back at Cas to be sure he'd heard right. Yes; Cas had just opened a beer. Cas was standing hunkered over in the VW's side door, and he'd grabbed one of the six-packs that Dean had bought earlier that day, and he had a beer in his hand.

"Cas!" hissed Dean. "Now is not the time!"

Cas paid him no attention; he reached outside and poured the beer into the water outside the van. He said, in English, "We are the ones who set you free. The one who enslaved you is not here. Please accept our offering." He slowly poured the beer into the water right outside the van.

The sturgeon flicked its tail lazily.

Slowly the fish opened its huge toothy jaws. It swung its great head around, and the tips of the jaws began to poke right out of the wall of the water. The enormous lower jaw, lined with yard-long serrated teeth, moved right up to the van. Right up to the side door. Two feet away. There it stopped. The fish stayed there, its vast jaws open, the upper jaw so large it seemed to be blotting out half the sky, and the tip of the lower jaw nearly at Cas's feet.

"Ka-psssh. Cas had opened a second beer, and he poured this one directly into the sturgeon's mouth.

The fish closed its huge mouth for a moment, swallowed... and opened its mouth again.
"Goddam," hissed Dean.

Sam said, "Gimme a friggin' beer, Cas." Cas tossed Sam a beer, and handed another to Dean. Dean scrambled into the back to join them, and a moment later they were all popping the cans open and pouring the beers right into the mouth of a dinosaur-sized, fifty-million-year-old river sturgeon.

The sturgeon took several more swallows. Gradually, as beer after beer disappeared down its huge throat, it seemed to relax a little. Its big side fins began waving lightly, and its huge eyes seemed to lose a bit of focus.

"More beers, Cas! Quick!" hissed Sam. They quickly gave it all the beers.

"Let's try the booze!" said Dean. "I bought whiskey! And tequila! Oh my god I'm so glad I went shopping today!" Cas was already on it, handing around bottles of the booze Dean had just got.

"Hey, you beautiful big fish," said Dean, unscrewing a squat round bottle of Patron Silver tequila, "I want you to know, this is the good stuff. Nothing but the best for you." He actually felt a little pang as he dumped out his whole precious bottle of tequila into the sturgeon's mouth, but was rewarded a moment later, once the sturgeon swallowed that down, to see that the huge fish was actually tipping over slightly, its huge black eyes now looking distinctly glazed. Sam gave it an entire bottle of whiskey, Cas a bottle of vodka, and Dean added even more whiskey.

They gave it every single bottle of alcohol Dean had bought. By the time they'd emptied out their last bottle, the fish had definitely started tipping farther, and the water level around the van sank down a few inches, enough so that the van settled a little more firmly on the roadside. At last the elemental closed its jaws and swung back into the wall-of-water.

"Dean," whispered Cas, "Go. It's letting us go. We have to leave before it lets go of the wall." Dean scrambled back into the driver's seat and began driving slowly forward, hurrying the VW through the remaining inches of water as fast as he dared. The sturgeon was now practically on its side. It seemed to be trying to get back to the river channel now, though in a rather crooked zigzag, and once it accidentally veered straight down and got its nose stuck in the mud. It finally got its nose free and managed to steer itself into the river channel with some fairly uncoordinated fin-waving. The road was almost clear of water now and the VW was going much faster. Dean gunned it, and the van surged ahead.

"There it goes!" said Sam. In the rearview mirror Dean saw the great wall of water collapse behind them, a quarter mile back. It made a huge roar. They all braced themselves, but they were far enough away that when the resulting wave of water finally reached them, it was only a few inches high. The water only surged around the VW's tires for a moment and drained away.

A minute later the VW was motoring its way peacefully down a muddy stretch of road. The surface of the Mississippi River was shining on either side in the late afternoon sun, the water surface calm and smooth.

"The beer was a good idea, Sam," said Cas, briskly tossing all the empty beer cans and bottles back into Dean's grocery bag. "I'm glad you mentioned that the other day; I don't think I would have thought of it otherwise. Though... it took more than one beer."
"We did good," said Sam slowly, as they motored their way back to Dyersburg. "Didn't we?" He sounded a bit uncertain.

Dean said, "We did good," hoping that saying it would somehow would make it true. He was still trying to forget the image of poor Burt being swallowed whole. After a moment Dean added grimly, "We did the best we could. That's all we can do."

Cas was shucking off his muddied wet backpack in the back, with Sam's assistance. He said, "You're correct, Dean. Though I wish there could have been some way to save Burt too. I tried, but..." He sighed. "I suspect he was doomed from the start. I hadn't yet realized how angry the elemental was. It really wanted revenge. It was Burt who'd been chanting the commands to it, and though I was trying to explain to it that Burt never knew what those chants meant... well, water elementals do have this tendency to get very stubborn. It was convinced he was to blame." Castiel paused a long moment, looking out the rear window, still holding the muddy backpack. Finally he added, "It bothers me much more than it used to when I can't save somebody."

"Why's that?" said Sam, "I mean, why does it bother you more than it used to?"

Cas set the backpack down on the floor. He was silent a moment.

"Well. I used to believe in a just afterlife," said Castiel. "But I don't anymore."

Dean caught Sam's eyes in the mirror. It was a sobering thought.

Cas settled on his movie-chair, shaking his wings out a little and then folding his hands over the chin-rest. He added to Sam, "Also I'd never been human. I didn't truly understand how it felt." He gazed out at the side windows, at the fields sliding by, and said, "The sheer power of the emotions. The happiness you can feel is so happy; the sorrow so incredibly sorrowful. I'm still overwhelmed by it, quite often. Back at the bunker, I felt so... so very hopeless, really. Then once we got out on the road, I felt such joy. Just to be seeing the world again, in the company of friends. Everything feels so much more significant. And also..." He hesitated.

After a long moment he went on with, "Before, I thought that human life on Earth was just a prelude. A prelude to the real point of existence, which was— I thought— one's true life in Heaven. From that viewpoint it didn't seem to matter if the prelude ended early. But now I think that Heaven is a sham. And I suspect it's always been a sham. The real point of existence is what happens here."

He fell silent after that.

Halfway back to Dyersburg, Sam broke the silence with, "Speaking of what happens here mattering. You guys remember what Burt said about the full moon? In two weeks?"

"Yeah," said Dean, "Did that sound a little end-of-the-world-ish at all, or was it just my imagination?"

"It wasn't your imagination, Dean," said Castiel. "That was very disturbing. I think we'll need to really accelerate our plans. I still can't figure out what the Queen's strategy is— it's really quite odd having the elementals this widely scattered, actually. And it was very strange that this elemental
wasn't better guarded. Burt had no idea what he was doing, and he was all alone there. Quite odd. But clearly the Queen's working up to something. Something big, two weeks from now. And I don't think it's even going to be possible to even find four other elementals, or their cowboys, in just two weeks. Dean, Sam— is there anybody we can call on for assistance? Some other hunters, maybe?"

Dean thought a moment. "We don't have a ton of contacts anymore. Hunters having such short lifespans and all. But... Let's see, we oughta be able to come up with a couple contacts."

Sam said, "We should put a few hunters on the Pacific Ocean one."

Castiel shook his head, saying, "Sam, that one's liable to be the most powerful."

"But it's also the farthest away," explained Sam. "Think about it. We're headed to Florida. We could barely even get to San Francisco in two weeks. We're never going to reach that one in time. Also there's that fire elemental in the same area. We're trying to work both sides of the country here."

They discussed it a bit longer. Sam finally made a few calls, Cas chimed in with a couple of helpful bits of elemental-lore, and by the time they got to Dyersburg, a rough plan had emerged. Two other hunters had agreed to team up and head to San Francisco for the Pacific Ocean elemental and hopefully the fire elemental after that. Sam, Dean and Cas relayed every piece of water-elemental knowledge they knew to both the teams ("Don't touch the scale!" Dean warned them. "Whatever you do, do NOT touch the fish scale.")

But they couldn't reach any other hunters. And that still left two major elementals: the Bahamas hurricane elemental, and the Colorado snow-nado one that had nearly killed them all once already.

"Four elementals in two weeks," said Castiel, frowning. "This'll be tight, even with assistance."

"Tonight we pack," said Dean. "Tomorrow we drive. Every day counts now. Florida, here we come, come hell or high... heh!" He snorted, and said, "Come hell or high water! Ha!"

Dean snorted, Sam laughed, and Castiel just sighed.

They got back to Dyersburg just at sunset. The VW, and almost everything in it, had been seriously muddied up, so the first stage of packing was simply to clean up the van. Dean found an automatic coin-operated car wash on the edge of town, the kind where the van could be parked in a big bay and washed using coin-operated hoses. Sam trotted off with Cas's muddied blankets and sheets to a nearby laundromat, while Dean scrubbed down the VW, hosed down the little tiled floor and Cas's mattress, and gave the backpack a rinse as well.

Then he took a critical look at Cas. Dean had made him stand in the back of the bay, out of view of the street, and by now, Cas seemed to have drifted out of the building entirely, standing just outside the carwash in the grasses of an abandoned field out back. He seemed to be inspecting the ends of his long feathers, which had been sticking out of his backpack and were now completely covered with mud from when he'd been running through the flood.

Cas was bent over in a rather odd position. Dean took a step closer, and realized that Cas was trying to rub the mud off the feathers with a handful of twisted grass, but he couldn't quite reach the ends.
"Hey Cas, you want a hose-down?" Dean offered. Cas turned to him with an eager nod. A moment later Cas was pulling off his velcro-strips jacket and his custom-fitted shirt and hanging them inside the van. He took his hiking boots off too and set them to the side. Dean grinned, said, "Brace yourself!" and turned the spray full on him.

He'd expected Cas to protest at the blast of cold water. But Cas leaned right into it, spreading both wings halfway and then turning slowly all the way around, getting both sides of the feathers fully doused. He didn't even seem to care that his jeans were getting soaked too. Then he started shaking both wings in a series of quick little half-flaps, showers of droplets flying off of them. His eyes drifted closed as he turned this way and that, standing in the spray of water shaking his wings.

Dean couldn't help laughing, and he cut the flow of water to say, "Oh man, you look like a bird in a birdbath!" Cas opened his eyes and gave Dean a doubtful look, his wings pausing in mid-shake, but Dean hastened to add, "It's good! It's a good thing. You just really look like you're enjoying it."

"I am," said Cas with a little smile, resuming the wing-shaking. A cloud of wet droplets flew off both wings, making a little rainbow in the long rays of the setting sun. Cas said, wiping down his damp hair with both hands, "This is my first shower in a long time, actually. I've been trying the motel shower recently but I can't really open my wings in there. Can you, um, can you turn it on again? The water?"

Dean turned the spray back on and Cas closed his eyes again, his head tipped up. His damp feathers were all fluffed up now, and he kept shaking his wings with trembling little flaps. Dean kept having to bite his lip to not laugh at how blissed-out Cas looked, with his wet wings spread wide, looking for all the world like a huge, fat, happy sparrow that had just found a new favorite puddle.

Sam walked up a few minutes later to find Cas stationed smack in the middle of the car wash, stripped down to his boxers now, with the VW parked in front of him to shield him from view. Both wings were completely covered with sudsy soap bubbles, and Dean was kneeling by his feet, carefully scrubbing down the ends of Cas's left wing feathers with a couple of big soapy sponges.

"We're on preening duty, Sam!" Dean called out, tossing Sam one of the sudsy sponges. "Get to work!"

Sam, to his credit, jumped right in to help scrub down the other wing. It only took a few minutes, and soon Dean had the water again to rinse the feathers clean. Then the two brothers squeegee'd Cas's wings off as best they could, and Cas bundled himself up in a big towel, thanking them both gravely for their assistance.

"Family, Cas," said Dean, giving him a rather stern look. "Not a burden. In fact... it's kind of fun."

That night they ate microwaved leftover pizza at the motel while they packed. Sam and Dean took turns holding the motel blow-dryer on Cas's feathers while he helped them pack, and soon everything was ready to go for their morning drive. Cas sprawled out on Dean's bed for the final stages of feather blow-drying, his damp wings spread wide, the wings stretching across both beds.
The VW's wet mattress was still airing out outside. So Cas took Dean's bed that night (after a ridiculous amount of arguing about who would sleep where). Dean slept on the floor right next to the bed.

Halfway through the night Dean woke to discover that one of Cas's freshly blow-dried wings was draped down right over him.

*We did our best,* thought Dean as he drifted off, warm and cozy under the wing. *We couldn't save Burt... Burt, wherever you are, I'm so damn sorry.*

It wasn't uncommon to see innocent people die during hunts, of course— it was always sad, but it had happened often enough that usually Dean could just put it aside afterwards and get on with the next job.

But tonight Dean couldn't seem to shake the memory of that gigantic elemental swallowing Burt up with such effortless ease.

What chance did they have, really?

Did they have any chance at all?

*We can't save everybody,* thought Dean. *But we did what we could. We did our best. That's all we can do. And so far, we're all still alive. The three of us, at least. That's something.*

*We're still alive. Still together.*

Dean gently, very gently, took hold of the edge of the wing, and he felt the alulas fold down over his fingers.

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*A/N - And now they've met a second elemental - a river elemental! Hope you enjoyed the meeting with the Mississippi sturgeon.*

*As always, please let me know if there was anything in particular that you liked about this chapter! Thank you for reading, and I hope you're enjoying the story. :)*
A/N - I feel like every single chapter of this fic needs to start with another apology about how long it's taken me to post the chapter! It's just gonna be that way for a while, sorry - I'm still rebuilding my health after last year's debacle (and also in the middle of a crazy job search). Turned out to be a herniated cervical disk btw that was causing all the migraines (plus a "minor" aneurysm that is still under investigation. Also there were THREE different types of tumors that also required investigation - count 'em, 2 skin carcinomas, 1 breast & 1 endometrial, collect the full set! - though thankfully those all turn out to be benign). The neck/head stuff is now 99% better if I get a lot of exercise and do a lot of stretching every day, so I am getting into great shape and that's awesome, but of course that really cuts into writing time. Updates will continue to be slow but will keep happening, I promise. Thank you for your patience!

And now back to our heroes. :)
"Yeah," said Dean, "Who wants to get talked to by an air elemental anyway? They're always so boring."

Cas said thoughtfully, "They do tend to go on and on about prevailing winds. And barometric pressure. And temperature fronts."

"See?" said Dean. "We're way more fun. Aren't we? I bet we know much better jokes, too. For example—" He paused, trying to think of a joke to lighten the mood. "Okay, for example, why did the air elemental cross the road?" (Dean didn't actually have a punchline in mind, but was hoping one would come to him.)

"Oh man, this is gonna be bad," groaned Sam in mock dismay. "I can already tell."

"Wait, let me guess," said Cas, straightening up a little in his movie-chair. "I heard this kind of joke last year once, when I was on my own. Though that one was about a chicken. Why did the air elemental cross the road... Let's see." He thought a moment, and declared confidently, "To start a hurricane."

This was such a completely ineffective non-punchline that Dean and Sam both cracked up laughing.

"Was that a good joke?" said Cas, looking back and forth between them.

"It made us laugh, Cas," said Sam, still chuckling. "So, apparently, yes."

Dean repeated, "Why did the air elemental cross the road... To start a hurricane." He shook his head. "That's actually weirdly hilarious for some reason, Cas."

"Well then, how about another joke," said Castiel. "Here's another type that I learned last year. A little girl explained it to me, and it's got a very precise sequence that you're supposed to follow. It always starts like this: Knock, knock."

"Who's there?" said Cas.

"An air elemental," said Castiel.

"An air elemental who?" said Sam.

"Um... an... air elemental," said Cas, now sounding a little uncertain. "It's... an air elemental."

They waited, but he said nothing more. Apparently there was nothing more to the joke.

Dean and Sam both broke up in giggles.

"That's how those jokes go, right?" said Cas. "Was that right?"

"Yes, exactly," said Dean.

Sam said, "Wait, my turn, I've got an excellent joke. Knock, knock."

"Who's there?" said Dean.

"To get to the other side!" said Sam, and both Dean and Sam were immediately lost in another fit of helpless giggles.

It went downhill from there.
The jokes (or, non-jokes, rather) turned out to be a pretty good way to pass the time. They had a long haul ahead of them, another brutal all-day drive, all the way through Georgia and clear down the entire Florida peninsula. So when Cas requested, a few minutes later, that they explain the "crossing the road" joke more fully, Dean decided it was time to really launch into explaining the whole idea of jokes to Castiel.

And somewhat to Dean's surprise, Cas actually started to get a handle on it. By the time they'd reached Orlando, Castiel had mastered several dozen knock-knock jokes (and actually seemed to be grasping — sort of — why they were funny). Soon he'd added a good handful of chicken-crossing-the-road jokes, and they even made some progress at the classic how-many-to-change-a-lightbulb category.

Dean eventually got brave and decided to risk a very simple dirty joke: "Try this one, Cas. How many mice does it take to screw in a lightbulb?

Cas frowned. "I don't know... four?"

Sam delivered the classic deadpan answer: "Two."

Cas was silent, thinking.

"Get it, Cas?" said Dean. "Two mice? Screwing? In a lightbulb? You know, screwing?"

Castiel replied "But, Dean, their paws are very small. I think they would need more mice." This sent Sam and Dean into another pretty bad fit of giggles, especially when Cas declared, "I really think they'd need four mice at a minimum."

It went even further downhill after that.

The hours rolled by pretty comfortably, punctuated with more joke sessions now and then, and some music, some unproductive speculating about the Queen of the Elementals. And even some napping — Cas spread the mattress out in the back, and Sam and Dean started taking turns back there, flopping out for a lie-down in between driving. The van's mileage maybe wasn't the best, and Dean did (secretly) miss the Impala's power a bit, but the van definitely did have some advantages.

As they pulled into Miami that evening, Sam had somehow gotten deeply engrossed in trying to explain the classic joke, "Why was six afraid of seven? Because seven ate nine." Sam and Cas turned out to have some kind of obscure history with this joke — some trip they'd taken together that Dean must have missed — and it somehow led Sam down a very wandering digression of explaining what seemed to be all possible puns, rhymes, and homophones that could possibly occur in the English language.

Meanwhile Dean concentrated on trying to navigate his way through the Miami streets despite a
pretty heavy rainstorm. The tail end of the last hurricane was still blowing by, and they were catching just the fringe of it.

Miami looked nothing like the last time they’d been here, during spring break last year, when it had seemed all college kids and beach parties. Dean found he was glad it looked so different now, so gray and rainy, because this way it wasn’t reminding him too often about that previous trip. And, specifically, that Minoan mask they’d found here. That weird ancient mask that had turned out to control an actual minotaur, of all things, which had then attacked Castiel.

Quite a terrible series of events had resulted from that. They’d lost not only Cas himself, but even their memories of him.

*But we got him back,* thought Dean. *We got him back in the end.*

Such strange dreams he’d had during those months, when all his memories of Cas had been ripped out. All he’d been left with was a recurring dream of a little angel statuette *with broken wings* (the image seemed sickening prophetic now) — wings that Dean had kept trying to glue back on to the little ceramic angel. And there’d been one other thing in his dreams, too: a man, standing behind him in the shadows. A man in a trenchcoat, who Dean could never get a clear look at.

Dean suddenly felt acutely aware of Castiel sitting just behind him. Cas was saying to Sam, rather excitedly, "Oh, the two words *sound the same!* The number eight and the verb 'ate! I *get it!*" but all Dean could think about now was that Castiel had a *for-real* broken wing now. Which Dean had tried his best to "glue back on." Cas was even sitting behind Dean, too, out of view, just like he’d been in all those dreams.

Dean found himself reaching back one hand till it bumped into Cas's left wing, and he took hold, gently, of the edge of the wing. Cas glanced at Dean in the mirror with a questioning look. But Dean couldn't think of what to say; so he didn't say anything.

Cas watched him for a moment and then pushed the wing more firmly into Dean's hand. He turned back to the pun-discussion with Sam, but kept his wing pressed firmly into Dean's hand after that.

Dean thought, *We lost him, but we found him. And we're not going to lose him again.*

He kept hold of the wing after that, as he drove his way through gray, rainy, hurricane-swept Miami.

They finally found a motel for the night, and the next morning Sam and Dean started calling around to boat-rental places. The plan had been that during this brief break between hurricanes, they’d rent a powerboat and speed on out to the Bahamas themselves.

A boat was really their only way to get out there. Flying just wasn’t an option (rather to Dean's relief). Beside the fact that Cas obviously could never have made it past airport security with those wings of his, it had turned out that there were no seats available anyway. All air travel in the USA had been pretty much in a permanent state of chaos during the endless hurricanes— all the East Coast airports had been closed more often than not, and thousands of stranded travelers were grabbing up the few flights that were available.

A boat, in contrast, seemed much more feasible. Sam and Dean had both done a bit of futzing around on boats in their pre-hunting days. Especially Sam, who'd been living right on the Pacific coast when
he'd been at Stanford, and had even gone out on offshore fishing trips with friends a few times. The Bahamas were only fifty miles from Florida, and Sam had heard that small boats made the crossing all the time. It was an open-ocean journey, to be sure, right across the vast strong current of the Gulf Stream, but even a relatively small boat could make the trip in a single day if conditions were good.

If conditions were good. If they didn't get lost. And if they could find a boat to rent.

It actually took a few days (most boats had been pulled out of the marinas, it turned out, during the hurricanes). But on the morning of the third day in Miami, Sam jumped up from his motel chair saying, "Finally!", waving his phone in the air.

Dean and Cas both looked up. "Found a marina guy in Biscayne Bay," reported Sam. "You know, the huge bay here in Miami. He got a forty-footer kitted out for deepwater fishing. Sounds like a good solid boat. Got a shaded center console, and a galley and four bunks, down below. Also - he's okay with us taking it to Great Abaco — that's an island in the Bahamas — as long as we leave right now, before the next hurricane comes. He says it'll make the crossing fine."

"There's gotta be a catch," said Dean.

Sam grimaced. "Yeah. The catch is, the boat was pulled out of water weeks ago. But for a mere triple the usual rental fee, plus boat-transport charges, he's willing to stick it back in the water tonight. We can take possession tonight, pack it up, fuel it, head out tomorrow morning."

"Grab it," said Dean.

While Sam called the marina guy back, and Cas started packing up their gear, Dean checked the calendar on his phone.

It was ten days till the full moon.

The Bahamas were a full day's journey away. They'd be spending all day tomorrow on the water, and then who knew how long it would take to find the elemental-cowboy. Then a full day to travel back.

_Damn, that's tight._ thought Dean, staring at his calendar. _Two more elementals after that. TWO._ The fire one, and the Pacific ocean one as well.

Which meant that Dean, Sam and Castiel would have to find this Bahamas cowboy absolutely as fast as possible. And Great Abaco, it turned out, seemed to be an alarmingly large island.

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They made a trip to a grocery store to buy snacks, water and groceries, picked up some beer, whiskey and tequila (Dean had decided to never to go anywhere ever again without beer, whiskey and tequila at hand) and then stopped at a gun shop to stock up on ammo. By early evening everything was packed and ready; now they just had an evening to kill before they got hold of the boat.

So they swung into their new evening routine, which meant, of course Castiel's regular nightly appointment with the Winchester Bros' Wing-Therapy Clinic And Feather-Preening Spa.

The wing-therapy part was going pretty well these days. Sam and Cas had been working together
diligently every night. He'd been a little sore for the last couple days (Sam's theory was that he'd overdone it a bit with the enthusiastic flapping at the car wash back at the Mississippi) but tonight he seemed to be feeling better, and they did a solid half-hour of stretching, range-of-motion workouts, and a whole series of wing exercises that Sam had devised after consulting with Dr. Mac and Sarah a few times over the phone.

Near the end of tonight's session Cas even managed to lift the wing up a few inches and hold it there for several long seconds, a notable enough achievement that Dean decided they should all have a round of beers.

Sam cracked his beer open and took a swig, saying, "Great job, Cas. Let's stop there. Dean, ready for feather duty?"

"Already got the washcloths," said Dean, standing up to grab two folded washcloths and two bowls that he'd set out earlier by the motel room's little sink. While Cas dragged his movie-chair to his "preening station" (as they'd taken to calling it), positioned carefully between the two beds, Dean filled both bowls with warm water and passed one bowl and one washcloth to Sam.

Both brothers had been taking turns helping Cas with the feather-preening every night. Sometimes one brother did the preening while the other relaxed or went to get take-out dinner, but sometimes, like tonight, they each tackled one wing. After some trial-and-error they'd figured out that stationing Cas between the beds, with each wing half-extended over the nearest bed, allowed Sam and Dean to each sit on the edge of their respective beds and still reach most of one wing — while still being able to watch TV. It was already seeming like just part of the evening routine, like cleaning the guns.

Dean had the right wing tonight, and he started with the inside of his wing. This involved starting by reaching across the entire wing to reach the tertials at Cas's back, wiping each tertial down, top side and bottom side, running each feather gently between his fingers to smooth it out and then wiping it once more with the washcloth. On the other wing, Sam was starting in the same place on the left wing. (They'd learned to stay symmetrical. The first time they'd been preening the two wings simultaneously, Dean had happened to start on the inner part of one wing while Sam had started on the outside of the other, and Cas had unconsciously started "tilting" so much that he fell off his chair.)

"I have to thank you both, once again," Cas said, as they finished up the tertials and moved on to the white secondaries. "I could never do this adequately on my own. I really am so grateful."

"No problem, bud," said Dean.

Sam added, from the other side, "It's actually kind of fun. I mean, giant angel wings, how fascinating is that?"

"Well, I'm grateful just the same."

They fell silent for a while, Cas watching a nature documentary on TV while Dean and Sam concentrated on the feathers. Dean worked his way through the white secondaries on his side, shifting gradually further away from Cas on the bed so he could spread the wing out a little more and really get at each feather individually.

Sam was right; it was kind of fun. The feathers just plain felt good, for one thing — silky and soft, yet strong. There seemed to be something indefinably reassuring, almost soothing, about angel feathers; somehow it always put Dean in a good mood. The feathers even smelled good. There was also a certain indefinable pleasure in the work itself, just working his way along each feather methodically, taking his time, cleaning it as best he could. It always reminded Dean a little of washing the Impala,
especially when he got to the outer section, the shining black part of the wing.

And there was another indefinable pleasure in seeing the effect it had on Cas.

Dean glanced at Cas now, checking his breathing— slow and even now— and Cas's expression—which had, as always, softened a little, his brow smoothing, his jaw and mouth relaxing. Soon Cas was blinking slowly, his eyelids starting to drift shut now and then.

Dean caught Sam's eye across the wings and grinned at him, and Sam grinned back. Castiel had never said a thing about preening feeling good, but it was pretty obvious that it did. A few times they'd even managed to send Cas completely to sleep. After all the pain he'd been through while the broken bones had been healing, it was nice to see him relaxing for once.

Dean finished the last secondary on the right wing, cleaning it to glossy perfection, and he moved further out to the primaries. The first few primaries were white; only the outer ones, the longest ones, were black. As Dean worked his way from the white ones to the black ones, he noticed how striking Cas's wing coloration was. The glittering black, and the shining white, and the soft dove-gray made an extraordinarily beautiful pattern.

Comparing the white feathers to the black, Dean remembered something, and he asked, "Cas, didn't you say once that you didn't used to have any black feathers?"

Cas's eyes were closed all the way by now, his head leaning down on the chin-rest of his movie-chair. But he seemed to still be awake, for he responded, "Yes. My wings used to be all white."

"Like the illustration in that book?" Dean asked.

Cas opened his eyes and glanced over at Dean with a slightly surprised look. "The Schmidt-Nielsen book that Sam has? Have you read it?"

"Well, all the parts about feathers, yeah," said Dean, feeling only slightly guilty as he said this, for this was almost true. Dean had looked at all the feather illustrations, definitely, and had rapidly skimmed... well, some of the text. The parts Sam had pointed out. (Any second now he was going to read the rest of the book— any second now. When this damn elemental problem was all over.)

Sam put in, "The wings are all white in the illustration in the book. No black, and no gray either. And none of these little silver tips." (All of Cas's feathers, on both wings had little glittering silver tips.) "Did your wings used to look like that?"

"Yes..." said Cas, after an oddly long pause. "Pretty much exactly like that illustration, actually. "

Dean asked, "So what happened?"

Cas paused for a long moment. Now he was looking at Dean out of the corner of his eye, one of those slightly-eerie sideways stares he did sometimes. There was something contemplative in his expression.

Finally Cas looked away. He folded one arm under his chin and looked back toward the TV. Eventually he said, "Feather color can change for several reasons. If the root of the feather is damaged, the new feather, in the next molt, can come in black. Also, sometimes feather color will change if the character of the angel's grace has changed. There's a very deep blue that you see sometimes on angels that have rarely left Heaven; there's a brown barring that appears sometimes on those angels that administer, um, correction to other angels."

Cas stopped there. He still hadn't quite explained what had happened to his own feathers; some kind
of feather damage, maybe? Dean looked at him curiously, as he worked the washcloth slowly down a long black feather.

"So..." said Sam, a little hesitantly, "why did yours change color, then?"

After a moment Cas cleared his throat and said, "The feathers at the base of my wings went that gray color after the Apocalypse. I wasn't sure why at the time, because it's an extremely rare color, but later I discovered that's a sign of having exercised free will. As if, I'm not purely Heaven's tool anymore— I'm not purely white, that is— but something more Earthly; something in-between. Something more gray. Does that make sense?"

Dean looked over at the feathers at the base of Cas's wings. They were a delicate dove-gray (laced with the little crescents from the silver tips). The gray covered the whole base of the wing, and even extended onto the tertials (well, the tertials on the right side, at least).

"It makes perfect sense," Sam said slowly. "Jeez. Free-will gray. That's pretty cool, actually."

"The other angels..." began Cas. He hesitated, and finally said, "It's not universally regarded as a good color."

*A sign of having exercised free will*, he'd said.

"I think it's an awesome color," said Dean firmly. Cas gave him a little smile.

Sam added, "I gotta agree. In fact I'd say that's just about my favorite feather color. But, how'd the primaries end up black, then? You said black means some kind of damage?"

"Yes," said Cas, "That... was... feather-root damage. Just... some damage."

"What kind of damage?" pursued Sam. "If you don't mind my asking?"

Cas was silent for a few moments, looking at the TV.

"Never mind, I was just—" Sam started to say, casting a look at Dean. There was clearly something here that Cas didn't want to talk about.

But Cas said, quite casually, "Oh, I burned the edges of my wings once. That's all."

Dean gave a little huff of surprise. "How'd you do that? Holy fire or something?"

"No... not holy fire..." said Cas.

But he didn't say what it had been.

*Wonder where he could have burned them*, thought Dean. It was starting to seem, though, that it might be something Cas didn't really want to talk about, so Dean was about to drop the topic... when a thought struck him.

Dean paused, looking down at the glittering dark feathers in his hands.

"Where'd you burn your wings, Cas?" said Dean steadily. Sam gave Dean a bit of a glare behind Cas's back, from across Cas's wings, shaking his head slightly as if to warn him not to press Cas on this. But Dean ignored him.

Cas glanced at Dean very, very briefly. And immediately looked away again.
"Well. Um," said Cas, now looking down at the motel's shag carpet. "Well, they were burned in Hell, actually. I was trying to fly around a lot of hellfire. Hellfire doesn't kill angels, of course, not like holy fire, but it can wound us. What happened was... I had to bank and turn a lot, and there was hellfire shooting all around; there was sort of a... uh... a chase going on. And I couldn't quite maneuver like usual, because..."

Cas paused yet again, and finally went on, "Well, I was flying laden, and I had to keep my wings spread a bit more than usual. To maintain lift. So I wasn't quite as maneuverable as usual. I was with several other angels at the time, but I ended up being the only angel who got his wings burned. Isn't that funny?"

Dean was studying Cas's face now. Cas was now staring at the shag carpet, frowning down at it as if he were completely engrossed in careful examination of the carpet pattern.

Cas rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, cleared his throat, and added, "But I was fine. I survived. Anyway, on the next molt the feathers came in black. Sam, how about a movie?" He glanced up at the TV. "This show's almost over. Maybe there's a movie we could watch? We could check the other channels."

Dean didn't budge. He was still studying Cas's face. Cas was not looking at him.

Dean said, "What do you mean, flying laden?"

"Dean—" said Sam, a warning note clear in his voice. Dean ignored him.

"Oh...nothing," said Cas, rubbing the back of his neck again. He shifted his feet a little, scuffing them against the carpet. "Just... I was carrying something. So..."

"What were you carrying, Cas?" said Dean.

Cas finally turned his head and looked over at him. A long, level look.

"You," said Cas.

Dean stared at him, and then looked down at the wing. At the long, black, shining feathers.

He ran his hands over the black flight feathers, one after another.

Sam had frozen absolutely still, staring down at his wing too.

Dean said, slowly, "You burned your wings carrying me out of Hell."

Cas had even burned the leading edge of the wing, Dean realized, for it wasn't just the primaries that were black. Almost half the leading edge of the wing was black too. Including the big joint of the wing, and even the alulas—Cas's nimble, clever little winglets.

Dean set the washcloth down on the bedside table, and slipped his fingers under the alulas, holding them up slightly to get a better look. They were solid black, shining black, all over.

"You burned your winglets," said Dean softly.

"Yes."

"Cas... aren't these sensitive? The book said these are sensitive. It must... it must have..." Dean had to pause before he could ask, "Did it hurt?"
The alulas flexed, wrapping down over Dean's fingers, just as when Dean had been drifting off to sleep in the Tennessee motel. Dean ran his thumb over the slender black winglets, trying to imagine what they must have looked like when they were white.

Trying to imagine what it had felt like when they'd burned.

"It was worth it," said Castiel, finally looking straight over at Dean. "I never had any doubt that it was worth it. Actually I was just worried about maintaining enough lift. The primaries... well, I nearly lost flight control. It was a little dicey. But I got through. I got you through." He spread his alulas a bit, lifting them up off Dean's fingers and glancing over at them. "Afterwards I couldn't hold anything for a while," Cas said thoughtfully. "I mean, couldn't hold anything with the alulas. But they healed. And I still had all my tertials, fortunately, so everything molted back in fine. You know, when you first met me, a few weeks later, I was regrowing the damaged primaries. You must have noticed, didn't you? When I showed you my wings?"

Dean thought back.

He could still see it now, in his mind's-eye, as clearly as if it had just happened yesterday: Castiel standing before him in that barn, doing that wing-raising move, the shadows raising up on the wall behind him (shadows cast from the etheric plane, where the wings had really been, Dean knew now). Those stunning shadows... They'd looked so impressive, so raggedly dramatic... impressive and ragged ... and... ragged.

Ragged.

Ragged, Dean realized. The wings had, in fact, looked ragged.

At the time, the raggedness had seemed kind of cool. He'd taken it, then, as an indication of the sort of rough-and-ready, no-nonsense, badass fighter that Castiel had turned out to be. A warrior through and through; a little roughed up, maybe, but ready to fight.

But Dean knew now that wings were not supposed to look "ragged."

Castiel had been regrowing his feathers, after they'd been burned in Hell.

Dean couldn't speak for a minute.

"You never told me you got hurt," he said at last.

The alulas tightened slightly on Dean's fingers. Castiel said, "Dean, it was worth it. I never had any doubts then, and I never have had any doubts since. It has always been worth it. Even now, the tertials... even this was worth it."

Dean tore his eyes off the black alulas, and looked up at Cas.

Cas was looking Dean right in the eyes. He said, "I'm proud of the black, Dean. I've always worn it as a badge of honor." Glancing over at Sam, he added, "I would have done the same for you, Sam, if it had come to that. But as it happened, getting you out of Hell didn't involve the same kind of aerial battle. And... I know I've said this before, but I'm sorry I didn't do a better job, actually, when I got you out—"

"Cas," said Sam, who was starting to look a little shell-shocked, "You got us both out of Hell. Don't you even think of apologizing."

"Have you ever wished your wings were still white?" said Dean, who was still thinking about the
awful mental image of Cas's wings getting burned black by hellfire. "I mean, have you ever... you know..." Now Dean's throat seemed to have gone a little tight, but he managed to say, "Have you ever regretted it?"

"Not ever, Dean," said Castiel, folding the winglets tightly over Dean's fingers again. "Not ever." He turned to look at Sam, who was staring down the other wing with a very thoughtful look, and Cas said to him, "Not ever, for either of you. You know, the silver—"

But Cas stopped there.

Finally Cas said, "Well. You're both worth it, is all. And now, how about that movie?"

Later that night they made a quick trip to the marine to check the boat. Cas did a very thorough check for hex-bags (and also checked for wild-calls, the little bundles of wild elemental-magic they'd encountered in the Tetons). Meanwhile Dean and Sam checked the hull, engine and everything else they could think of. Cas drew some protective wards and sigils in various places around the boat, just in case. In the morning they loaded in all the gear, and soon they were heading out of Miami's huge Biscayne Bay. Sam was at the helm, and he'd programmed a neat course to Great Abaco Island into the boat's little GPS navigator.

Sam turned out to be a much better boat pilot than Dean had realized; Sam steered them successfully out of the marine and through all the channel markers without even breaking a sweat and soon he was speeding the boat to a pretty good clip as they headed out into the open ocean. At first there were a few other boaters motoring around near the waters near Miami. But as the flat Florida coast dwindled behind them and vanished over the horizon, soon they were all alone on a vast blue sea.

The water changed color to a deeper, darker blue when they crossed into the deep Gulf Stream, the great northward current that swept right past the Florida coast and clear across the Atlantic Ocean. But conditions on the Gulf Stream were good today, with just some light choppy waves over long, slow swells. The swells weren't too bad, and it was a beautiful day. Their little boat sped along across the sea. As the boat picked up speed it got surprisingly chilly, but as the glittering water flew past the cool wind seemed exhilarating, the speed intoxicating.

As soon as Miami disappeared behind them, Cas shed his backpack and shook his wings out. He stood by Sam and Dean a few moments, watching as they discussed the navigation issues. Sam said he felt fairly comfortable with the navigation equipment, but the Gulf Stream could sweep little boats off course very easily, so he was keeping a close eye on the GPS and wanted to talk it over with Dean. While they talked over headings and course settings, Cas drifted away from them, into the wind, his feathers ruffling in the breeze. Soon he'd inched away up onto the forward deck, and the next time Dean glanced up, Cas was right at the front of the bow, where there was a sturdy bowsprit — a slender, but strong, narrow board that stuck forward right out over the water, framed by a waist-rail to hold on to.

A moment later Cas had stepped right out onto the bowsprit itself. He moved out to the very tip of it, leaning into the wind, gripping the rail at his waist.
He opened the right wing, and then the left, as far as it would go. And he stayed there, standing at
the very, very, very front of the boat, with nothing around him but the wind. With both wings spread
as far as they could go.

Feeling the wind in his wings.

"Man, what a sight," said Sam, shaking his head. "Look at those wings."

"Like Leo DiCaprio with wings," said Dean. "No, wait, forget I said that, cause we are NOT gonna
be the Titanic."

Sam laughed, and said, "I was thinking more a pirate ship. He makes a hell of a figurehead."

"Aye-aye, Cap'n Sparrow," said Dean.

They both stood there a while, watching Cas with his wings spread, leaning into the wind.

It was a few minutes before either of them got around to looking back at their little GPS route-plotter
again. At which point they discovered that the little GPS had died. Its screen had gone black.

"What the..." said Dean. He tried turning it off and on. Nothing. He checked the backup GPS; it was
dead too.

Sam throttled down, till they were bobbing up and down in the vast empty ocean, and he helped
Dean pull the GPS, and its backup unit too, off their little brackets to examine them.

Cas made his way back toward them, wings folded in now, saying, "Why have we stopped?"

"Our GPS just died," Dean said. "Oh, hell, look, Sam, the thing at the back that connects it to the
boat battery is destroyed. Looks like someone broke it. It's just been running off its own little backup
battery... and of course the battery eventually died." He handed it to Sam, and Sam looked it over
grimly.

Sam said, "Check the backup."

Dean picked up the backup GPS and realized instantly, from the weight, that it was just an empty
box. The innards were gone. He showed it to the others. Sam swore; Cas just frowned.

Dean said, "God friggin' dammit. I knew this boat was too good to be true. I mean, who has boats on
the water in the middle of a series of hurricanes like this?"

"I think the Queen's onto us," said Sam, examining the empty GPS box.

Dean nodded. "She must have wised up after the river elemental." He pulled out his cell phone, in a
faint hope that maybe its GPS might somehow work. And actually it was working... except that the
phone couldn't download the associated map. The phone was just showing their location as a
cheerful blue dot in the middle of a completely blank gray screen.

"No cell towers in the ocean, Dean," said Sam. "Which means no map."

"I know. I just was hoping," said Dean wistfully, sticking the phone back in his pocket. "Dammit.
Somebody got to the boat. Before we got to it, I bet. But we checked the boat all over for hex bags!"

"And wild-calls," said Sam, setting the empty GPS box back in the console with a sigh. "We
checked for everything."
Castiel was leaning closer now, looking at the GPS. He said, "It wasn't a hex bag or a wild-call. There was nothing magical here at all." He reached out and fingered the broken part. "Nothing was added; it was just that a small thing that was already there was broken. That's a very tricky sort of tampering to detect. This was cleverly done."

"And when we checked it earlier, it was working," pointed out Dean.

"Yeah," said Sam, "It was designed to fail later. Once we were out in the middle of nowhere. Smart." He looked grim. Glancing ahead at the empty blue ocean ahead of them, he said, "We'll never be able to get there without at least one working GPS. We'll be swept north by the current and end up in the middle of the Atlantic." He looked behind them and added, "At least we can probably find Florida if we just go the other way, but we're going to have to turn back."

"And then we'll never find another boat in time," said Dean. "Ten days to the full moon. We can't afford this kind of delay. Dammit, dammit, dammit." He gave a deep sigh, and said, "Well... at least the boat didn't blow up. They could've gotten to the engine, after all, but they didn't."

"I put several sigils on the engine last night," remarked Cas. "And on the fuel tank. Sigils against failure, sigils to encourage things to keep working. Just in case. But I didn't think of putting one on that little device. I'm sorry, Sam, I didn't realize it was that important. What does it do?"

Dean said, "Oh, it just keeps us from getting swept out to the middle of the friggin' Atlantic Ocean and dying a hideous death from thirst and starvation, that's all. No biggie."

"No biggie?" said Cas, puzzled.

Sam explained, "It's a navigation device, Cas. Helps us know where we are and set a course heading."

"Oh, is that all?" said Cas, brightening. "But, we can do that ourselves. It's easy. You're right, Dean, it's no biggie."

Sam and Dean both looked at him.

"What?" Sam said.

"Well, as long as you know what time it is, of course," said Cas. "Which we know. For example, at the time it is right now, and given today's date, and the elevation of the sun..." Cas walked back up to the bow, and right out onto the bowsprit again, where he took a moment to look all around at the horizon. He glanced toward the sun for a long moment, squinting his eyes, judging its elevation.

"Great Abaco Island is that way," called Cas back to them. He pointed.

Sam and Dean both automatically looked toward where he was pointing; just another featureless stretch of glittering blue water on the horizon.

"You sure about this, Cas?" said Dean. "Not that I'm doubting you, but, y'know, if you're wrong, then there's the horrible thirsty death."

"I'm sure," called Castiel, looking back at them over one wing. "I've flown this section many times. And swam it a few times."

"Swam it?" asked Sam.

"I've taken whales as vessels. From time to time. Over the past million years. I've swum through here
quite a few times, actually." He glanced around and said, "I think I might even be able to recognize the currents. Even with this human vessel."

Sam and Dean glanced at each other.

"He's taken whales as vessels," said Dean to Sam. "From time to time."

"Over the past million years," said Sam nonchalantly. "And he's flown this section many times. And swum it. But of course." He put the boat back in gear, and slowly pushed the throttle forward, revving the boat up toward its fastest speed.

From the bow, Castiel called back, "A little more to the right, Sam." He pointed again.

Sam turned the boat a little more to the right.

The boat sped forward again, over the glittering water of the deep blue sea. Castiel spread his wings once more, pointing now and then whenever they needed to change their course. Sam seemed comfortable following Cas's pointing, so Dean zipped up his coat against the wind and sat on a padded bench just in front of the console. He had a great view of the whole ocean from here, but he found himself looking just at Cas's wings, spread wide in the sun and the wind.

Dean sat there a long time, looking at the white, and the gray, and the black.

A/N -

So, Castiel really WAS in molt in that barn scene in S4. He had a huge gap in the primaries of both wings - and that sort of gap in the MIDDLE of the primaries means a wave of molt is going down the wing. And his alulas were visibly damaged. (the left one looked dislocated, and both alulas were missing their feathers. I choose to believe there was also a second alula on each side, folded down on the wing.) It was the first thing I noticed during that scene - "oh, that angel's in molt, and look, he hurt his alulas." Ever since I've had the idea that Cas got hurt while flying Dean out of Hell.

(I'm sure the visual effects guys chose a ragged look just because they thought it looked dramatic. Artists sometimes stick that "ragged gap in the middle of the wing" look into a bird image without realizing what it really means!)

Let me know if there was a certain scene or a line that you liked! Thank you all so much for your support. :)
Dust Devil

Cas stayed up on the bow for hours.

Dean took a driving shift and Sam took a nap; then Sam took a driving shift and Dean took a nap; and Cas stayed there on the bow the whole time, wings spread. Pointing now and then, one arm outstretched, to show the way.

At lunchtime Dean took him a sandwich. Dean ate his own sandwich up there too, standing just behind Cas and peeking over Cas's left wing (which, of course, was only partly spread) at the view ahead. Dean had just finished his sandwich when Cas called back over his shoulder, "Dolphins, Dean! Get in front. Take a look."

Cas folded his wings in and scooted back rapidly, inching back off the bowsprit, and guided Dean in front. As soon as Dean took hold of the handrail and stepped carefully forward, onto the skinny little bowsprit, he knew why Cas had been spending the whole day here.

It really felt like flying.

It was like being suspended in midair. From this position Dean couldn't actually see any of the boat at all. Instead all he saw was sun and sea, and all he felt was the wind. There was nothing on either side but the wind; nothing above him but the wind; and nothing below him but the surface of the sea, several yards below, rocketing past with amazing speed in a sparkling blur of wave and water. Bursts of spray hit Dean's legs now and then as the boat zoomed through the waves.

Wings began to spread in Dean's peripheral vision. Cas had inched onto the bowsprit just behind Dean, and was standing just a foot behind Dean's back, spreading his wings again. Cas tapped Dean on the shoulder then, and pointed down toward the sea, where, it turned out, dark gray shapes were dashing through the waves just in front of the boat. There were dolphins! A whole horde of them. Some of them even surfaced, practically right under Dean's feet, riding the bow-wave of the boat with what seemed like obvious joy. Dean was overcome with an almost giddy joy himself at the sight, and he shouted back to Sam, "SAM! DOLPHINS!"

Sam nodded, with a great big smile; he'd seen them too. And then there were dolphins all around the boat suddenly, dozens and dozens of them, leaping on all sides.

After several magical minutes, the dolphins disappeared back down into the depths. But Cas started tapping Dean's shoulder now and then to point out other things, too. More dolphins, in the distance; dozens and dozens of flying fish (each of which burst out of the water and glided for an astonishing long distance before falling back down); huge, stiff-winged birds with big dark eyes that circled the boat for a while; once a distant whale-tail on the horizon. Cas even began pointing out the different textures of the waves, and the patterns of the clouds in the sky.

It's the furry cows all over again, Dean thought. He loves the world.

He loves it all. He thought he'd lost all of it. And even though he can't fly—not really, anyway—he's still so glad just to be here at all.

As am I, Dean realized.

They stood there a few minutes together, watching the sun and the spray, and the flying fish, and the distant whales.
Eventually Sam called out from behind them, "Let's go a little faster now the dolphins are gone, ok?"
Dean waved a hand in acknowledgment, and the boat speed picked up with a surge. The wind hit Dean's face powerfully now. Cas's right wingtip immediately started to flare out even more widely, as if the rush of wind were making it positively irresistible for Cas to stretch his good wing out to its very full extent. But then there was a slight scuffling noise just behind Dean, and Cas quickly pulled the right wingtip back inward to match the left. Dean heard a muffled swear.

"You okay?" asked Dean, twisting around a little to look at Cas. Cas's wings were folding in now.

"Yeah," said Cas. "Fine." But he looked a little crestfallen, and his wings shuffled uncomfortably against his sides. "Wind's a little strong for me, I guess," he remarked, with what seemed a deliberately casual air.

*He's unbalanced,* Dean realized. *He can't extend the right wing all the way in a strong wind without being knocked off balance.*

*Because the left wing can't match the right.*

"Lean on me," said Dean. "Try again."

Cas hesitated a moment, searching Dean's eyes.

"Lean on me," Dean repeated. "Grab on. I'll hold us both steady." Dean's part of the waistrail, here at the very front of the bowsprit, was a solid steel bar. But the part that Cas could reach now, from his position behind Dean, was only rope.

"You sure?" Cas said, still looking a little doubtful.

Dean nodded and turned to face front.

After a slight pause Cas leaned against Dean a little, tentatively at first. But after a few moments he seemed to gain some confidence and soon was bracing himself more securely against Dean's back, and even put his chin down on Dean's shoulder as if to give himself an extra anchor point.

"Put your arm around me," Dean told him, and Cas snaked his right arm across Dean's chest and grabbed onto Dean's left bicep.

"Ready?" Cas said. Dean nodded, and Cas gradually extended both wings out, the right wing going all the way out this time.

Cas was flaring his wings out slowly, but almost immediately Dean could feel how much the uneven wingspread was pulling Cas to the left. But Cas held tight onto Dean, and Dean held firm to the steel handrail, and Cas got his good wing all the way open this time. Dean even felt him give a little sigh of satisfaction when the wing was all the way open.

"Feels good?" Dean said to him, grinning a little.

"Feels great," Cas agreed.

They stood there together a moment, the sun shining down, the water rushing past, and the wind whistling through Cas's feathers.

Then Cas said, directly into Dean's ear, "You know, this is almost exactly how I carried you when I flew you out of Hell."
Cas fell silent, and Dean stood there flabbergasted, suddenly realizing that Cas's right hand was on Dean's left shoulder, just where that handprint had been. *I'm the one who gripped you tight*, Cas had told him, all those years ago. But somehow Dean had always imagined Cas standing beside him, in Hell, tugging Dean along somehow with just one hand on his arm. It had never occurred to him that Cas might have been pressed up behind him so closely, with an arm wrapped right around him like this.

It made sense, of course; Cas would have needed a secure hold on Dean.

*I'm the one who gripped you tight...*

Cas spoke again, lifting his chin off Dean's shoulder this time to say right into Dean's ear, "You fought me."

He did not put his chin back down this time, but stayed there with his mouth at Dean's ear, as if about to say something more, but he paused.

"You fought me all the way," said Castiel. "You fought me the entire way. I had to turn you so you were facing away from me, like this, because you were fighting so hard. But I didn't let go."

The sun gleamed on the whitecaps ahead of them; the glittering sea rolled past.

Castiel said, "Balthazar asked me later why, when my wings caught fire, why I hadn't batted out the flame with my hands."

A flying fish broke the surface and skittered away. Dean tracked it with his eyes till it fell from the air, to sink once more beneath the shining waves.

Castiel briefly loosened his grip on Dean's shoulder, lifting his fingertips a little as he said, "I actually did try to bat out the first feather that caught fire. But then I nearly dropped you. So I put my hand back on your arm, here,— he tightened his grip again, on Dean's left shoulder— "but my hand still had some hellfire on it, and you were burned. I was sorry about the burn, Dean... I don't think I ever told you that."

He paused a moment and added, "I never let go after that."

Then Cas set his chin back down on Dean's shoulder.

He was quiet after that, and they watched the sea roll past.

The wind and the salt spray seemed to have gotten fiercer, for Dean's eyes were stinging.

For another long moment they seemed to simply soar through the air. Cas's right wing stayed fully outstretched for quite some time, and Dean hung tight to the waistrail, blinking to clear his eyes.

*Lean on me all you want,* Dean thought. *Lean on me all you need."

But then Cas's wings abruptly pulled in, both wings tucking inward by a foot or two, and both tilting slightly against the wind as if to try to brake (to maneuver, Dean suddenly realized, feel Cas's weight shift yet again against his back; of course, *that's* why the wings pulled in when Cas was tense; it was an instinct that got him ready to maneuver). Dean glanced over, trying to gear himself up to say something — "hey, thanks for getting me and Sam out of Hell" seemed a little insufficient, didn't it? Maybe something about "I never minded the scar on my arm"? "In fact I kind of miss it"? But then he saw that Cas was focused now on something far away.


"Look," Cas said, nodding toward something far ahead. "On the horizon." Dean followed his gaze and saw... something.

It was very far away, just a tiny dark blob wavering on the horizon. Miles away. Dean squinted at it, shielding his eyes with one hand. Slowly the blob resolved into a thin, wavering vertical line. A shipmast? A weirdly shaped cloud? Cas had closed his wings entirely now as they both stared at it, trying to figure out what it was. It darkened suddenly, and got bigger, writhing around in the sky as if it had suddenly become disturbed.

It was getting closer.

"Dean, this is something strange," said Cas into Dean's ear, and they retreated rapidly off the bowsprit to go consult with Sam.

The magical moment of sun and sea and light seemed to disappear as Cas and Dean clambered their way back to the stern, the sky growing dark and overcast in moments. By the time they reached the pilot's console, the wavering vertical line was much larger. Sam was already slowing the boat; he'd spotted it too. As soon as Cas and Dean got within earshot, Sam called out, "What the hell is that, Cas?"

"I'm afraid it's a water-tornado," said Cas, making his way down into the pilot's console next to Sam. Dean joined them, and all three of them stood side-by-side, watching the menacing dark line.

"A water-spout, I think you call them?" said Cas. "Sam, you may want to slow further."

Dean asked, "So... is a water-spout also an... elemental?" It made a certain sort of sense, and sure enough Cas nodded.

"Think we can outrun it?" said Sam, glancing at the speedometer.

"I doubt it," said Cas, shaking his head. "This is an air elemental, and they're fast. It's an air elemental that's trying to borrow energy from the sea. And it looks like it's succeeding."

Sam tried anyway, reversing course and trying to run, but the water-spout caught up to them with almost lazy ease. Sam throttled down, and they watched tensely as it approached.

"Maybe if we give it a beer?" suggested Sam, but Cas shook his head. "That likely won't work," he explained. "Food worked for Mr. Magma, because his element is solid matter; alcoholic drinks worked with the river elemental, because those drinks were all water-based. But this is an air elemental. I suspect it won't be amenable to food or drink. We could try, of course."

Dean opened a beer and shook some into the air, on the off chance it might help, but the beer droplets just fell into the sea. And the water-spout didn't slow. It rushed right at them, tall and menacing, a slender column of whirling air and water. Soon it was looming over them, terrifyingly large, hundreds of feet tall and at least thirty feet wide. It came up off their right side just a hundred feet or so away, filling half the sky, still approaching, and Cas said sharply, "Get behind me." He maneuvered to the side of the boat, pushing past both Dean and Sam and spreading his wings as if he were trying to shield them both.

The moment Cas spread his wings, the water-spout stopped.

There was a weird howling noise in the air, like a sound of sighing wind mixed with thunder, and Cas's eyes widened.

Cas called out something. Something in that strange elemental-language that he'd used before.
More howling from the air, the water-spout hanging right in front of the boat. Again, Cas shouted something back.

"Is it talking to you?" Sam whispered. Cas gave him a sharp not now gesture with one hand, and Sam fell silent.

The sequence repeated several times, the wind-howling noise alternating with Cas's strange words. But something clearly wasn't working, for Cas was looking increasingly frustrated. The water-spout was getting agitated too, and it started bouncing and swaying in front of them, kicking up some big waves that rocked the boat alarmingly.

At that point Cas reached over to the right wing, grabbed his own alula and yanked hard, grimacing.

"Cas!" said Dean, reaching out to stop him. "No! Don't hurt your wing!" But Cas just yanked harder, till with a hiss of pain he'd pulled out the longest alula-feather. A slender black feather, four inches long. The alula started bleeding, a trickle of blood working its way slowly down the wing, but Cas ignored that and tossed the feather into the air. It whirled upwards, straight toward the water-spout.

There was a little spark of light as it vanished into the water-spout, and the whole water-spout seemed to twitch. Then it straightened, and steadied, and got a little more slender, a little less dark.

A little less menacing.

It started to move away from the boat.

"Follow that tornado!" Cas ordered. Sam and Dean stared at him. Cas looked at Sam expectantly, gesturing at the throttle, and said, "Follow it! It's trying to help us."

Sam and Dean blinked at each other, and Sam hurriedly put the boat in gear and started (rather hesitantly) following the skinny water-spout.

"Cas, what the hell is going on?" demanded Dean.

"It's the strangest thing, Dean," Cas said, still not taking his eyes off the water-spout. "This is the hurricane elemental, believe it or not. That's what it says, anyway. Apparently the word has gotten out, from Mr. Magma and the sturgeon, and I think also the Zion elemental, that enslaved elementals are being freed by two humans and an angel." He frowned, adding, "This is extremely unusual. The different types of elementals normally don't talk to each other."

Sam said, "I'm getting the impression, though, that it's also pretty unusual for elementals to be enslaved in the first place."

Cas considered that and nodded. "You have a point. Indeed it is. It involves an ancient form of magic that hasn't been used for a very long time. Apparently it's driven them to consult with each other."

Dean asked, "Cas... Wait. Are you saying this elemental came over here... to... " Dean glanced up at the huge water-spout ahead of them. "To ask us for help?"

Cas nodded. "It says it's been looking for us for weeks, hoping that we would come here. It's been forced to make the hurricanes - it isn't doing it by choice. It spotted my wings from a long way off—apparently it spotted me right about when you encouraged me to spread my wings all the way, Dean. It saw my wings from the upper troposphere several hundred miles to the south, and then it realized we are two humans and an angel, just like it had heard about from the other elementals, and it got excited and apparently it came running all the way over here, from hundreds of miles away, to ask
for help and to try to lead us to the cowboy. It's not supposed to be here— the cowboy's forbidden it from getting this close to Great Abaco Island— but it's snuck past the cowboy's defenses by borrowing a very small bit of energy from the Gulf Stream elemental." Cas paused and added, "The air elemental got uncertain about me when I folded my wings in; that's why it was looking so agitated as it came closer, and that's why it calmed down when I spread my wings out again."

"Wait, wait," said Sam. "Cas, an air elemental is talking to you?"

Cas shook his head and said, clearly still a little frustrated, "It's trying to, but the problem is, it can't seem to hear any of my replies! I could hear everything it said, but it couldn't seem to hear me. Maybe the snow-nado had the same problem, actually. I'm starting to think that it's not that they don't want to talk; perhaps the problem is that they simply can't hear angels who are earth-bound. It was about to conclude I wasn't an angel at all, so I gave it the feather. It seems reassured now, wouldn't you say?"

Dean and Sam both glanced over at the thousand-foot high water-spout, which was now purring neatly along ahead of them, trailing a train of peaceful, small puffy clouds out of its top end. It was heading right across the ocean on such a dead straight course it might have been an old-time locomotive following a train track.

"You know," said Sam, "I never would have said before that a tornado could look reassured, but that does actually look like a reassured tornado."

Cas confirmed that the water-spout was leading them unerringly to Great Abaco Island. And a few hours later, once they finally got close to the island, the water-spout steered them carefully around to the long southern shore of the island.

"This is tremendously useful," said Castiel. "We had no idea where on the island we should be focusing our efforts. This could have taken days otherwise."

"Is it getting smaller?" said Sam. He pointed at the elemental, and Dean took a critical look. The water-spout was, in fact, noticeably thinner. And shorter. Cas nodded, saying, "I believe you're right, Sam. It did say, earlier, that it would probably get progressively weaker as it approaches the cowboy. So it won't be able to lead us the whole way there. But it'll lead us as far as it can."

By late afternoon the water-spout had guided them to a large bay of turquoise water, and it seemed to be trying to point them toward a certain area of the shoreline, where there was a string of ritzy vacation houses up on a small sandy bluff. After some discussion they decided to back off a bit and go ashore a mile away, to sneak up a little less conspicuously (though, as Dean pointed out, "sneaking up" on anybody when you had a small tornado on your team was a dubious concept at best).

They picked a spot to unload, where Sam got the boat close enough in that Cas could hop out into fairly shallow water and wade to shore, carrying their necessary equipment (and some dry clothes) over his head, holding his wings as high out of the water as he could. (The left one dragged a bit, of course, but Cas did pretty well.) Then Sam and Dean took the boat a little further out to where they could anchor it safely, and both brothers swam back to shore to join Cas. While they were drying off, helping Cas dry his left wing, and changing their clothes, the water-spout drifted onto shore nearby and immediately grew smaller still, soon shrinking down to just a little dust-devil that began wobbling around on the shoreline, kicking up bits of dried seaweed and loose leaves.

"I think it's waiting for us," said Sam. Once Cas had his wing-backpack on and they all had their weapons, Dean said to the dust-devil, "All right, you puff of wind." He took a few steps toward the
dust-devil and gestured up and down the beach. "Where do we go now?"

Cas had warned them that this elemental didn't seem to know English. (Cas's theory was that it had probably spent most of its life in the upper troposphere, where there was not much English to be heard.) Yet the dust-devil seemed to get Dean's meaning anyway, for it began to move slowly in a certain direction, though wobbling a little drunkenly. By now it was barely the size of the little stunted beach pines, with a little mess of leaves and dust whirling weakly at its base. But it managed to start making its way forward, and Sam, Dean, and Castiel followed along behind.

It led them about a mile through scattered beach pines and scrubby ground, roughly parallel to the shore, getting smaller and weaker the whole time. The sun began to set and the light grew dim, but they could still see enough, in the fading twilight, to follow the little dust-devil. Eventually they realized it was taking them directly toward a particular building: a big, fancy-looking house up on the little sandy bluff, with huge plate glass windows that looked out over the sea. This house was all alone; there were no other houses nearby.

Cas pulled the crucifix out of his pocket and checked it. Sure enough, it had started to spin.

"That's it," whispered Dean. "That house. That's got to be it." They decided to creep a little closer to try to check the layout before developing a firm plan. The dust-devil, now shrunken to barely person-height, tried to accompany them, but there came a point where it paused and seemed unable to move any closer to the house. Dean took several steps past it before he realized it wasn't coming with them anymore.

"Dean, it can't go any further," said Sam. They all stopped and looked at it. The little dust-devil was incredibly weak and skinny now, maybe six feet tall. It seemed barely able to keep together at all, just a tiny whirling bit of breeze barely a half-foot across, only able to bat a couple of leaves around. Two leaves, and a little black thing.

A little black thing. Dean squinted at it, trying to get a closer look.

A little pointy black thing, about four inches long.

"It's still got your feather, Cas," said Dean.

Sam said, "Wow, it can barely keep the feather up. Cas, this thing's really the elemental that's been doing all the hurricanes? Those gigantic ferocious Category 5 hurricanes?"

"Yes, it is," said Castiel. "It's extremely weak here because the enchantment enslaving these things is that powerful. Though the enchantment's easy for us to break, for the elemental it represents a powerful binding. Being this close to the cowboy, against direct orders, must be tremendously difficult for it." He studied it for a moment, and added, "I'm amazed it's holding together at all, actually. This must be causing it tremendous discomfort."

"Well, little tornado, you better turn back here," said Dean. "We'll do our best to help you. And, I know you probably can't understand me, but, if we do manage to set you free, please don't kill us accidentally, okay?"

He started walking away from it, but suddenly the dust-devil made one last desperate surge toward Dean and fell right on him. Dean flinched, but the dust-devil was so weak now that all it seemed able to do was puff lightly against his skin, and throw one of its two leaves into Dean's hair. Then it threw the other leaf at Sam, and last of all it tried to return the feather to Cas. But by now it was almost too weak to carry the feather—it only managed to loft the feather a foot or so toward Cas, and Cas had to reach out and snatch his alula-feather out of the air himself.
Cas held the feather thoughtfully, and Sam and Dean held their leaves, watching the rapidly weakening dust-devil. It went limping away back in the direction they had come, barely visible now, just a little moving twist of air that was only visible as a stirring of loose dirt on the ground.

"I never thought I could feel so sorry for a puff of wind," said Sam, tucking his leaf in the front pocket of his shirt and buttoning the pocket closed. Dean stuck his leaf in a pocket too, and Cas tucked his feather carefully away.

They got all their usual gear out, Sam and Dean armed with pistols and Cas with an angel-blade, with various other weapons stashed at the ready in their pockets. Dean found, though, that he felt pretty uneasy. They really had no idea whether they'd be facing just another helpless human like Burt, or a full-powered angel like Ziphius, or maybe even something worse. So Dean called a halt, behind a few trees near the house, to have a whispered strategy discussion.

"I was thinking about sigils," whispered Dean, turning to them both, "I know that didn't work so well against Calcariel, but maybe we ought to—"

"—Just give up?" said a cheerful voice.

A finger snapped, and flood lights sprang to life all around the house.

There was a short, round, dark-haired man smiling at them from the veranda of the house about fifty feet away. He was wearing a little pendant of blue glass around his neck. He didn't seem to have any kind of weapon— and didn't need to, for when he snapped his fingers again a moment later, at once Dean and Sam both lost hold of their pistols and Cas lost his blade, the three weapons flying out of their hands and through the air to land neatly at the man's feet. A third finger-snap and Dean suddenly found that he couldn't move his feet at all. Or his hands; his arms seemed bound to his side by invisible cords. He was still standing very close to Cas and Sam, since they'd just had their heads together whispering to each other, and he looked over at them desperately. But they both just gave him unhappy looks back. Neither Cas nor Sam seemed able to move either.

"Boys!" said the dark-haired man, clapping his hands twice in summons, and two burly Bahamians with demon-black eyes stepped out of the shadows at the corner of the house, one on the left and one on the right. They each were holding assault rifles. M-16's. The good ol' US Army classic, with big curved 30-round magazines sticking dramatically out from the lower sides.

"Oh man, you dudes don't mess around," said Dean, his heart sinking.

"Three against three!" said the dark-haired man cheerfully. "Perfectly even fight! Can't say it's not fair."

"Right," said Sam, "An angel, or whatever you are, and two demons with M-16s, against three unarmed humans. Whose hands you've frozen. Totally fair."

The man gave him a wide, toothy grin. "Three humans? Let's see, who's your third companion there?" He walked a little closer, peering at Cas, and he said, "It truly is Castiel, isn't it? Castiel! I heard you might have gotten mixed up in all this but I admit I didn't truly believe it till today. I wanted to see it for myself. You know, I could have just stopped your hearts, all three of you, the second you stepped on shore from that boat— by the way, did you really think we wouldn't notice a thousand foot high water tornado? That elemental is going to be very sorry for doing that, I can promise you that!"

Cas said, "Belaniel. What are you doing here? Why are you involved in all this?"
"Belaniel" grinned, and said, "It's nice to see you again too, Cassie. It's been quite a long time since the South Pole garrison days, hasn't it?"

An angel, thought Dean, trading a grim look with Sam. Dammit.

Cas said, his voice low, "What do you want from us?"

"Well... my boss wanted to stop you fellows at the Gulf Stream, actually," said Belaniel. "With that little plan of disabling your boat. But, as I said, I wanted to see you. And, Cassie, I noticed you were able to navigate anyway, and that you were communicating with the elemental. Listen, Castiel. You've got some decent skills. I've decided to offer you a chance to join us."

Cas blinked. "Join you?"

"I thought you might be interested. Because it was you, after all, who cast us all out of Heaven."

Cas said, in a distinctly aggrieved tone, "I've told everyone who will listen, I didn't know what Metatron was planning—"

"I believe you," interrupted Belaniel, "But you played a role, and you can't say you didn't. But, Castiel, you can redeem yourself. By helping the angels find a new home! Cassie..." (Dean rolled his eyes; the "Cassie" was getting annoying.) Belaniel continued, "We can build a new Heaven right here. On Earth! All we have to do is sweep the planet clean first; just wipe everything out and sterilize the earth, do a bit of cleaning, sweep up a bit, maybe some bleach; a few centuries ought to do it; and then just plant some flowers, put a few benches around and it'll be perfect! And a couple of us have come up with a pretty feasible plan to wipe the planet clean. We're starting with North America."

"Oh, you are kidding me," said Dean. "Calcariel's plan again?" Calcariel, in Wyoming, had been trying much the same thing. (Minus the flowers and benches.) "Didn't you guys learn your lesson with Mr. Magma?"

Belaniel glared at him, but conceded, "The magma elemental didn't work out, agreed. Ziffy told me what happened. But I wasn't part of the team then, and there's lots of other elementals to try. Don't you humans have a saying... if at first you don't succeed, try, try again?"

Sam put in, "And killing millions of people is okay with you?"

Belaniel shrugged. "Yes, to put it bluntly. Millions of people, or millions of ants, or millions of chickens, and so on. To be honest, you all look to me like slightly advanced bacteria. I don't really see that there'll be that much of a loss. Our boss has a good plan and I think it'll work."

Sam said, "Your boss? The Queen?"

Belaniel gave a chuckle. "Not a bad term for her now. Yes, I suppose so - the Queen."

"So what's the plan?" said Dean. "Rile up all five elementals at once?"

"Oh, no, most of them are just decoys," said Belaniel.

Cas, Sam and Dean exchanged bleak looks, and Belaniel smiled at their expressions, saying, "We originally tested several elementals to see which had the most continent-cleaning potential. But we were planning all along to pick just the best one and then keep the others as decoys. The freshwater ones were near useless — they can only flood a very limited area. The marine one showed a lot of potential and we were planning to base our whole approach around it — did you know that thing can
produce a ten-thousand-foot tsunami, if it really sets its mind to it? But, unfortunately, some other irritating hunters seem to have freed that one. Though at least the elemental took them down to the bottom of the sea for their troubles."

This was awful to hear; Dean had to struggle to keep his expression neutral.

Belaniel went on, "This air one, now, the one that led you here, is actually pretty strong, but it turns out it always weakens when it goes over land; it can only really affect the East Coast. We're keeping it as a backup, though. Anyway, as I said, we held on to all the rejects as decoys. Basically to keep you fellows running all over the place for as long as possible. Worked like a charm, didn't it? Because here you are on the complete wrong side of the continent!" He smiled, and said, "My idea, actually, if I can take a bit of credit. Ziffy didn't really appreciate how persistent you Winchesters can be, but I'd heard some tales."

Dean couldn't even look at Cas and Sam.

They'd come the wrong direction.

They should have gone west, all along.

Cas said, "But what would you have done if we'd gotten west in time?"

"Oh, we had a little insurance plan," said Belaniel. "Which we don't need anymore. So, old friend, what do you say? Join us, and help us build a new Heaven here on Earth! We really could use another angel. It's been rather difficult coming up with reliable personnel, and we really need someone who can speak with air elementals. They won't talk to most of us who fell. If we could get one more angel—"

"Oh, Belaniel, no, no," said Cas, shaking his head. "That's no redemption at all, and that is no Heaven at all that you would be building. Annihilating life on Earth is the worst evil there is, can't you see that? Worse even than what Lucifer did! Belaniel, listen to me, human life is valuable. Every human is unique, Belaniel, and their souls can be so beautiful, and—"

"Yes, yes, I'd heard about how you'd gone native," interrupted Belaniel. "Gone slumming with the locals quite a bit, haven't you? Pretty obvious, isn't it? But I wanted to extend the offer nonetheless." He started to walk over to Cas, saying, "This is your last chance—"

And then Belaniel froze in mid-sentence, staring at the bottom of Cas's backpack. He said, "Wait. What... what is sticking out of your rucksack, Cassie, are those... feathers?"

He waved a hand, and the whole pack flew backwards off of Cas's back, jerking Cas's arms and wings roughly as it wrenched off. Cas winced and folded his wings back up.

Belaniel's eyes widened. He walked further around Castiel, looking at the wings from behind. "Mortal wings? What in Heaven's name... oh...oh, dear Lord, Castiel—" Belaniel actually grabbed hold of Cas's left wing (Cas flinched at his touch, leaning forward and gritting his teeth, his hands helplessly bound to his side.)

Belaniel pulled the left wing wing out, extending it a few feet to take a close look at it from behind.

"Castiel, you've been tertialed?" said Belaniel.

Belaniel sounded truly appalled. He poked the half-extended wing gingerly with one finger (Cas flinched again) and said, "Tertialed, and mortal wings! Dear lord above, I was not really expecting
He let go of the wing and shook his hand, wiping it on his pants as if fearing some sort of contamination from Castiel's "mortal" wings. "Oh my goodness. Ziffy broke you. Didn't she. She said she was going to try, but we never knew what had happened. Ziffy actually broke you. Yet somehow you survived? Astonishing. Simply astonishing."

Dean snapped, "Would you just get on with it?"

"But this is so fascinating!" said Belaniel, walking slowly all around Castiel now, and peering at his wings from all angles. "I've never seen mortal wings! I've heard of the possibility of course, but never seen a case myself. And I've never even heard of a broken wing healing. Many angels injured their wings in the fall, of course, but everyone who broke a wing ended up dying. Cassie, what was it like? How much did it hurt? Can you move it at all? What's it like to know you'll never fly again? How did it feel to know you'd always be stuck with completely useless wings?"

"He's just fine," growled Dean. "His wings are great. Thanks so much for asking."

"And by they way they're not useless," added Sam.

"Oh really?" said Belaniel, stepping back around to their front and looking at Sam with his eyebrows raised. "Wings are for flying, you know. Without flying, well, what else are they good for?"

"They can hand us things," said Sam.

"They can punch people," said Dean.

Belaniel actually laughed. But then Castiel said earnestly, "Belaniel, my friends have been taking care of me. We share jokes and cookies and movies. We go out, and we see cows and dolphins and the sky and the sun. Mortal life is good, Belaniel. Even without flying. And even with the planet exactly the way it is. Whether you can understand that or not, it's true."

"Aw, that's so cute," said Belaniel, glancing at Sam and Dean, and then back at Cas. "You're happy with your little human friends." He shook his head, chuckling, saying again, "That's cute."

Cas exchanged a tired glance with Dean as Belaniel turned away from the three of them and strolled back toward his two demons, who had been waiting (somewhat impatiently) with their M-16's.

Turning to face Sam, Dean and Cas again, who were still frozen in a little clump together, Belaniel said, "Castiel, I'm sorry. I'm going to have to retract my offer. You're not an angel anymore, and we need someone who can talk with air elementals."

"I'd already rejected your offer anyway," said Cas, now sounding very exasperated, and with very much a you-can't-fire-me-I-quit scowl on his face. "Belaniel, listen to me—"

"Hey boys!" interrupted Belaniel, turning away from Cas. The demons perked up as Belaniel told them, "I know you want to try out your toys, so— go to it. Rip 'em apart!" Belaniel turned away to face the house, his hands laced behind his back, as if he weren't really all that interested in what happened next. The two thugs flipped their safeties off and raised their weapons.

Dean saw the guns come up, and saw the men take aim, and he thought, It couldn't last. It could never have lasted. The interlude of peace, of togetherness, all the happy moments they'd had recently.

The furry cows, the knock-knock jokes; Cas in the car wash; their mixed-up Christmas dinner in the snow; Sam and Dean helping Cas preen his wings in the little motel rooms night after night,
watching movies together... Dr. Mac and Sarah laughing together in the library... Cas spreading his wings on the boat... the sun and the sea and the dolphins... all of it, all those moments, seemed to soar past Dean now in a flash, and Dean thought, The good things don't last.

The good things never lasted.

Time slowed down. Dean turned toward Cas and Sam, with a hopeless thought of trying to shield them both from at least some of the gunfire. But he couldn't even move his arms, and his feet were still glued to the ground, and all Dean could do in the end was crouch down with them. He saw Cas ducking his head down, saw Sam crouching too, saw Cas's wings start to flare out around them—the left wing around Dean, the right around Sam. Cas's hands were still magically bound together, but apparently he could still move his wings. Not that it was going to help, of course. Dean even had a split second to notice, with a detached clinical interest, Oh, look, the left wing's doing great, he's actually got it all the way around me. That must be half-extended at least, right? Maybe that time on the boat in the wind helped open the wing up a little more...

They crouched together in a hopeless little huddle.

The gunfire began, a tremendous roar of noise. It was over.

Dean could feel the bullets hitting him, punching his side brutally hard. Dozens of bullets, pounding his side and back ferociously. It was like being hit with dozens of blows from a hot iron hammer.

Strangely, it didn't actually hurt all that bad. Dean even had time to think, as he hunkered down under the tent of Cas's wings, leaning onto Sam and Cas, So this is what it's like to get shot to death. It's not so bad.

And at least we're all going together. Not so bad, really.

The deafening roar of gunfire stopped. There was a clicking sound; both M-16s had run out of ammo. Dean's ears were ringing; the very air seemed to echo in the sudden silence. Dean heard the clatter of the empty magazines being removed, heard Belaniel say "That ought to do it," heard a finger-snap, and in the next moment Dean realized his hands and feet were free.

Dean was still waiting to collapse from the bleeding, waiting to choke up blood, waiting for the pain to hit. They were all bunched together now, still crouched down, Cas's wings still wrapped around them, their three heads close together. Dean glanced at Sam and saw Sam looking back at him from just inches away, his eyes wide. For a moment they just stared at each other.

Close beside them, Cas whispered, "Now."

Dean hadn't even fully registered that they weren't dead yet when Cas whipped open his wings.

The two demons paused in the middle of reloading their weapons and stared at them in confusion. Belaniel had been walking toward them, clearly expecting to see three crumpled dead bodies, and he faltered in mid-stride just ten feet away, gaping at them with an almost comically baffled look on his face.

Sam was the first to snap into action, charging right at Belaniel without any weapon at all. It was a desperation move, and of course Belaniel simply waved one hand and poor Sam went flying through the air, only to slam into the ground nearly twenty feet away.

But Sam had successfully distracted Belaniel. And while Sam was flying through the air, while Belaniel was watching him in disdain, there was a flash of silver. It was Cas's second angel-blade, whipping through the air right at Belaniel's chest. (Dean happened to know that Cas had actually
brought not one but three angel-blades. The original one he'd had in his hand — the one Belaniel had taken from Cas earlier — and two more also, one up each sleeve. It wasn't traditional for angels to carry more than one, but Cas was not really a traditional angel, was he?)

Belaniel glimpsed the blade at the last moment and managed to flick one finger up to try to divert it. The blade veered, and didn't hit him in the heart where Cas had aimed, but Belaniel had been a hair too late and the blade did sink deep into one shoulder. Belaniel cried out and staggered back, a shaft of vivid white light lancing out from the wound. Cas was already throwing his third blade; again Belaniel tried to deflect it, again he was a hair too late, and this one sank deep into his thigh. Both wounds blazed with bright light. Belaniel screamed again and fell to his knees.

Then there was a huge burst of white light, and they all had to shield their eyes.

When the light faded, Belaniel's vessel was face-down on the ground and both demons were staggering, half-blinded from the blast of Heavenly light, fumbling with the reloading of the M-16s. Cas and Dean made short work of them after that; a half-blinded demon was no match for an angel blade.

Dean glanced over at Sam and was relieved to see him getting slowly to his feet, giving Dean a somewhat shaky thumbs-up. Dean spun back to Cas, then, dreading what he would find when he got a close look. Cas was standing still, looking at one wing and then the other, and Dean dashed over to him, saying, "Let me see, Cas, let me see," trying to brace himself for the inevitable sight of the blood and bone and the mangled feathers. For though Cas, Dean and Sam were somehow uninjured, the wings had definitely taken all the brunt of that brutal gunfire and surely they must be destroyed.

But all Dean found was smooth sleek intact feathers. He checked the left wing, and then the right: No blood. (Well, except for the tiny wound from the torn-out alula feather.) No bone. No mangled feathers. The wings were intact. Though they were glittering brightly in several places, almost steaming. Even as Dean was studying the wings, still trying to figure out where the damage was, some of the bright areas peeled off the outer surface of the feathers and fell off, clinking against the pebbles on the ground.

The bright areas were flattened discs of metal. Apparently that was all that was left of the bullets.

"Cas?" said Dean, staring down at the flattened bullets.

"Yes, Dean?" said Cas, as he bent down to pick up one of the smoking disks of metal. He hissed in surprise, dropped it and stuck his finger in his mouth. Apparently the metal disc was still hot.

"Cas, you never mentioned your feathers are bulletproof."

"I'm as surprised as you are," said Cas, looking at both wings curiously. "I didn't know."

Dean almost laughed. "You didn't KNOW?"

"Well, they were always impervious to everything when I was an angel, of course," explained Cas, fingering one of his feathers. "But I always assumed it was due to Heavenly power. In fact everybody's always assumed that. It never occurred to me it might be an intrinsic property of the feathers. I don't think even Schmidt-Nielsen knew that... and obviously Belaniel didn't know either. We might have made an interesting discovery." He looked up at Dean, and said brightly, "Perhaps we should write it up."

"Perhaps we should take you along on every hunt for the rest of our lives," said Dean.

Sam tottered slowly up to them, looking a little worse for wear but at least on his feet, just as they
heard a low moan and realized that Belaniel was moving.

Dean grabbed one of Cas's blades off the ground and was just about to stab Belaniel again when Cas yelled, "NO, Dean! Wait! That's not Belaniel anymore!"

Dean paused, confused, as Cas knelt down by Belaniel's vessel, gripped it by one shoulder and one hip, and gently rolled it over. A dark-haired man lay there, looking up at them, gasping. He said, in a completely different tone of voice than Belaniel's, with a strong Bahamian accent, "You gotta... hurry..."

Cas looked up at Dean and said, "It's not Belaniel. It's his vessel."

"What? I thought Belaniel was dead?" said Dean.

"I thought so too at first," said Cas, glancing around at the ground. "But, look, no wing scorch-marks." Dean looked around, and realized Cas was right: the ground was unblemished. Cas went on, "He was only wounded. They were bad wounds, though, and he must have been too weak to heal the vessel, and he must have also realized he was too weak to fly it anywhere. He decided to abandon the vessel and flee. The blaze of light was because he was so badly wounded—he was really leaking a lot of power."

Cas was trying to put pressure on the man's shoulder-wound as he spoke, but a lot of blood was flowing out around Cas's hands. Dean crouched down next to the man and said, "Hang in there. We'll get you help."

But the poor fellow was bleeding pretty badly, from both the shoulder wound and the thigh one. Sam was trying to staunch the thigh-wound now, but it wasn't looking too good. The man was groping clumsily at the blue pendant around his neck, muttering, "Break it... break it..."

Cas nodded at Dean, and Dean cut the pendant loose with one of the angel-blades, stood, and ground it to dust under his heel.

There was a huge roaring of wind all around them for a moment, the trees lashing from side to side, pine needles flying everywhere.

The wind noise receded away to the south, and everything went calm.

"What's your name?" said Dean, crouching back down by the man.

"Billy," gasped the man. "You've... got to hurry. Got to go... west."

"We know, Billy," said Dean, nodding. "We'll get there by the full moon. Don't worry."

"No," Billy whispered. "BEFORE... full moon. New plan... Friday. You have... to get there... by Friday. They're doing it... Friday."

"This Friday?" Dean said, startled. Tonight was Sunday. Friday was only five days away! He glanced up at Cas, saying, "What's he mean? Don't we have till the full moon?"

Cas looked up at Dean with a very worried expression. He said, "Dean... moon phase only matters for water elementals! They must have been planning to take action on the full moon so that they could use the Pacific elemental at its full strength. But they've lost the Pacific elemental! So phase of the moon doesn't matter anymore." He shook his head with a hiss. "Drat. They must have changed their plans."
Billy nodded weakly, and whispered, "California... redwoods. Friday. Air and... fire."

"The air and fire elemental together?" said Castiel. "Oh— oh, I see. Use the air one to fan the fire?"

Another nod, and Billy gasped out, "New plan is... huge... firestorm. Huge, huge!... Wall of fire... moving over... whole continent." Another ragged breath and he gasped, "You've got to stop them."

"We'll get there. We'll do it. I promise," said Dean.

"And... they've got... your friends..." Billy added. Dean frowned at him, puzzled, and Billy added, "The... girl... the guy. They grabbed them both... last night. Nurse and... vet. That was... the... insurance."

There was a long deadly pause.

Sam whispered, "Sarah and Mac."

Dean felt sick. And then heartbroken.

And then white-hot with fury.

Not again. Not again. Not again, was all he could think.

The good things never last.

Billy added, gasping heavily now. "They're going to... feed them... to the... fire. Friday. You've got to hurry." He took one more long sighing breath, and he didn't breathe again.
"Neither Mac or Sarah are answering their phones," Sam reported, as Dean sped the VW north out of marina parking lot in Miami.

"That's not good," said Cas, looking up from his maneuvering around in the back, where he'd been stowing their duffels of gear in the cubbies. They were all sunburned and wind-burned and tired, but they'd managed to make a pretty fast transit back across the Gulf Stream last night. After docking at the marina just moments ago, they'd all hustled into the VW van as quick as they could. Everybody was worried about Mac and Sarah, and there was no time to waste.

"No, it's not good," Sam agreed. He stared down at his phone morosely. "I even tried the zoo clinic, and Sarah's hospital too. Both say they haven't turned up for work this morning. Though, Cas, by the way, Sarah's friend Lydia did say she's looking after your cat, so don't worry about that. But... no Sarah. And no Mac. Nobody can find either of them."

"Dammit," said Dean. He'd known this was coming — they all had — but it was a blow to hear that Mac and Sarah really had vanished. Apparently Belaniel's poor doomed vessel Billy had told the truth about Mac and Sarah being captured. "Sam, what time is it, anyway?" Dean added. "How much time do we have?"

Sam had already started tapping his way through a map app on his phone. As Dean maneuvered the van onto the interstate, Sam reported, "It's two o'clock, now. We made good time back to shore. But, let's see, it's Monday afternoon now, so we have, um, three and a half days to get to the west coast." He stared at the driving route for a moment, and then put his phone down in his lap with a sigh.

They'd all taken it hard to hear that Sarah and Mac — who were almost their last two friends in the world, of course — were in trouble. In fact, Dean hadn't really been able to think about anything else for the entire journey. He'd spent most of the Gulf Stream transit trying to ignore an awfully distracting, and distressingly vivid, mental image of poor Sarah and Mac both being strung up by their hands and tortured by evil angels, presumably in some evil-angel-lair on the other side of the country.

And soon they'd both be "fed" to a fire elemental, according to Billy. That news had brought up some pretty terrifying memories of Dean's own experience, just last year, of nearly being fed to a magma elemental himself, back in Wyoming.

Once again, Dean's friends were paying the price for knowing him. Once again, good people — innocent people — were paying a terrible price for knowing him, for helping him, for getting involved. It should have been a given by now: Don't make friends. It's too dangerous for them. Don't let anybody get close.

Yet somehow it had happened again. Sarah, who'd saved all three of them back in Wyoming last year... Mac, who'd done such an amazing job saving Cas's wing.... and Cas's life.

"Dammit," said Sam, breaking into Dean's thoughts. He added, mysteriously, "This is my fault."

Dean glanced over at him, puzzled. "Your fault? What makes you so special?"

Cas, who had finished stowing the gear and was now getting settled in his movie-chair, spoke up...
with, "Aren't we all at fault?" (Dean snorted; he'd been about to say "It's not anybody's fault, Sam," but it figured that Cas would have a more pessimistic view.)

Sam muttered, "But I'm the one who called them."

Dean frowned over at him; what was Sam getting at? Cas seemed just as puzzled, and he asked, "What do you mean?"

Sam hesitated a moment and finally twisted around in his chair to look right at Cas. "I called them both. From Miami," Sam said. He had the slightly awkward air of someone bursting out with a confession, and after tense hesitation he added, "The night before we left. I called them to check on...."

Sam paused there.

Dean suddenly knew exactly what Sam was about to say, and he glanced in the mirror at Cas. Cas met his eyes sadly; clearly he knew what was coming. Sure enough Sam continued with: "Well, I called them to talk about your wing, actually Cas."

There was a little pause.

Cas sank down in his movie-chair a little, dropping his chin down onto his folded hands. Dean glanced at him again in the mirror; both Cas's wings were now drooping slightly.

Sam went on, "The angels must have heard me, or picked up the call or something." He slumped back down in his own seat, facing forward again, running a hand through his wind-tangled hair and rubbing some of the dried salt spray off his face. Sam looked exhausted now, as he added, "Mac and Sarah were the only people I called from Miami. And from what Belaniel said, he was onto us the whole time we were in Miami. Probably monitoring us. And our phone calls. My phone calls. I should have thought of that, but..." After another little pause he added, glancing reluctantly at Cas in the mirror, "I just wanted to check with them about how often to have you do the exercises."

"You've been doing that all along," said Dean. "Mac knows bird therapy and Sarah knows human therapy. They were the right people to ask. If you hadn't been calling them, I would've."

"Yeah, but I didn't have to call them from Miami," said Sam, clearly frustrated with himself. "I didn't have to call them at all this week! Cas is already doing so well, and they already gave me a whole set of exercises to have him do that'll last him at least a month. And I knew we were getting close to an elemental. I knew that! I just wanted to check in with them about this idea I had about his feathers and...." He shook his head "I was stupid, Dean, I was walking around outside talking to them on my cell. Anybody could've overheard! I was sloppy. And, also, it turned out Sarah was at Mac's. She said she's been going to Salt Lake sometimes on the weekends, for some reason. I think the two of them might be..." Sam stopped again, waved a hand in the air helplessly, and finally said, "Anyway I only had to make one call. They were both in Salt Lake. So if...." He trailed off.

"... so if that psycho Belaniel was listening in," finished Dean, "and heard they were both in the same spot, he'd have thought, perfect time to make a grab. Two hostages for the price of one. Just for insurance in case those Winchesters and their angel cause any trouble. That what you're thinking?"

Sam nodded, shifting uneasily in his seat.

"Then it's my fault if it's anybody's," Cas said firmly. "Because it's my wing. If I hadn't broken my wing—"

"It's nobody's fault," broke in Dean.
Cas countered that with, "Well, it's definitely Belaniel's fault, and I suppose the Queen, whoever she is, of course." He added, relentless, "And, in addition, each of the three of us played a certain undeniable role—"

"Okay, it's all our faults equally," said Dean. "But especially Belaniel's and he's dead. Point is, we'll get there and we'll rescue them. We made great time across the Gulf Stream. We can get there in time." Dean decided not to point out the part about how the hurricane elemental had almost certainly been helping them across the Gulf Stream. The sea had been an almost eerie glassy calm last night, and the wind had been at their back the entire time — the very best possible conditions for a motorboat. But that wasn't going to help them do a cross-country drive any faster.

Cas said, thinking aloud, "You said we have three and a half days, Sam. From here to the west coast is only about, let's see, three thousand two hundred miles, I'd estimate, correct? So that's only..." He stopped, glancing back at his left wing, and Dean heard him swear under his breath.

"I forgot that we're constrained to a motor vehicle," Cas said a moment later.

"I'm calling the airlines," announced Sam, scooping up his phone from his lap. "Just to see if at least one of us can get there any faster."

"I don't think they'll let me on an airplane," said Cas doubtfully, glancing down at his wing again. "Not with visible wings. I'd have to follow behind in the van. But I think you're right, Sam, it's probably best if one or both of you can go on ahead in an airplane and least begin to search for them. We are extremely short on time. And remember—" He leaned forward on his chair a little, till his head was right between the front seats, and he looked back and forth between Sam and Dean.

"Remember it's not just Mac's and Sarah's lives at risk," Cas said. "Not that wouldn't be enough, of course, but, it's not just them. The firestorm that Belaniel's vessel was talking about could very well kill millions. If the fire elemental is currently on the west coast, then we need to reach the west coast as fast as possible. Even if we have to split up."

Sam started making phone calls to the airlines.

But Sam didn't get very far. He was immediately put on hold what seemed to be a ridiculous amount of time, and at last he reported, "Damn. We forgot about the hurricanes! Remember the airports were all closed last week? So it turns out they only just reopened today. And there are only about million stranded passengers taking up all the seats."

"Try another airline," suggested Dean.

Sam tried another airline. And another, and another. He tried Jetblue, Southwest, United, Delta, American and more. There seemed to be no seats available at all.

At last he tried a travel agent, but he went quiet partly through that phone call. Dean glanced over at him, but Sam said nothing, listening closely to something that the travel agent was saying. At last Sam said, into the phone, "I see. Okay. Well, thanks for trying." He hung up, and put his phone down on his knee.

Dean said, "Well? Anything?"

Sam cleared his throat and said, "Still no seats. And... just by the way, I started asking about flights to all the West Coast airports, even the little bitty ones, and the travel agent mentioned that the Sonoma airport's been closed. Half an hour ago. Sonoma, California."

"Why?" asked Cas.
"Storms," said Sam. "And she said San Francisco will probably shut down within the hour. I guess all of northern California's shutting down. So... apparently there's a huge lightning storm going on near Mendocino. That's about two hours north of San Fran, in the redwood forest on the coast. There's these huge storms going on there right now. With lightning. And tornadoes. And snow. And also... some wildfires."

A grim silence filled the van.

"Well, look on the bright side," said Dean. "At least now we know exactly where to go."

The miles rolled by as they drove all the way north up through Florida (which turned out to be a maddeningly large state when one was trying to get to the west coast in a hurry). Sam and Cas both caught a little sleep, Sam slouching against the door in an uneasy doze while Cas sprawled out in the back napping. Sam woke a little later, and glanced back at Cas, who was still sound asleep.

"Think he's dreaming of flying?" Sam whispered to Dean.

Dean glanced in the mirror and saw what Sam meant; Cas's wings were twitching a little as he slept. Soft rhythmic little flutters. It sure did look like maybe he was dreaming of flying.

It was a rather sad thought.

Sam and Dean swapped driving shifts later. Cas woke while they were swapping and climbed back up into his seat, yawning, shifting his wings and stretching them out (as much as he could in the little van, that is), while Dean made another fruitless round of airline calls from the passenger seat.

Dean gave up on the airlines with a sigh, chucking the phone roughly onto the dashboard. "This is hopeless," he muttered. "We're not going to be able to fly there."

He couldn't help remembering Cas's wings twitching while he slept.

Then Dean had an idea.

"Cas," said Dean, tugging at his seatbelt so that he could turn around to look Cas right in the eyes. "Um. I just had a thought. Cas... are you sure you can't fly?"

That seemed to wake Cas up a little more; he looked up at Dean, his sleepy gaze sharpening, and said, "As sure as I can be without trying it. What do you mean?"

"I know I'm probably thinking about this all wrong," began Dean, "But, you've still got half your tertials, right? Couldn't you maybe still have a tiny bit of power? Just enough to get into the etheric plane, maybe? Maybe you could fly a little bit? Maybe just enough to get to California?"

Sam glanced over curiously, but Cas only remained silent for a moment, looking at Dean steadily.

At last Cas said, "You must know that if there were any way I could get there, or any way I could get either of you two there, of course I'd do it. Sarah and Mac are my friends too. Not to mention the other millions of people."

"I know," said Dean. "I know you would. But couldn't you just give it a try anyway? I mean, what would be the worst thing that could happen if you tried?"
"The worst? Well... I might fall into the sun," said Cas.

Dean blinked at him.

Sam said, "So, um... I gotta ask, do you mean that literally?"

"Yes," said Cas. "Very literally." He added then, frowning in thought, "Though, maybe that's not the worst thing that could happen. There are two other possibilities that are also not very good."

Dean said, "Okay, I'll bite. What's worse than, y'know, falling into the sun?"

Cas took a slow breath and said, "Maybe I should explain a little more." He stared out the side window for a moment, clearly gathering his thoughts. Sam and Dean waited, and at last Cas said, "I suspect actually that I could get into the etheric plane. Moving across the dimensions doesn't actually require power; it's just a wing maneuver, an ability that is intrinsic to angel wings. It does require tertials, though, but merely to maintain flight control during the transition. As you point out, I do have all my right tertials, and I believe I could probably move my right wing across, just as you suggest. And then the right wing could pull my vessel and my left wing into the etheric plane."

Dean stared back at him, totally confused now. Was Cas saying he could fly?

Sam said, "Then... I don't get it, what's the problem?"

Cas ran one hand gently along the edge of his left wing, looking down at it. He said, "The problem is that I'd also go into an uncontrolled spin immediately."

He sighed, took his hand off his wing and folded the wing tightly against his back, saying, "Taking off is not the problem. Steering, braking and landing are the problem. Angels who are missing as many tertials as I am are almost completely unable to steer or brake. You need to understand, even with both wings intact it's difficult to do a smooth transition between dimensions. Fledglings are constantly losing control, in fact; their first attempts have to be supervised." Cas gave a short little laugh, and added, "You should have seen my first try. I was just trying to shift from the etheric plane to this dimension, while on Earth—I wasn't even trying to go anywhere—but I ended up in orbit around Jupiter."

"Jupiter?" said Sam.

Dean added, "Let me guess, you mean that 'very literally' too?"

Cas nodded, saying, "I thought I was going to be stuck out there forever. Anna had to come fetch me."

He had a faint smile on his face as he said this, and Dean suddenly had a vivid mental picture in his mind of a little fledgling Castiel circling around Jupiter. Whatever Castiel's true form really had looked like, Dean couldn't help picturing him as a cherubic little dark-haired, blue-eyed baby, wide-eyed in alarm, flapping a pair of stubby white baby wings helplessly while Anna swooped in to rescue him.

Cas explained, "Tertialed angels have sometimes tried to fly. They do take off. But they have never landed where they hoped. Never. They have even poorer control than fledglings. It's usually one of three outcomes. Sometimes the angel heads out to space, as I did on my first flight. The second possibility is that the tertialed angel goes the other way, down instead of up, and ends up stuck in the planetary core, trapped in Earth's gravity well. Those angels can sometimes be rescued."

He paused, and added, rather mysteriously, "If they want to be."
"And the third is, let me guess, falling into the sun?" said Sam.

Castiel nodded and said, "I've seen it happen once. I tried to reach him, but he was moving too fast." He paused, looking ahead out the windshield at the sun for a long, quiet moment. Dean and Sam both followed his gaze, squinting at the bright, blazing sun that was now hanging low in the western sky before them.

Cas finally said, "I think he didn't suffer for long."

Cas turned to Dean then and said, reluctance clear in his voice, "Dean, if there were any way I could steer—"

"Never mind, Cas," said Dean, giving him a pat on the right wing, which was folded up near Dean's side. "I was just asking. But it sounds like it would just be a suicide mission for you."

They all watched the setting sun in silence together for a few more minutes.

Dean found he was still thinking of little fledgling Castiel circling around Jupiter. How often did angels get lost like that, anyway?

Finally Dean asked, "Cas, the lost angels that head out to space, what happens to them? Do you guys go out and rescue them, like Anna did with you?"

"Anna was supervising me," said Cas, "So she knew what direction I'd gone in and was able to follow me. But if it happens to an angel who is on his own, sometimes nobody knows what's happened, and often the angel ends up too far out quite suddenly, too suddenly to call for help and too far for angel-radio to transmit. We sometimes find them later, though."

"Later?" asked Sam.

"Millennia later," said Cas, almost casually. "Some of them end up in a long, long orbit, and they eventually swing back into the solar system, just briefly, and then head out again." He added, "Sometimes you see their wings burning when they come near the sun. But often they're moving too fast by then to catch them safely. And... after all that time out there alone, usually they've gone insane. They pass by the sun and burn for a while and then head back out again."

Dean said, "What, like a comet?"

Cas was silent.

Dean glanced over at him to find Cas meeting his gaze with a very somber expression.

Castiel said, "That's what comets are, Dean."

It took all day to get across Florida. They hadn't even reached the Alabama border yet when night fell. Sam finally fell asleep again against the passenger door while Dean was doing a driving shift, and Dean pulled over to make him to go lie down in the back and try to get some real rest.

Just ten minutes later Cas reported quietly, from his movie-chair, that Sam had conked out pretty quick.
Soon Dean was yawning and blinking himself, fighting a terrific exhaustion that seemed to be piling up behind his eyes. He'd thought he'd be okay for driving the evening shift, but the all-night journey across the Gulf Stream had taken a toll after all, it seemed.

"Dean?" he heard Cas say, and Dean jumped, the world snapping into focus around him. He swore under his breath, heart suddenly hammering; he hadn't quite been asleep at the wheel, but he'd been alarmingly close.

Cas touched Dean's shoulder lightly with his wing. "Let me drive," he said.

"What?"

Cas said, "I think I can bend the left wing back far enough now. So that it can go back horizontally, between the seat and the door. It's got pretty good flexibility in that direction. I was practicing on the boat. Let me try, at least."

Dean pulled over again and got out (Sam was so exhausted he didn't even wake) and after some awkward scrambling around and a lot of whispered consultations, Cas managed to climb directly from his own seat to the driver's seat. Cas had to crouch there on the seat, half-standing, while Dean helped him arrange both wings, sliding the left wing in place between the seat and the door, and the right wing between the two front seats. Then Dean wedged a pillow behind Cas's back to help pad the injured area of the left wing, Cas carefully sat all the way down, and Dean eased the driver's door closed.

It seemed to work. Cas fit.

Dean took a critical look from outside the driver's window: the wings were barely even visible.

Cas rolled down the window and said, "I think this will work." He gave Dean a little smile. "I wish these were happier circumstances, but I'm glad I can help drive again. And now you and Sam can both get some rest."

Fortunately Cas seemed to remember how to drive, from his sessions in the Impala months earlier. Just the same, Dean made him steer the minivan around a parking lot a few times, to get used to its slightly different controls, and coached him carefully through the highway driving for the first ten minutes. Cas adjusted quickly to the minivan's size, and soon he was looking pretty comfortable with the driving.

"Why don't you lie down in back to sleep, by Sam?" suggested Cas. "I'm fine, Dean."

Dean said, "I'll just stay up here with you for a little while." But when he shut his eyes briefly— just to rest them, of course — he fell asleep almost instantly.

Dean was soon in a searingly vivid dream in which Cas, and Sam, and Mac, and Sarah, were all being fed to the fire elemental, all four of them trapped in flames and screaming, while Dean desperately tried to free all of them at once from an impossibly complicated series of knots and chains. Dean failed completely and was driven back by the heat, helpless, and he could do nothing but watch as the screams eventually stuttered into silence.

Cas's wings were completely aflame at the end.
The four of them all burned away to nothing at all. All that was left was drifting bits of ash, and a pair of wing scorch-marks on the stone floor: the unmistakable mark of the death of an angel.

"Wake up, Dean," said a low voice from above him. A voice that Dean slowly recognized; Castiel's. Cas had come to save him, once again. *Cas had come to save him...*

Dean jerked awake to find that he was lying sideways, flopped over to the left, his hips still in the passenger seat but his torso and head stretched out horizontally toward Cas. Somehow he hadn't fallen down between the two seats, though; instead he was lying on something soft, and his head was pillowed on what felt like jeans.

He heard Cas say, above him, "It was just a dream, Dean." The soft thing under Dean shifted a little, and when Dean, still disoriented, moved one hand, he felt feathers below him. It was Cas's wing. Cas had somehow got his right wing half-spread under Dean, forming sort of a sturdy wing-hammock that stretched between the two front seats. Dean was lying on Cas's wing, with his head on Cas's leg.

The feathers felt cool and soft and strong. Not aflame at all. Nothing was burning.

Not anymore, at least.

"It was only a dream," Cas repeated, one hand patting Dean's shoulder now in an almost parental gesture. "It was just a dream. Everything's okay."

Dean thought *I oughta come up with some joke. I oughta sit up and act like an adult. And stop snoring like a baby on Cas's wing, for chrissake. But somehow Dean just lay there for a few more moments, listening to the purring of the road under the van's tires in the dark... and trying to shake off the haunting memory of the dream.*

"What was the dream about?" asked Castiel quietly.

A year ago Dean would have dodged the question. But tonight, in the dark, here in the van, on the road, with Cas's soft feathers under him... somehow it was easier to talk.

Dean whispered, "You all died in a fire. I couldn't save any of you. You, Sam... Mac, Sarah."

Cas said nothing for a moment. But he patted Dean's shoulder again. Then his hand shifted to Dean's head and he began stroking Dean's hair.

With anybody else, even Sam, it might have felt too intimate.

With anybody else Dean would have felt compelled to shake off the hair-stroking with a laugh, to crack some jokes about it, to act wide awake and all grown up and tough as nails. But the truth was that Dean was still exhausted, and the dream had been frightening, and Cas's wing was comfortable, and... well, it was *Cas. Cas, the angel. Cas, who was about a million years older than Dean, really, when he thought about it. Cas, who was something like Dean's guardian angel; and if you couldn't fall asleep on your own guardian angel's wing, whose wing *could you fall asleep on, after all?*

With Cas the hair-stroking was all right; it was soothing, even. And the hair-stroking was also, of course, exactly the same move Dean had once used on Cas, back when Cas had been having nightmares of his own.

"I suppose that's possible," said Castiel solemnly, still apparently thinking about Dean's dream of everybody dying. His hand kept moving over Dean's head as Cas added, incongruously, "We might all burn to death, yes. But—"
Dean almost laughed. "You’re really a ray of sunshine sometimes, you know that?"

"I was going to say," said Cas, "It's possible, but I will do my best to ensure that doesn't happen. I will do my very best. We do have a chance. Maybe not much of a chance, but we do have a chance."

Coming from Castiel, this actually seemed surprisingly encouraging.

The VW purred along through the velvet-dark night, yellow streetlights flickering past now and then. Cas said, "Rest, Dean." He kept stroking his fingers through Dean's hair. A very faint memory surfaced then of Mom doing the very same thing, some time a very long time ago: stroking a very much younger Dean's hair as streetlights flickered through the car, sending little long-ago Dean to sleep. Mom had, of course, been saying her usual thing about Angels are watching over you.

Or at least one angel, anyway, thought Dean. The one that matters. And with that thought he finally let himself drift away.

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They reached Mendocino County, in northern California, late on Wednesday afternoon. Amazingly, it had in fact taken just two days to cross the entire country. That's got to be a Winchester record, Dean reflected, as he slowed down to take the exit to the winding coastal road that led to the stands of immense California redwoods. We actually made it across the ENTIRE country in two days!

Granted, Dean had at times found himself frustrated that the VW couldn't match the Impala's speed or power. But the sheer luxury of being able to stretch out on a mattress (or, on an available angel wing, if one was handy) could not be beat for overnight driving. And with Cas providing the crucial third driving shift while Dean and Sam both slept, they'd actually been able to drive twenty-four hours around the clock, only pausing for a few quick pit stops for bathroom breaks and fast-food drive-throughs. A few hurried sponge-baths in the back of the VW had taken off the worst of the grime (and most of the sea salt). They were all pretty well rested, and reasonably well-fed.

Dean even dared to hope that they might actually be halfway fit for a hunt.

Though what sort of hunt remained to be seen. For, sure enough, there was a wild windstorm howling all around northern California. Lightning was visible in all directions, there were reports of scattered tornadoes, and, worryingly, more small wildfires had been reported as well.

But once again they were starting to figure out the location of a "bubble of inactivity." As Dean drove them further into the redwoods, under dark menacing clouds and through squalls of rain and roaring wind, Sam began looking up, on his phone, the locations of all the fires, lightning strikes and tornado-tracks. All of which he relayed to Cas, who added them one at a time to one of his maps. Soon Cas reported that all the storm activity was tracing out a huge circle around a certain patch of forest. Sam looked up the spot online and found that it was mostly national forest, except for a single clump of cabins that were at the dead center of Cas's circle; a children's summer music camp, apparently.

Dean pulled over briefly so that they could all study Cas's map. Cas slid it forward between the two seats, and Dean and Sam both peered at it.

"It's probably a trap," commented Sam, looking at the area that Cas had circled.
Cas said, "Of course it's a trap."

"It's definitely a trap," agreed Dean. "So what's our plan?"

Cas settled back in his movie-chair, gave a sort of wing-shrug and said, "Walk into the trap, kill the Queen Of The Elementals and rescue Sarah and Mac."

"Cas, if I could make a suggestion," Dean said, "someday you really ought to think about adding a little detail to your plans."

"You're one to talk," said Sam drily.

"Well, for detail," said Cas, considering, "I think maybe banishing-sigils could be useful. The Queen is very likely to be an angel."

Sam twisted around to say, "But, Cas, couldn't the sigil banish you too?"

Cas shook his head. "The sigil blows Heavenly power away, and things that contain Heavenly power. I do have a grace, but it's empty; I don't have any power. So I'll be okay."

"All right then," said Dean. "In that case, I have an idea."

Dean described his idea, and they took a few minutes to prepare — scarfing down some snacks for quick energy, chugging down some water, and assembling their gear.

A few minutes later Dean was standing at the back of the van, methodically loading rounds into the spare magazine for his pistol while Sam sorted through some maps at the front, when Cas interrupted his thoughts with a gruff, "Dean, would you like to have this?"

Dean looked up to find Castiel holding out something in one hand.

It was the little black feather.

Wow, thought Dean. A real angel feather. One of Cas's very own feathers.

"You could keep it," said Cas, still holding out the feather. "If you wanted. I thought maybe you could have this one and Sam could have the other, off the other wing. I mean, if you both wanted."

Oh. It was the alula-feather. The one the air-elemental had given back to Cas. Cas must have found it in his jacket while putting extra ammo and salt in his pockets.

Dean almost reached out to take it, but then he thought, Wait a minute. Cas can't molt anymore.

Cas couldn't grow a replacement feather.

This might be one of last alula-feathers Cas would ever have. And Dean knew full well that this particular kind of alula-feather was valuable. It was the long four-inch one; the very kind of feather that Cas had used months ago in that crucial spell in Wyoming, the spell that had saved Sam's life. Cas only had two of these feathers: the one he was holding now, and the other one on the left wing.

And only Cas knew how to do that spell.

"You should keep it," said Dean, stuffing the ammo into his pockets. "What if you need it for something? It's better if you keep it, isn't it?"
Cas blinked. His hand pulled back slowly and for a moment he gazed down at the little black feather in his hand. Then he cleared his throat and nodded, stuffing the feather back in his pocket. He said, picking up an angel-blade from the van and fiddling with it idly, "Of course. Just thought I'd check. And I can't molt anyway, so... Um. Never mind. Just a random thought, really." He rubbed the back of his neck for a moment with his other hand, flipped the blade around a few times, looked down at the blade as if he'd forgotten what it was, and finally slid the blade up his sleeve.

Dean looked up from holstering his pistol, realizing that there had been something a little odd about Cas's phrasing; and there was also something a little odd in the way Cas was staring at the ground now; and there had actually been something odd about this whole feather-offer thing, come to think of it. Dean had just opened his mouth to ask what Cas had meant by "I can't molt anyway," when a tremendous howl of wind went roaring by overhead and an entire maple tree came crashing down to the ground, just fifty feet away from them, falling straight down out of the cloudy sky as if it had been dropped out of an airplane. It hit the ground with a horrific impact, in an explosion of splinters, branches, and leaves, along with some snowflakes that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. Cas and Dean both jumped nearly a foot back toward the van in shock, Cas's wings reflexively flicking out to try to shield them both.

"Get a move on!" Sam yelled from the front. "They must've spotted us!" They all leapt into the van, Dean scrambling into the driver's seat and throwing the van into gear just as another tree came thundering down behind them, this one even closer. Dean caught a quick glance overhead out of his window. There was a funnel cloud—a tornado that had not quite touched the ground—hanging directly above them, hundreds of feet overhead, swirling slowly. A third tree fell out of it, plummeting straight toward them.

A/N -

I admit I've gotten fond of these road-trip chapters. Just love the interludes when they get a moment to talk with each other..

But now trees are falling! Action! wooo!

More soon I hope. I really hope you are enjoying my story. If there's a scene or a thought or a line that you liked, let me know. :)
The Queen of the Elementals

A/N - Sorry for the long delay - I was at JIBCon! (my first ever con! of any type! And yes I got a photo with Misha, and yes I was terrified out of my mind! Full report here: https://www.reddit.com/r/fandomnatural/comments/4le1h3/five_seconds_with_misha_collins_a_novel/)

I went from JIBCon directly to fieldwork in northern Alaska, where sadly I have had no time to write - I've spent the last two weeks following birds nonstop, and finding their nests, 24/7. Only to watch them get hammered by a series of freak June snowstorms. Today is the 3rd heavy snowstorm in a week and there has been 100% nest failure. All the birds have had to abandon their nests and all the little eggs froze.

I went out just after the last snowfall to check on the nests and found tiny bird foot-tracks in the snow by the (snow-covered) nests - it seems the birds came back after the storm to look at their ruined nests. In at least one case I think the female was even having trouble finding where her nest had been. Her little birdy foot-tracks were all over that patch of snowy tundra and it looked like she'd gone to every single bump in the snow and checked it out, presumably trying to find her nest again, but the nest was totally buried and the eggs were frozen. :( Life isn't always easy for the flying creatures.... they may have wings, they may be free, yes, but they take serious hits too. They're tough, and they bounce back; they put it behind them and move on. But I feel certain that they feel something very like grief, during that moment they come back to the little nest, the nest that they took such care to build and defend, only to find it has been destroyed in the storm.

Today I shift field sites - I'm flying from Deadhorse to Barrow, across a stretch of Arctic Ocean through a driving sleety snowstorm. (The Alaska Airlines staff all seem totally blase about the conditions - I guess they're used to it!) I've got four hours in the Deadhorse "airport" (a single room), my first free hours for fic writing in many weeks, and I've commandeered the only electrical outlet to plug in my laptop and try to push forward on the next part of Broken. Hope you enjoy.

When last we left our heroes, they had reached the redwoods and were dodging falling trees....

Dean floored the gas pedal, and the little VW leapt forward as the third tree crashed down just behind them. They had a brief breather then for maybe half a minute, as Dean raced the VW along the little road into the redwood forest. It was a ridiculously winding road, almost a constant string of hairpin turns that snaked up and down and in and out of the massive redwood trees, and Dean had to slow down almost immediately for the turns.

More trees started to plummet down out of the sky every minute or so, each one accompanied by a thunderous crash and a thick puff of snowflakes. Sam craned his head out the passenger window and reported that the funnel cloud was actually darting away now and then to go fetch more trees, bringing back one or two entire uprooted trees at a time.

"It's the friggin snow-nado," spat Dean. "It's that same elemental. Got to be. Same one that threw the spruce tree into the map-room."

"Our favorite tornado," agreed Sam. He still had his head out the window, looking up, trying to monitor the funnel cloud's progress. He called a second later, "TREE! Incoming! Go, Dean, GO!" Dean floored the gas pedal again just as a huge hemlock tree came barreling out of the sky, slamming into the ground behind them.
"Perhaps that tree at Christmas was intended to kill us," commented Cas. "And now the elemental's trying again."

Another tree fell just to their left. And another to the right. The funnel cloud snaked away to fetch a few more trees.

"Seems like a good theory," said Sam, a little shakily. "Ah, jeez, it's back already. I think it's doing one tree at a time now."

"At least its aim sucks," said Dean, whipping the VW around another turn as quick as he could as a truly enormous maple came crashing down crown-first on the side of the road — the biggest tree yet.

"The trees are getting bigger," Castiel pointed out, as another massive tree, this one some kind of conifer, came plummeting down with an earsplitting crack just to their side. "See how huge that one is? Each tree is a little bigger than the one before. Dean, can we go faster?"

"Trying," said Dean, whipping the VW around another series of curves.

Sam said, "We're right in the middle of the forest that has the biggest trees on earth, aren't we?"

"Yes," said Cas. "Many of these redwoods are over three hundred feet tall. I believe the record holder is three hundred seventy-nine feet. It's the largest tree on earth. It's around here somewhere."

"That's just awesome," said Dean. "Really. Awesome. I'm so glad you know that little piece of trivia, Cas, thanks."

"You're welcome," said Cas, still studying the last tree as it toppled over behind them. "If I'm right, then the next—" Another tree fell to their side and Dean whipped the VW around another hairpin turn, taking the turn so perilously fast that Castiel nearly went crashing to the other side of the van (the movie-chair had a jerryrigged seatbelt but Cas hadn't had time to fasten it). Cas's right wing shot out as the ever-reliable "flap when tilted" instinct apparently kicked in, but he couldn't extend the wing fully and ended up with the joint of the wing beating against the side window, the flight feathers pressed flat against the side wall. But it at least kept him from tumbling all over the van. Sam grabbed one of his arms and hauled him back into his seat.

Cas said, "Ow," rubbing one elbow. He extended both wings to the side windows to brace himself on both sides, and went on calmly, as if he'd barely been interrupted at all, "If I'm right, the next tree to fall should be a redwood. If it's going to keep increasing the size of the trees it's going to have to shift to redwoods."

As he said these words a deafening roar came down from above. Dean floored the gas pedal again. Cas and Sam both twisted around to look back over Cas's wings and Dean watched in the mirror, all three of them staring numbly as a full-size redwood tree plummeted right into the road just behind them. The trunk must have been twenty feet in diameter, wider than the road itself, and hundreds of feet tall, the top soaring up completely out of view. It seemed like the end of a massive blunt spear thrown down by some pagan god, and the sound of the impact was truly deafening; the VW actually jumped into the air as the whole road shook. The tree's trunk utterly obliterated the road, crashing straight through the asphalt and sinking down into the earth several feet. Huge vertical cracks appeared in the trunk, and needles showered down from far above.

For one long heartbeat the tree just stood there, shuddering, as the VW motored slowly up a straight stretch of hill. Then there was a puff of snowy air and the redwood slowly began to tip... toward the VW.
"GO, GO, GO!" Sam hollered. Dean had the gas floored but the VW was chugging slowly up the hill and wouldn't go any faster. Never had Dean wished so much for the speed of the Impala! The VW kept chugging gamely away from the tree—a hundred feet away, a hundred and fifty, two hundred. *But redwoods are over three hundred fifty feet tall,* Dean thought, watching as the behemoth tree in the rearview mirror continued tilting slowly in their direction. He could hear a whistling sound from directly above and cringed to think of the unthinkably huge tree-trunk that must be barreling down on top of them. Finally the hill flattened out; Dean kept the gas pedal floored and took the next turn so fast the whole minivan tipped up on two wheels.

They all held their breath as the VW wavered around the turn, balancing on the two wheels, Dean fighting for control, Cas's wings braced hard on both walls, Sam clinging to his door.

Then the VW crashed back down on all four tires, and a second later there was a thundering roar, the whole road shaking and the air filling with dust, as the gigantic tree crashed down to the road on the turn behind them.

"I DON'T WANT ANY MORE TREES DROPPED ON MY HEAD!" yelled Dean out the window. "I want trees to stay AWAY from us!"

But apparently this elemental either couldn't understand English, or didn't care about Dean's opinion, for more redwoods kept dropping out of the sky. Unbelievably huge, terrifyingly close. Sometimes crashing down right next to the VW, sometimes plummeting down just behind them. There were a couple more close calls with falling trees that kept Dean's heart in his throat for several minutes at a stretch.

But slowly he realized the trees were never hitting the van.

The trees kept landing just to the side of the van. Or just barely behind it.

Never on it.

Sam finally said, "I don't know if it's got bad aim, or if it's trying to herd us, or scare us, or what."

"I don't know and I don't care," said Dean, "I'm just keeping going, okay?"

And then the trees stopped. Abruptly. No more trees.

They hardly dared believe it at first, but Sam (who was peering up out his window again), reported that the funnel cloud had backed off. It was hovering above a ridge that they'd just passed, and seemed unable to follow them any further.

A minute later they came to little parking area by a wide, slow river. The road went on in another direction, following the curve of the riverbank, but here at the parking lot there was a narrow suspension foot-bridge headed across the river to the left, and on the far side of the river was a little cluster of log cabins. It was the music camp.

Dean pulled the VW into the little parking lot, and they all peered out of the windows uncertainly.

The air was eerily still and calm. An angry-looking circle of gray clouds was visible on the horizon all around, but overhead was just cheerful blue sky.
"I think we're in the bubble of inactivity," suggested Cas. "Maybe the air elemental can't come this close."

They all looked at each other for a moment, and got out cautiously, guns and blades at the ready.

Nothing happened. Nobody seemed to be here.

Sam pointed out a sign on the footbridge: "REDWOODS MUSIC CAMP CANCELLED DUE TO WEATHER. PARENTS PLEASE PICK UP CHILDREN AT TOWN POLICE STATION."

"Wimps," said Dean. "They went and cancelled camp just because four-hundred-foot trees kept falling out of the sky? Kids today, I tell you. Total wimps."

Castiel said, "Dean, the trees are no more than three hundred and seventy-nine feet."

"Right. Only three hundred and seventy-nine feet." Dean said with a sigh. He turned back to the van, where Sam was spreading out several of Cas's maps on the linoleum floor inside the van, by Cas's movie-chair—putting each of the maps map-side-down, blank side up. Dean said, "Well, time to walk into the mousetrap like good little mice. Cas, want to do the honors?"

Dean held out his hand, and Cas shook an angel-blade out of one sleeve and took hold of Dean's hand gently. Then, while Dean gritted his teeth, Cas made a careful cut across the palm of Dean's hand. Then Cas did the same to Sam.

Sam and Dean each drew a banishing-sigil, in fresh blood, onto the back of a map. Sam had selected the maps with the thickest paper, the ones that would hold the sigils best. When the sigils were done, Dean pinned his sigil to Sam's back, attaching the entire sheet of paper to the shoulders of Sam's shirt with a few strips of duct-tape and some safety pins for good measure; and Sam attached his own sigil to Dean's back too.

"There!" Dean said when they were all done. "Portable banishing-sigils. Without having to cut ourselves up and lose more blood than we need to. Not a bad idea, if I do say so myself."

"It's a good idea, Dean," said Castiel, glancing up from where he was tucking the rest of his maps away with Sam's books. His eyes met Dean's for a moment, and it seemed, for a second, that Dean saw something there, something in Cas's eyes. Something a little sad, perhaps? A look of quiet acceptance, or of resignation. Something almost wistful.

Then Cas glanced away, tucking one of Sam's books into the cubby with the maps and closing the cubby door. What had been the look on his face... had Dean imagined it?

Focus, Dean. Focus. Now is not the time.

But Dean did allow himself to reach out and give Cas a little squeeze on the shoulder. "We'll be okay," Dean said, willing it to be true. He felt unreasonably pleased when Cas gave him a small smile back.

"Ready?" said Sam. Cas and Dean nodded, and they set out.

They crossed the shaky footbridge single file, guns ready. The bridge creaked and wobbled as they tiptoed along it, but nothing happened. There was just a peaceful little stream running under the bridge, and with the circle of blue sky overhead, the little music camp seemed almost peaceful.
Nobody was in sight.

On the other side of the wobbly footbridge was a trail, with cheerful little signs saying "Dining lodge this way!" They headed down it, Sam and Dean arranging themselves side by side so that they were both ready to slap their bloody hands to the other's sigil at a moment's notice. Cas walked half a pace behind them, an angel-blade in his hand, ready to whip his wings around both of them if need be.

They trudged along further, past huge tree trunks that stretched overhead impossibly high. Shafts of golden sunlight were filtering down diagonally through the trees high overhead, great golden beams that slanted down from so high up that Dean felt like an ant walking through a cathedral. They went by a series of little cabins that were set next to trees so enormous, each trunk fifteen or twenty feet wide, that the cabins seemed like tiny midget-houses in comparison. They even passed an incongruous cluster of pianos, timpani and drumsets that seemed to have been covered hurriedly with dustcloths when the camp had been evacuated, the pile of instruments left willy-nilly in the middle of the dusty ground, surrounded by gigantic trees.

Cas spoke up to say that he was worried that the sigils were drying, so they stopped briefly to freshen up the sigils with more blood. ("It has to be wet blood — living blood, that is — or it won't work," Cas explained.) Soon they came to a large log lodge nestled among the trunks of a group of tremendously tall redwoods, several of which seemed to have almost grown together at their bases. Each tree seemed as wide as a small house, the great columnar trunks stretching up to a vanishing point far, far overhead.

And there were Sarah and Mac, chained side by side to a pair of particularly huge redwoods. There was a skinny blonde teenager standing in front of them, facing Sam and Dean and Cas as they approached.

The moment Sarah and Mac caught sight of them, Mac yelled, "Guys, it's a trap!" and Sarah called out, "Go back, you've got to go back, she's been luring you here—"

The blonde girl twitched one finger, glaring over her shoulder at both Sarah and Mac, and their jaws snapped shut.

"We know," said Dean to them.

"We came anyway," agreed Sam.

Another twitch of a finger and Sam and Dean lost hold of both their guns, which flew across the clearing to land several dozen yards away. Along with Cas's angel-blade. Dean glanced over at Sam, trying not to smile; this guns-flying-away thing had become a fairly predictable pattern, and they had actually been carrying decoy guns that they'd planned to lose. They had their real weapons inside their jackets. And Cas had expected to lose that particular blade; he still had two more blades up his sleeves and an extra one stuck in his belt.

"Sarah," said Sam. "Mac. You two okay?"

Neither seemed able to talk, but they both nodded, shooting sideways glances at each other. The blonde girl said, tipping her nose in the air a little, "I've treated them well."

In fact Sarah and Dr. Mac did actually look in fairly good shape, physically at least. They'd both apparently been taken while at work at their respective jobs, for both were wearing hospital scrubs (or zoo scrubs, in Dr. Mac's case). The scrubs seemed a little torn up and had smears of dirt from the tree bark, but both of them seemed healthy and alert. Though of course they both looked very tense. And very alert.
And absolutely tiny, against the immense trees. This particular pair of trees seemed especially large even for redwoods, their trunks a good twenty-five feet across, the fissured bark a vivid chestnut-red against Sarah's green hospital scrubs and Mac's blue ones. The tree seemed to have been too wide to get a rope around, for both Sarah and Mac were secured not by ropes but by shackles of some kind of silver metal. Each of them was shackled around the neck and also around both wrists, and all the shackles were attached to short chains that led to silver spikes driven deep into the tree.

The shackles looked like they might be made of the same metal as angel-blades.

The teenage girl was just a skinny little thing, with sleek blonde hair. She couldn't have been more than fourteen years old. She was wearing an old-fashioned striped skirt, and a long-sleeved blouse, like a 1940s housewife, and an all-too-familiar blue pendant was hanging around her neck. She was also holding a glowing ember casually in the palm of her hand yet her hand seemed to be unburned.

At the base of Sarah's tree, right by her feet, was a pile of light, dry straw. The girl casually stretched her arm out, till the glowing ember was directly above the straw at Sarah's feet. Sarah flinched, and turned her head to gaze at Dr. Mac again. They both seemed unable to talk — the blonde girl was still preventing them from speaking — but Mac held Sarah's eyes.

Sam said, in a furious growl, "Let them go."

"Why should I?" said the girl.

"Kerry, I assume?" said Dean. "Or are you the Queen?" As he said this he began raising one hand behind Sam's back, planning to slap it to the bloody sigil on Sam's back, but he heard Cas yell, "Dean, NO!" A second later Cas had jumped forward to grab both Dean's and Sam's bloody hands, holding their hands firmly and saying, "No sigils. Don't use the sigils. Don't."

The blonde girl said to Dean, "I would listen to your friend if I were you. Banishing-sigils might be unwise. And, to answer your question, you can call me Kerry if you wish. Though I do rather like 'the Queen'. That's not a bad title. It's... respectful."

The Queen looked at Cas and said, "Castiel, why don't you tell your friends here what this is that I'm holding? And what would happen if you used a banishing sigil."

Cas said, his gravelly voice even lower than usual, "You're holding the heart of a fire elemental."

Dean looked again at the burning ember that the girl was holding. She had it delicately between one forefinger and her thumb now, balancing it lightly over the straw at Sarah's feet, barely keeping a firm hold on it at all.

Cas went on, "And if we used the sigil, you would probably drop it."

"Correct," said the Queen. "If you hurt me, or kill me, or blow me away, I might drop it. And if I drop it on this kindling here, what will happen?"

Cas said grimly, "Sarah will die. And probably Mac too."

Sarah, who had been gazing at Mac silently through all this, glanced over at Cas with a surprisingly stoic expression.

"Sarah," Sam whispered, "Mac. I'm sorry you both got mixed up in all this. I'm so sorry."

But Sarah, amazingly, gave Sam a smile. And Mac just shrugged, as if to say, "Well, you know, these things happen."
"Correct, they'll die if I drop it," said the Queen to Castiel. "Now why don't you explain why."

Cas took a short breath, and said, "If the heart of a fire elemental is touched to dry tinder, the elemental is called to that site immediately and it will unleash all the force of its fire. So... if that ember is dropped on the straw, immediately the fire elemental will consume all the straw. And the tree. And..."

He stopped.

"Yes," said the Queen. "Don't worry, Nurse Helvern, and Doctor MacElroy—" (Dean blinked; he'd almost forgotten that "Sarah and Mac" had any other names.) The Queen glanced back at her two captives to add, "If it does happen, it would happen so fast that you wouldn't feel anything. I do not mistreat my prisoners."

"Oh, great," said Dean. "That's a relief. What a load off my mind."

The Queen rolled her eyes at him, snapped her fingers, and the paper sigils ripped from Sam's and Dean's backs and blew away. She said crisply, her nose wrinkling in annoyance, "Enough backtalk. Though I rather liked your sigil idea, actually. That was clever. I must say Belaniel was right; you three are much more persistent than I expected. Persistent, and rather creative too. In the end I decided to view you not as obstacles but as opportunities. I decided to draw you here deliberately, but I took this bit of insurance— your friends here, and the tinder, and the heart of the fire elemental—in order to enable a calm, reasoned conversation, without having to deal with sigils, and blades flying at me constantly and so on."

"So," asked Dean, "Was chucking the three-hundred-foot trees at us also part of the calm, reasoned conversation? Just curious."

The Queen raised her eyes to the dark clouds on the horizon. "The trees were not from me." With her free hand she took hold of the little blue pendant at her neck, raised it to her mouth and actually bit it.

Far in the distance, there was a weird high-pitched wind-whistle noise. It sounded almost distressed, like a whining puppy. The funnel cloud, still visible far in the distance, seemed to writhe in pain.

Looking at the funnel cloud, the Queen muttered, "You will be punished more later. How dare you ask my enemies for help."

Dean exchanged a startled look with Cas.

"The elemental was asking us for help?" said Dean.

The Queen shrugged. "Some of the elementals do not appreciate the grandeur of my plan. Yes, it was asking you to free it."

"It was asking us for help by dropping trees on us?" said Dean.

"Ah," Cas said suddenly, his eyebrows raising. "It asked us for help earlier too, didn't it? At Christmas? The first tree it gave us was a gift?"

"What?" said Sam and Dean simultaneously.

The Queen gave a grudging nod. "I'll admit it snuck away from me that night too. As best I've been able to determine, it was searching for you, Castiel, hoping to speak with you. But it could not see both your wings, it could not hear you speak, and it got confused about whether it had really found
you, and about why you wouldn't speak with it. Then it saw that the three of you had a very small tree and apparently it thought that if it gave you a bigger tree that you might speak with it, and maybe help it. It was quite dejected that you didn't speak with it; I believe it concluded that its gifts did not meet with your favor. It's been rather depressed ever since. Pretty mopey, to be honest. So today it's been trying to give you bigger trees, still hoping to win your favor, I suppose. Of course, since you still didn't speak with it, or free it, now it's even sadder." The Queen had a small smile on her face now as she added, "I allowed the whole charade to continue simply because I thought it might be a good training opportunity. The complete failure of its attempts should, I think, dissuade it from further disobedience." She glanced again at the woeful-looking funnel cloud in the distance, adding, "I'll apply some corrections of my own."

"Look," said Sam. "Whatever your plan with the elementals, please, let Sarah and Mac go. They're innocent. Take — take me instead." Dean shot a surprised glance at him, hissing "Sam!" under his breath, but Sam whispered back, "It was my fault they got dragged into this." To the Queen, Sam said again, "Take me and let them go."

"All right," said the Queen equably. Sarah's and Mac's eyes both went wide, and Dean started to say "NO—" but the Queen said, "Coincidentally, that was exactly my plan. How pleasant that we've arrived so rapidly at a mutually agreeable arrangement." The Queen waved one hand, the shackles of angel-metal sprung open, and both Sarah and Mac went rolling to the ground, knocked roughly away from the tree by some invisible force. Mac landed hard and gave a rather alarming shout of pain; Sarah tumbled pretty far herself, and seemed nearly knocked senseless.

Another wave of the Queen's hand and Sam and Dean both went flying through the air to the tree, Sam slamming into the place where Sarah had just been and Dean taking Mac's place, their backs against the tree. The shackles snapped crisply shut around their necks and hands. Cas had already started to run toward the brothers, but with one more hand-wave from the Queen, Cas froze in place, his feet apparently stuck to the ground. Both his wings were flapping slightly, as if he were instinctively trying to fly toward them, but his feet seemed stuck in place and he seemed unable to move.

"Hey," said Dean, "I didn't agree to this."

The Queen shrugged. "You were about to. I'm just saving time."

Dean was mostly just trying to stall for time at this point. Keep her talking, keep her talking, he thought, as he added, "I thought you didn't mistreat your prisoners?"

"I don't," said the Queen, with a brief glance at Sarah and Mac, who were wobbling to their feet some thirty yards away. Though Mac was white-faced and was clutching one arm, and Sarah was limping a little as she stumbled over to him. The Queen frowned a little as she noticed this. "Well, mostly all right, at least," she amended, "but those injuries technically occurred a half-second after I freed them, and thus are not my responsibility. And they'll heal, anyway. Merely a temporary inconvenience." She returned her cool gaze to Dean. "I do try to keep to certain standards of behavior. That doesn't mean, however, that I'm fool enough to let my two best sacrifices go. It's you too that I really wanted." As she spoke, she reached down one hand and flicked a stray piece of straw off her striped skirt, and brushed a bit of dust of her sleeve.

Something about her words, and her movements, was nagging at Dean.

"Samuel. Dean," said the Queen, now ignoring Mac, Sarah and Cas completely as she addressed Sam and Dean each in turn. She tucked her gleaming blonde hair back in place behind one ear and said, "Your friends were simply bait to get you both here. I've been monitoring Nurse Helvern ever since she provided medical treatment for the three of you in Wyoming, and the good Doctor here
ever since I realized he had aided you too. But I only decided to take them a few days ago, when I realized that you two are actually the sacrifices I need. Samuel, you will make the best possible meal for the fire elemental. Your soul was not only touched by hellfire, but your blood was tainted by demon blood as well! The fire elemental will simply be delighted with the taste of your soul!" She smiled at Sam cheerily and then turned to Dean. "And you, Dean, you'll be a most excellent meal for the air elemental, I believe; an archangel's vessel should taste most exquisite to an air elemental. As for you, Castiel—" she turned to Cas last, and said, giving him a very piercing look and enunciating each word carefully, "Your role is simply to stand and watch. You need to learn what it is like to see all your plans fail, and your dearest friends die."

She took a breath and added, her voice returning to a rather chipper tone, "And after that, Castiel, once you've learned your lesson, I'll possess you and crush your own consciousness to dust and I'll take your vessel. Please don't take it personally. I simply need a stronger vessel. My previous one was too badly damaged; and this one is too weak."

"Why?" spat Dean, his eyes darting now and then to that terrible glowing ember. The Queen again had the ember so casually poised over the straw at Sam's feet. Sam and Dean were both shackled. Cas seemed frozen still. Mac looked like he'd just broken an arm, and Sarah had sprained an ankle or something, and it was clear that neither of them were a match for the Queen anyway. Things were not looking good. But Dean could at least try to figure out what in hell was going on, so he said, "Who are you? Why are you doing all this?"

"I already told you why I'm doing this," snapped the Queen to him. "Do you have that poor a memory? I explained the entire plan." Dean frowned, baffled, as the Queen turned back to Castiel and said, "It is only fair. After what you did to Ziphius, and to me."

"What he did to you?" said Dean, glancing over at Cas, who was staring at the Queen intently now, his brow furrowed.

The Queen held up her little ember again, saying, "You ruined all my plans, Castiel. Twice. And then, as if that weren't enough, you destroyed my wings." She was nearly spitting out the words now, "Oh, I molted them back, of course; I've still got my tertials, unlike certain pathetic non-angels I could mention, but then you killed my friend, Castiel. You killed Ziphius. You killed Ziphius. So you need to learn what it feels like when your dearest friends die."

"Kerry," said Castiel slowly, still staring at her. "Ziffy... Kerry."

Dean looked at him, baffled for a moment— why was Castiel mentioning "Ziffy"? That was Belaniel's nickname for Ziphius...Cas had never used that nickname himself...

A thought began ticking around in Dean's head. "Ziffy."

Belaniel had had kind of a habit of silly nicknames, hadn't he? Kind of like Balthazar used to do, Belaniel had used "Cassie" for Castiel... And "Ziffy" for Ziphius...

And "Kerry"... or... maybe it should be spelled "Cari"?

Cari, for...

"Calcariel," said Cas softly. "Calcariel."

Dean turned slowly to stare at the blonde girl.

Kerry. Calcariel.
There she stood. A skinny fourteen-year-old blonde girl. Wearing striped clothes just as Calcariel used to. She had flicked dust off her sleeve just like Calcariel used to do; she had just told Dean she had "already" explained her plan to him.

Cas said slowly, "I thought you'd died. But you didn't die, did you, Calcariel? You vacated your vessel. You vacated your vessel. And you found a new one."

The blonde girl nodded. He— no, she, now — tucked her smooth, shining blonde hair behind one hair once more (ah yes... that was a Calcariel move too, wasn't it?), and she turned the heart of the fire elemental around in her hand, smiling at it faintly.

Dean's jaw had dropped open. He said, "Calcariel? But... you died... you died!"

"No scorch-marks," whispered Sam, from the tree next to his.

"What?" said Dean.

"No scorch-marks where Calcariel died," said Sam, looking over at him, ashen. Sam flicked a quick, miserable glance at Sarah and Mac, who were now crouched quietly together at the far side of the clearing, Sarah helping Mac brace his broken arm while they both watched the strange conversation unfold. Sam added, "When I woke up, in Wyoming, I noticed no angel died in that basement. There were no wing-marks. I was puzzled later when you said Calcariel had died there. I assumed I must've just seen it wrong."

Dean was trying to remember the scene now. Calcariel, gripped by Mr. Magma, his flaming wings beating the air; he'd screamed; then there'd been a huge flash of light. When Dean had opened his eyes again, there'd been nothing left of Calcariel but a few drifting bits of wing-ash.

Nothing left but ash, Dean had thought at the time. The smooth stone floor had been intact and unblemished. Nothing left but ash.

Sam was right. There'd been no wing scorch-marks.

"But that flash of light?" said Dean, but even as he said it, he remembered Belaniel, in the Bahamas. The flash of light... Belaniel's vessel crumpling to the ground. Belaniel hadn't died; he'd vacated his vessel just in time. A flash of light could mean the angel had died; or it could mean a wounded angel had fled. Dean should have known that! He'd seen angels vacate vessels with bright light before! Even Castiel himself had been pretty damn bright when he'd switched vessels once; Anna, too, had looked like she'd actually exploded in light once, but she'd merely been flying away.

Bright light didn't always mean an angel had died.

"I thought Mr. Magma devoured you," said Castiel slowly to Calcariel. "I knew Mr. Magma doesn't like the taste of grace, but I assumed you'd been devoured because... Calcariel, there is no way you could have flown with any degree of control! I've had burned wings. I know what those injuries are like. There's no way you could have flown in that state and stayed on the planet at all."

"I couldn't! I didn't! I went shooting straight off the planet! I went past Neptune! I couldn't stop! I couldn't stop!" Calcariel said, his calm veneer cracking completely. Or rather, HER calm veneer cracking completely. Because of course angels could use either sex of vessel, of course they could! Dean had known that, he'd known that! Belaniel had even laughed about the "Queen" nickname, and had even said, "I suppose that's not a bad term for her now."

Dean realized, sickened, that the clues had been everywhere. He just hadn't put it together.
Calcariel took a shaky breath, the new vessel's lovely, feminine face now twisted in an angry scowl, saying, "If it hadn't been for Ziphius, I'd be out there still! Ziphius searched for me. It took her months, Castiel! I was out there in the void months! My wings destroyed, no control at all! She had to bargain for a location spell from the King of Hell himself, but she found me in the end. She... she helped me molt. After."

Calcariel paused, her face twisted in real grief.

Castiel blinked, and said, softly, "Ah, Calcariel. I didn't know. I'm sorry."

"You're sorry? You killed her," Calcariel spat.

"Well, she was trying to kill me at the time," pointed out Castiel. "It seemed fair."

"But you were fighting God's plan!" roared Calcariel, "Breaking your wings was just! It was a just sentence for you! My plan is just, Castiel, you know it is; my plan is correct, it is right! I am doing the right thing! And because of YOU, my wings have burned to a hideous black, my wings will never be white again, and, and, and, Ziphius is dead; but still I WILL purify the world, I will! I will end all suffering at last. God is on my side; you must see that. It is you who have been in the wrong, all along, you who are impeding the work of God, and I who have been right, and the plan begins now."

"But... not until Friday...?" said Sam, hopelessly. Calcariel glanced at him with a short laugh and said, "I told Belaniel that. But really I was just waiting for you fools to arrive. We will begin right now. I'll call the fire elemental first, and then the air elemental; and then, at last, AT LAST, my plan will unfold. I'll send a wall of fire across the world, and the world will be purified. And all our suffering will be over. Yours... and everybody's... " Calcariel's voice softened to almost a whisper as she added, "And mine as well."

Calcariel looked at the burning ember in her hand and spoke a long, complicated sentence in that strange elemental-language. A tongue of fire leapt up out of the ember, shooting up some twenty feet in the air, a single darting, swirling, flickering flame that was somehow supporting itself in mid-air with no apparent source of fuel. Calcariel spoke another word and the flame began dancing around the clearing, leaping from tree to tree like a dancer. It touched the edges of the wooden lodge, and the little cabins to its sides, and the fallen logs on the ground; it darted to some trees in the distance; it bounced back. And as it jumped around, capricious and playful, from tree to tree, from log to log, as it danced through the air like a bright ribbon of orange silk, everything it touched began to burn. Soon there were small fires sprouting everywhere, on dozens of trees, on dozens of the cabins, in all directions.

In mere moments there was fire on all sides. Calcariel spoke one more word and the flickering flame came back into the center of the clearing, paused in mid-air and began to move slowly toward Sam.

"Castiel, do remember," said Calcariel, as the fire elemental drifted lazily toward Sam, "Your only job is to watch and learn."

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A/N -

So, back when I wrote that chapter of Forgotten, I had this in mind all along. Calcariel did not die. He vacated his vessel and fled out the window while Dean and Cas had their eyes closed. The white
light was him bleeding power from his injured wings. Mr. Magma only devoured the empty, damaged vessel.

I thought maybe some people would send in comments then, when I posted that chapter, about the two major clues: (1) there were no wing scorch-marks, and (2) Mr. Magma would never have knowingly eaten an angel, because he despises the touch of grace. Absorbing even a small bit of grace hurts Mr. Magma; even Cas's single alula-feather (inside that orb) stung him pretty badly.

But nobody said a word...

*evil laugh* BWA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA! THIS HAS BEEN MY PLAN ALL ALONG!
Wildfire

A/N - Yesterday was my last day at my old job. What a run of overtime it's been — 12-14 hour work days every day, no weekends off, for months now! Since jibcon in fact. (And all unpaid overtime, of course, sigh) As you've all noticed the fic writing has had to take a back seat. I've still got some science papers I need to work on this coming month but the immediate daily work pressure is off now, so I'm really hopeful I'll get some solid fic-writing time in for Aug & Sept.

The very first thing I did today (my very first day after my job ended) was work up two new chapters for my two current fics, and I'm hoping to keep updating them both weekly after this.

So thank you all for your patience in the last couple months!

We now return to a certain clearing in the redwoods. Just to refresh your memories: Sam and Dean are chained to a pair of trees with Calcariel holding an ember over a pile of tinder at Sam's feet. Cas is standing in the clearing with his feet magically stuck in place and unable to move; Sarah & Mac are at the edge of the clearing, but both injured (Mac with a broken arm and Sarah limping)... and Calcariel is now calling the fire elemental to devour Sam.

The fire elemental floated gently toward Sam, dancing in the air. "No!" Dean yelled, "Calcariel, call it off! Stop it!" But Calcariel just raised her hand a little, holding the fire elemental's ember right above Sam's feet now. The elemental drifted closer, till it was just ten feet from Sam, a tall, flickering ribbon of yellow silk that seemed almost playful, dancing and shimmering in the air. The heat radiating off of it was scorching. Sam cringed against the tree, his teeth gritted.

Maybe it's like Mr. Magma, thought Dean. Maybe we can negotiate with it? He cleared his throat and said, a little nervously, "Um, Mr. Fire Elemental, sir? Or, um... ma'am? Look, maybe we can come to an agreement here. Do you like M&M's by any chance?"

But the fire elemental didn't pause.

"It's not listening," Sam whispered back.

"You're all just toys to it," said Calcariel, who seemed unaffected by the scorching heat. "Just more potential fuel."

Behind Calcariel, Cas made a slight movement, a little shake of the arm. The movement was familiar; Cas must've just slid one his back-up blades into his hand. Dean felt a brief flicker of hope, but Calcariel said, "Oh, please," her voice was laced with bored annoyance. She waved her free hand over her shoulder at Cas, and instantly he was shoved hard to the ground on his back, his wings spreading helplessly as if a giant hand were pressing down on them. His blade slithered away as if it had been pulled by a string. Dean winced; he could only hope that Cas's wing hadn't just been re-broken. Calcariel returned her attention to the air elemental, while Cas lay there, pinned in place, apparently unable to move.

Then: BOOM.
The ember went flying out of Calcariel's hand in a blazing shower of sparks. One particularly bright spark soared over to a different redwood across the clearing, and the entire redwood burst instantly into fire, from the roots all the way up to the crown high overhead.

Somebody had shot the ember right out of Calcariel's hand. Calcariel whipped around and there stood Sarah, of all people, Sarah, still standing by Mac's side but now holding Dean's dropped pistol in a firm two-handed grip— the pistol Calcariel had whisked away when the Winchesters had first arrived at the clearing.

Sarah shot again, bracing herself, one eye squinted shut as she aimed carefully. BOOM. BOOM. She was aiming for the blue pendant now. Mac was looking up at her, astonished.

She's a Wyoming girl, Dean remembered. Grew up on a ranch. And ranch girls always know how to shoot.

BOOM. Another shot. Sarah was still trying for the blue pendant, but now Calcariel was onto her. Calcariel easily deflected the three bullets, and with one easy wave of a hand, Calcariel smashed Sarah flat on her back to the ground. She lost her grip on the gun and it slithered away, just as Cas's blade had.

Calcariel howled in rage, screaming, "You little UNGRATEFUL BEAST! I TREATED YOU FAIRLY!" She gripped the unbroken blue pendant in her hand, the air-elemental pendant, and started chanting something. In a split second the funnel-cloud came roaring close by overhead. The fire elemental was darting away now — it seemed it'd been freed the moment that Calcariel had dropped the ember, for it was dancing up to the treetops now, setting tree after tree on fire with evident joy. But Calcariel still had the air elemental.

Calcariel said something to the air-elemental, pointing at Sarah. The funnel-cloud hesitated visibly, and Calcariel bit the pendant, hard, just as she had before. The funnel-cloud twitched, cringing, and shrank slightly.

But the elemental still didn't move toward Sarah. Instead it made a tiny move toward Dean.

Calcariel screamed at it, biting the blue pendant again and again. The funnel cloud seemed to compress under the unending assault, shrinking down to the ground and folding down into a little dust-devil on the ground, just as the Bahamas one had. It veered from side to side as it tried to make its unsteady way toward Dean, growing steadily smaller. But despite Calcariel's raging, despite all the bites on the pendant, the dust-devil managed to reach Dean's side, till it was buffeting right against the tree.

Dean felt a gust of weirdly strong air near his hand, almost like a hammer had swept very close to him. The silver shackles on Dean's wrists and neck shifted; was the elemental trying to pull the attached silver spikes free, to get Dean's hand loose of the tree? Calcariel screamed and bit the pendant again and the elemental shrank a little. A moment later it had dropped the tiniest tree imaginable right into Dean's hand, and then the little dust-devil cringed away, fading back to the edge of the clearing.

There seemed to be a bit of slack now in the wrist-shackle chain, enough for Dean to be able to catch the elemental's little gift, and turn it around and look at it. The "tree" was ridiculously small, just a tiny seedling really. It must have been the only tree the elemental had been able to carry against Calcariel's direct orders. It was barely two feet tall, just a single spindly stalk with a pathetically small spray of pine needles at the top.

At that point Cas started to crawl away, oddly enough. He'd managed to roll onto his stomach and
was now flapping his right wing dramatically, though the left one was only flailing in pitiful small
shudders, the left wing-tip trailing on the dust in the ground. *Dammit, no, no!* thought Dean, thinking
that Cas's wing had been broken again. But then Cas looked back over his shoulder and cast a sharp
look at Dean — and at Dean's little tree.

Cas was feigning a broken wing. Dean felt certain. Castiel was trying to lead Calcariel away, by
feigning a broken wing just like a mother shorebird trying to lead a predator away from a nest.

And indeed it caught Calcariel's eye. Calcariel spun toward Cas and roared at him, "You SEE what
it's like when a wing is damaged? You SEE how it hurts! Well, it'll HURT MORE SOON, Castiel!"

While Calcariel ranted at Cas, and while Cas flailed his "broken" wing ever more pathetically,
slowing his crawling to an even more pitiful pace, Dean took the opportunity to try to wrestle his
wrist-shackle spike out of the tree. The air elemental had definitely managed to loosen the spike, and
with a couple quick yanks, at last Dean pulled his hand free of the tree.

One hand free now. This was completely pointless. What could you do with a two-foot-tall pine
tree?

*What the hell,* thought Dean, *Maybe I can hit Calcariel in the eyes with some pine needles and just
distract him— her— for a moment?*

He threw the tiny tree at Calcariel.

It was a useless move, an act of desperation.

But the tree did hit Calcariel. Just on the arm, not a hard blow at all, but Calcariel jerked, stiffened,
and toppled over backwards, white light suddenly gleaming at her eyes and mouth. The pine needles
seemed to have plastered themselves against her arm, *and they were glowing bright blue* — the same
blue as the pendant at Calcariel's neck.

Calcariel sprawled there on her back, trying to close her mouth, the white light almost, but not quite,
spilling out of the vessel.

Cas hollered, "THE LEAF! QUICK!" Dean stared at him, and Castiel roared, "THE LEAF! FROM
THE BAHAMAS! THE LEAF IN YOUR POCKET! THROW THE LEAF ON HER!"

*Oh.*

*The leaf.* The last gift from a desperate, captive air elemental — the air elemental back in the
Bahamas. A millennia-old elemental, an unthinkably old creature of eons past, a creature that
undoubtedly had great magic at its disposal. A creature that *had known they would be confronting an
angel.*

Dean open his shirt-pocket, fishing out the Bahamas leaf with one shaking hand, and he flung it
toward Calcariel.

The leaf zoomed straight to Calcariel, carried by a sudden helpful puff of air from the wavering dust-
devil nearby, and the leaf plastered itself right against Calcariel's neck, glowing with the elemental's
blue light. The white light at Calcariel's mouth and eyes grew brighter, almost seeping out. Calcariel
spasmed, her back arching, and she slapped one hand over her eyes and one over her mouth, as if
trying to keep herself housed in the vessel.

Sam called, "MY LEAF! DEAN! I've still got my leaf too! GET IT! I CAN'T REACH IT!"
With a few more ferocious yanks, Dean managed to pull completely free of the tree — he was a little startled to realize that the air elemental had actually broken the shackle-clasps, and in a moment he was completely free. He wobbled over to Sam, dragged Sam's leaf out of Sam's shirtpocket and tossed that one at Calcariel too.

This leaf plastered itself to Calcariel's forehead. Calcariel jerked, spasming, under the triple blow of the pine needles and the Bahamas leaves — the combined magic of two air elementals. Her hands fell away from her eyes and mouth; the white light bulged out; and they all heard Calcariel say, in a very different voice, a thready, high-pitched girl's voice, "Get out! Get OUT! GET OUT! I take back my consent! GET OUT OF ME, YOU SON OF A BITCH!"

A bright stream of white light shot out of Calcariel's mouth and up into the air.

Cas sprang to his feet, both his wings suddenly fine and folding up neatly at his back. Calcariel's magical hold on Cas — and on Sarah and Mac as well — seemed to have broken. Sarah started helping Mac to his feet, helping him cradle his broken arm, and the two of them came limping closer. Sam was still shackled to his tree, staring up at Calcariel, who was now darting around overhead in the form of a streamer of light overhead (Calcariel seemed to be chasing after the fire elemental, which kept dodging him). Dean began hauling as hard as he could on Sam's silver spikes, trying to free him from the tree. The tiny dust-devil was still wobbling at the edge of the clearing. And the blonde teenage girl, Calcariel no longer, was getting shakily to her feet, tears streaming down her face. She yanked at the blue pendant around her neck, pulled it over her head with one clenched fist, and screamed at the top of her lungs at the white streamer of light that was zooming back and forth through the burning trees overhead, "YOU'RE A TERRIBLE ANGEL! YOU LIED TO ME! YOU TOTALLY LIED! AND YOUR STUPID PLAN SUCKS!"

Castiel ran straight to the girl, who shrank back from him uncertainly, eyeing his wings and saying, "Get— get away— you're an angel too— aren't you— aren't you an angel?"

"Yes," said Castiel, grabbed the blue pendant from her hand. "But a better kind of angel. I hope." He flung the pendant to the ground, and ground his heel onto it.

A huge burst of wind roared through the clearing and the dust-devil leapt upward in joy. In a flash it swelled to full-bore tornado size and sprang into the air high overhead, and then it twisted sideways, horizontal, chasing after the slender streamer of white light that was still circling over the clearing. The white light tried to dart away, but faster than thought the tornado chased after it.

Everyone below was staring up in shock — Sam, still tied to the tree; Cas, staring up at the sky, one foot still on the remnants of the pendant; Sarah and Mac, pausing together, looking upwards; Dean, who was still yanking on one of Sam's wrist-shackles; and the blonde girl, still shaking, tears streaming down her face. All of them just stared up for a moment, trying to take in the incredible scene overhead. Vast redwoods loomed up all around them, stretching hundreds of feet upwards. The redwoods were bursting into flame one by one as the flame-orange fire elemental bounced from treetop to treetop in joy, far overhead, and quite a few trees were now in long lines of flames that stretched from their crowns all the way down to the ground. Meanwhile the sideways tornado — the air elemental — was veering crazily across the sky chasing a desperately dodging streamer of white light — Calcariel, of course. The tornado seemed determined to not let the streamer-of-white-light
escape, and was whipping rapidly all over the sky, trying to hem the white light in... with the unfortunate side-effect that bursts of wind kept whipping through the clearing.

And every burst of wind made the fires all around flame brighter.

A shower of sparks drifted down. A moment later a huge flaming redwood-branch plunged to the ground. Everybody jumped.

"Sarah, GO!" Sam yelled, snapping everybody out of their trance. "Mac, you too! Get out of here!"

Dean yanked his attention back to down to the clearing. He glanced around and realized things were looking pretty alarming. Several cabins nearby had caught on fire too, several more trees were in flames, and ashes and sparks were drifting everywhere.

"We can't leave you," Mac said to Sam — though it didn't actually look like Mac was going to be much help, though he was picking up a rock with his good arm and trying to hammer Sam's other wrist-spike loose. Soon Sarah and Mac were both chipping wood away from one wrist-shackle while Cas and Dean both started wrestling with the other two shackles.

"GO!" Sam yelled at all four of them. "You have to go! All of you, get out of here!"

"You took our place," said Sarah, and Mac just nodded. Mac's rock shattered against the angel-metal of the wrist-shackle, and Sarah limped over to one of the fallen angel-blades, grabbed it off the ground, limped back to Sam and began hacking at the tree-bark where the shackle's chain was attached to a silver spike driven deep into the tree. Dean was now trying to pick the latch of the neck-shackle, but whatever the air-elemental had managed to do to Dean's own neck-shackle didn't seem to be very easy to do; Sam's neck-shackle stubbornly refused to open. Cas, meanwhile, had fetched one of his other angel-blades (which were scattered around the clearing now) and had started copying Sarah's tree-chipping technique. Dean spared a glance around the clearing. The fires had all grown. The air was getting hot. At least ten trees around them were burning now, and most of the cabins had caught fire.

"Dean," Sam said.

Dean glanced at him.

Sam hissed, "Get them out of here."

Dean gave Sam one short nod. He groped in his pocket for the VW key and turned to Sarah and Mac. Dean almost had to shove himself in their path to make them stop chipping away at the tree. Dean said, "Guys. Guys. You've got to get out of here. The most helpful thing you can do is, take our van and go get the fire department in the nearest town. Take the girl too. Go to the van— it's the VW, it's parked at the parking lot right over the little bridge— and go to the nearest town and find their fire department. Tell them the music camp is on fire and to send everything they've got."

Sarah and Mac paused, glancing at each other. Dean could see the uncertainty in their eyes.

"You've already done more than enough," Cas told them. "Your role is done. Please, save yourselves — and save the girl too. None of this was her fault."

"I promise we'll be okay," added Dean. "We'll get Sam free. But you've got to go."

Sarah and Mac looked at each other for a moment. Mac gave a short nod, and Sarah grabbed the VW key from Dean's hand. Mac took her arm (there still seemed to be something wrong with Sarah's ankle — it was hard to tell which of them was supporting the other more, actually), and the two of
them made sort of a limping dash over to the blonde girl (who was still staring vacantly up at the darting streamer of light overhead, muttering, "You lied to me... You lied to me..."). Mac grabbed the girl by one hand, barked, "Come with us!" and jerked her roughly toward the trail to the river.

A moment later Sarah and Mac were hustling down the trail, dragging the stumbling blonde girl along with them.

"TURN LEFT AT THE ROAD!" Dean hollered after her. "THE OTHER WAY'S BLOCKED WITH TREES!" They didn't even look back at him, but Dean saw Mac nod and wave. Thankfully the blonde girl seemed to be recovering; soon the girl sped up, started to help support Sarah from her other side. Soon they had vanished into the smoke, down the path between the burning cabins.

Dean turned back toward Sam. Cas was wrestling with the wrist-shackle, trying now to press the points of two angel-blades against it.

"You work on the neck-spike," said Cas briefly to Dean. "Do what Sarah and Mac were trying—try to dig out the spike from the tree-trunk." He tossed Dean one blade, saying, "I think I can get the wrist-shackle off. It's got a mechanism I think I can trip." Dean set to work, hacking at the tree for all he was worth with one of Cas's slender angel blades. Chip after chip of wood flew away, Sam cringing to the side with his eyes squeezed shut as chips of wood hit him in the face.

But it was slow going. "Dammit," Dean muttered. The air was getting smokier, the fires all around them were getting worse, and he'd only gotten an inch down into the wood. Cas was still fiddling with the wrist-shackle. At long last Cas said, "Got it," and one wrist shackle sprang open. Sam whipped his hand free and, annoyingly, instantly started using that hand to try to push Dean off of him.

"Leave," Sam said, his voice gruff. "Both of you. Get out now."

"Shut up," said Dean, shoving Sam's hand away, still hammering at the tree bark.

"LOOK AROUND!" said Sam. "You're both almost trapped. The fire's about to block the trail." Another huge branch plummeted to the ground near them in a blaze of sparks, as if to punctuate Sam's words. "LEAVE!" yelled Sam, still trying to shove Dean back.

"I'm not leaving you, you idiot," growled Dean, knocking Sam's hand away again, so Sam tried to stop Cas next, reaching his free arm under Dean to try to block Cas from working at the other wrist-shackle.

Cas slammed one wing out without even looking, pinning Sam's free hand to the tree with his wing, and said, "I'm not leaving you either. Neither of us is leaving you. Shut up and hold still." Cas was focusing intently on the wrist-shackle, frowning in concentration, pressing the blade tip at some tiny mechanism on one part of the shackle. A moment later he said in triumph, "There!" and the second wrist shackle sprang open.

Both Dean and Cas focused all their energy on the neck-shackle's tree spike then, alternating blows with the angel-blades while Sam (finally showing a glimmer of a desire to live) grabbed the end of the spike with both hands and yanked hard on it, trying to work it free. It seemed to take ages; Dean
was covered with sweat, panting and coughing, wood chips flying everywhere. *At last* the spike came free, so suddenly that Sam fell over backwards into the sea of sparks that was now lying all over the ground. He scrambled to his feet, brushing flaming cinders off his arms, and the three of them turned to run down the path.

And then all three of them came to a screeching halt.

The path was completely gone. All the cabins and trees ahead of them were just a wall of flame.

"This way!" said Dean, pointing toward the other side of the clearing, where the little path continued toward some other cabins. It was the wrong direction, away from the river, but it was the only part of the clearing around them that was not yet on fire.

Soon they were dashing along through unburned forest, past intact cabins. The roar of the fire began to fade away behind them, but soon the path came to a complete end, petering out into a scruffy underbrush of shrubs after the last cabin. A long hillside stretched upwards ahead of them, peppered with boulders, shrubs and occasional redwoods, the great bases of the trees glowing in soft shafts of sunlight.

"We gotta go up the hill," said Dean.

"Dean, this is bad," Sam said, turning in a little circle and glancing all around. "This whole hill is all dry bushes. This'll all go up like tinder. We've got to find the river. Let's head downhill—"

Sam had started to point back down the path, over Dean's shoulder, when he stopped in mid-sentence, his eyes widening. Dean felt a sudden forceful rush of hot air at his back, as if an oven door had opened. He spun around, Cas turning to look too.

The *entire line of trees* around the last cabin was all bursting into flame at once.

The fire was moving toward them, fast, *very* fast. In the next moment the cabin exploded into fire too, so suddenly it seemed it must have been made of paper. A wave of hot air hit them, so scorching hot it felt like they were staring right into an open oven.

"Run!" Cas shouted, pushing them both, and Dean thought *We're not going to be able to outrun this*, but he ran. They all ran, all three of them, racing up the hill as fast as they could. Dean felt the heat searing him from behind, actually starting to sting his skin on the back of his neck. It was hard going clambering up the hill, though, scrambling through bushes and over rocks, and every time Dean glanced over his shoulder the fire was closer still, jumping from tree to tree and crawling rapidly through the grasses just below them. Still they stumbled upwards, choking on the waves of smoke, panting for air. Sam was slightly in front, Dean right behind him, then Cas. Dean risked a glance over his shoulder and saw, over Cas's wing, another tree, closer to them, suddenly burst into flame all at once.

"FASTER!" Dean hollered at the others.

But there was simply no way they could go faster. Dean's feet seemed to be filling with lead. His lungs were aching; he was heaving desperately for breath, and despite the panic, despite the
desperation, he knew he was slowing down.

Dean glanced to the left and right, wondering if they could slant sideways. There was a tongue of flame racing through the shrubs on their right side. "LEFT! LEFT!" Dean hollered, and Sam swung left immediately but then stopped dead, so suddenly Dean ran right into his back. Dean looked up, gasping; the line of trees to their left was aflame.

Then Cas pointed to the top of the hill.

The trees ahead of them, at the top of the hill, were burning. Looking overhead, Dean realized the air high overhead was laced with sparks. The fire had jumped directly to the top of the ridge, from the tall trees behind them to the tall trees in front, and it was crawling down the trunks in front now, crawling down to pen them in on all sides.

Dean grabbed Sam's arm with one hand, and then Cas's with the other, instinctively wanting to drag them both to safety somehow. But how? Where? Where could they go?

Dean looked all around one more time, searching for a gap, for a place to run to. Searching for a strategy... trying to think of a plan... a deal he could make... some magic he could use... something... anything.

But fire was on all sides.

There was nowhere to go.

A tree pretty close, just thirty feet away, was aflame now. Another one, closer still, started burning, fire crawling down its trunk from above. Yet overhead Dean could still see blue sky; the trees closest to them were still unburned. But that blue sky overhead might have been a million miles away.

"No, no, not like this, not like this," Dean muttered, gazing all around. Sam had found a boulder to crouch down next to, and he pulled Dean and Cas a few feet over to the boulder, yelling something about hunkering down — now Sam was trying to push Dean down and lie on top of him, so of course Dean fought him, because it had to be Dean that laid on top of Sam, obviously, and meanwhile Cas was doing something totally weird. He seemed to be trying to rip his jacket apart.

"Help me get it OFF!" Cas yelled, scrabbling at the jacket, "GET IT OFF, GET IT OFF MY WING!" Dean suddenly saw what was going on. The air was so hot, and so many sparks had hit Cas's jacket, that the velcro that held the jacket to the base of his wings had sort of glued together from the heat. Cas was ripping at it frantically, trying to get it off.

He was trying to free the tertials of the right wing.

*The tertials of the right wing.*

Was there a chance? A slight chance? Dean remembered Cas saying, "Tertialled angels have never landed where they planned. Never. It's usually one of three outcomes."

*Usually,* Cas had said. *Usually.*

Could that mean there was a slight chance of a *fourth* outcome? A non-disastrous outcome?

A slight chance of success?

Sam understood at the same moment, and Dean and Sam both nearly jumped on Cas, yanking at the jacket. Then the fire was suddenly ON them, trees just fifteen feet away aflame now, a huge
horrifying wall of fire ripping through the forest all around, the heat unbelievable, the air searing.

Dean couldn't breathe. They were in an oven. They were going to die. They were all going to burn to death. But Cas still had one angel-blade in his hand and he shoved the haft into Dean's hand and Dean ripped it through the half-melted velcro. The jacket came off.

Cas whipped the right wing out and this time it spread fully, the tertials sliding smoothly over each other, shining strangely. Cas grabbed Dean around the waist with one arm, and Sam with the other, hugging them very close, and Dean and Sam both grabbed on tight, Dean hanging on around Cas's shoulders, Sam around Cas's waist. There wasn't a moment to spare; there was no time to discuss, no time to talk it over; for they all knew they had mere seconds left. It was do or die. Now or never. So Sam and Dean grabbed on.

Cas's right wing did one great, weird, strange flap, and they were pulled... sideways.

Dean felt a bizarre twisting sensation in his gut, and abruptly everything went gray.

Everything was gray and misty. The trees and the forest and the grass, the hill, the sky, the sparks flying through the air; all of it went gray. And lacy, and fuzzy at the edges, as if the world had suddenly changed into a black-and-white movie that was slightly out-of-focus. The bright yellow flames were suddenly a cool, eerie white, flickering a little strangely, as if they were viewing the fire from underwater. The scalding, terrifying heat abruptly disappeared, and they seemed to be in floating in a bubble of blessed coolness. The roar of the fire disappeared too; all Dean could hear was his own heartbeat, and the strangely distant sound of Cas's wings beating the air. Or, beating the "ether," apparently?

On the very first beat of Cas's right wing, the very moment they transitioned, the eerie white flames sank down below them, and they shot up above the flaming forest canopy, up above the strangely gray redwoods to the strangely gray sky above.

For one moment Dean thought, *He CAN fly! He CAN! This is going to work!*

But then they were tilting; and then the forest below them began to spin. Dean could actually feel how uneven Cas's wingbeats were. The injured left wing simply couldn't open enough, and it was missing those critical tertials, and already they were going into a pretty bad spiral. They were slanting, tilting, the grey forest and white sea of fire spinning faster and faster beneath them, the ghostly flaming forest tilting strangely, whirling around.

And they were sinking back down.

The whirling forest was getting closer. They were being pulled down. No matter how desperately Cas beat his wings, no matter how tightly he clung to Dean and Sam, he couldn't seem to steer away, and he was being pulled back down.

*We're going down,* Dean realized. *We're too heavy for him. We're being pulled down.*

To the planetary core.
Then he heard Cas yell, "NO — DON'T—" Cas's voice was strangely muffled in the gray fog of the ether, but Dean heard him nonetheless, heard him yelling, "NO, SAM, NO!" and Dean looked over and realized that Sam had let go from around Cas's waist and was trying to pry Cas's arm free from around him. Cas struggled to keep his grip, and Dean flailed down at Sam, trying to grab Sam's shoulder, but Sam got Cas's hand loose.

Cas lost his grip, Dean felt his own fingers brush the edge of Sam's shirt, and Sam fell away.

The moment Sam lost contact with Castiel, Sam himself went gray and fuzzy, just like the gray, fuzzy trees below them. Sam had fallen back to the Earthly dimension. Five hundred feet in the air. Above a burning forest.

Cas was still yelling something. Dean saw Sam's face one last time, gazing up toward them. Dean could have sworn Sam had something like a smile on his face. A small, sad, twisted smile, as if to say, It had to happen someday.

Then Sam dropped away, out of sight, and he was gone.

Dean screamed "SAM!" He distantly heard Castiel screaming something too, and felt him do a convulsive, desperate wing movement, trying to dive toward Sam. But instead they went into a viciously bewildering spin. The earth and sky spun horrifyingly fast around them. Dean nearly lost hold of Cas and flailed for a handhold, just managing to lock his arms around Cas's head and neck and one wing. Cas screamed something again, and Dean realized that his arms had gotten wrapped on the right wing, right over it. There was a terrible lurch; the right wing was struggling under Dean's grip, the left wing fluttering jerkily at the ether. Dean had totally blocked what little control Cas had left.

Quite suddenly the sky above Dean darkened to black. Complete black. Absolute black. Then there was a white round thing zooming past a few feet away. Dean followed it with his eyes, still desperate about Sam, too confused to understand what was happening. A white round thing zooming past... and a little blue ball near it that seemed to be shrinking to a very small size. Shrinking down in the darkness, like a deflating blue-and-white balloon.

Dean tried to adjust his grip, to free the right wing, and lost hold of Castiel entirely.

The grey mist disappeared instantly. The world was completely black. All the air went exploding out of Dean's lungs— there was no air, there was NO AIR, Dean was suffocating, and he was falling, he was falling— no— he wasn't falling, he was weightless! For the little white thing that had zoomed past "a few feet away" was the Moon, and it wasn't "a few feet away"; it was thousands of miles away and moving unbelievably fast. And the blue sphere that was shrinking near it was the Earth, further away still. And now that the gray mist was gone, Dean could see that there were stars all around. Dean was back in the Earthly dimension, all alone, floating all alone in the vacuum of space.

Air was still pouring out of Dean's lungs, his chest was burning with pain, his mouth was full of blood, his hands and feet freezing, his eyes going blurry—

It lasted no more than a second, and then Cas barreled into him, hitting him so fast Dean was sure he felt some ribs crack. The stars whirled sickeningly, but Cas held on, his right wing flaring out, and a moment later they were in the gray ether again. The ether seemed breathable (or maybe people just didn't need to breathe when they were in the etheric plane?) and the searing pain in Dean's lungs eased slightly. His vision was still terrifically blurry but he caught one glimpse of the Earth whirling in front of them, the stars spinning around them sickeningly. Cas couldn't seem to stop the spinning but he threw Dean roughly from one side of his body to the other, as if using Dean's weight to compensate somehow for his uneven wings, and then he seemed almost able to partially steer,
chasing the Earth in wild, veering zigzags. *Cas was chasing the Earth.* Everything was still spinning; but the Earth was getting steadily larger. Larger, larger still, till it loomed in front of them and Dean thought *We're going to crash right into it.* More drunken, veering turns, and then a sickening spiral that made Dean close his eyes.

He buried his face in Cas's chest for a moment, hanging onto Cas with the last of his strength, arms shaking, still retching up blood. Dean managed to open his eyes and glanced to the side.

Everything was an even, glowing orange. *Are we in the center of the Earth?* thought Dean.

He closed his eyes. Opened them again. Lacy streamers of light were flickering in front of him; green, blue, red. *The northern lights?* wondered Dean.

Every time he opened his eyes he saw another impossible sight, for Cas was veering all over the planet now, in wild, uncontrolled zig-zags, trying over and over to get back to the surface of the Earth. Dean kept blinking his eyes open to see one bewildering sight after another. One moment whales were floating all around them. *Whales.* Which meant they were under the surface of the ocean. The whales went whirling away; Dean closed his eyes, opened them again—

Now there were tiny grey dots in front of him. Tiny grey dots on a vast parched brown field. *Elephants,* Dean realized. Elephants, far, far below, miles below, on a parched savannah. Dean closed his eyes, opened them again—

An unbroken view of white ahead of them. Nothing but white. Jagged black lines running through the white, like black lightning against a white sky, in one of those black jagged lines a white dot was swimming: no, it was a bear, a white bear, a *polar bear.* Swimming in a jagged stretch of open dark water. In the middle of the polar ice cap. They must be above the North Pole.

*Hell of a ride,* Dean thought, as the unbelievable images flickered past. *Hell of a way to go.* He hung on to Cas, and closed his eyes, felt Cas's increasingly jerky wingbeats, and waited for the end.

But the end didn't come.

The next time Dean dared to open his eyes they were veering in a huge, uneven circle around a clump of gray mountains that seemed to sprout up out of a vast grey sea. The sky was grey, the mountain was grey, the water was grey, everything was grey, and it was all turning around them slowly, one mountain in particular coming close and then brushing past and then circling away from them, then coming close again. Again and again the pattern repeated, Cas adjusting his hold on Dean a few times as the mountain veered past again and again, and Dean finally realized that Cas trying to reach the mountain. Cas's strategy of using Dean as a counterweight seemed to have given him a small bit of control; but he seemed only able to turn in one direction, like an airplane that had one set of wing flaps disabled.

And Cas was weakening. Dean could feel it. Whatever strange "air" there was in this etheric plane, it wasn't giving Cas enough power; he was having trouble breathing, his chest heaving in huge exhausted gasps. His wingbeats were getting slow and stuttery. The left wing faltered entirely, sometimes dragging loosely behind him for a few seconds, and the right wing was only half-open. And his arms, though they were still tight around Dean, were trembling with fatigue.

But still Cas kept flying

Dean felt Cas take a great breath of ether, all his muscles tensing; and both wings flared out. Braking — or trying to brake? Of course it was an uneven braking— It flung Cas into a sharp right turn— but it seemed he'd planned for this, for the sharp right turn spiraled them *toward* the mountain. They
dropped, they slowed...

Cas ripped Dean's arms free from him, tearing him loose. Dean looked up at him and he saw Cas's face, grim and exhausted, smeared with blood and ash. The right wing was fully spread, the left wing half-open. Cas looked right at him, meeting Dean's eyes one last time. Then Cas put one hand on Dean's chest and shoved hard. Dean tried to grab for him, but it was too late, and they fell apart. Dean got one last glimpse of Cas shooting past him, tumbling into a spin again, and Cas was gone.

Abruptly the world was in sharp focus again, and the colors were back; the mist was gone, and Dean was tumbling forward onto a long low hill of green and brown and white. Dean had long experience at falling, and instinctively he tucked his head and tried to roll, but the impact was terrific just the same, a huge blow that knocked all the air out of him and sent him rolling helter-skelter along the ground. He came to rest in a lumpy stretch of soft moss.

Dean was still. He was lying still. He'd actually stopped moving.

He was lying on some soft, squishy, wet moss, face up, staring at a flat gray sky. It was raining.

For a moment Dean felt nothing at all except the soft, cold raindrops pattering on his face.

Then the pain hit.

For about five seconds it was sheer, blinding agony, gripping him all around his midsection, so bad that all Dean could do was lie there and gasp, his hands clawing at the damp moss around him. He couldn't move at all, and couldn't breathe either, and he was certain that he'd broken something critical. His pelvis, maybe; or both his legs, or his back, or something terrible. A wave of near-panic overtook him then.

But then the pain began to loosen its grip. Dean managed to draw one shallow, shaking breath, and then another. The pain eased a bit further.

The pain lessened further, and further still. Another shaky breath; then a fit of coughs, and Dean curled up on his side, choking up blood, slowly realizing that he was still able to move.

Gradually the pain just faded away into a dull ache.

Dean just lay there stunned for a moment longer, till the ground stopped whirling around him and the coughs began to slow. He was still retching up blood now and then, but slowly he realized that he'd only had the wind knocked out of him. Which, granted, always hurt like hell, but it was a pain that faded quickly. Experimentally he wiggled his toes, and then his legs, and his hands, and felt his ribs; he did have a lot of weird little pains here and there, it was still strangely hard to breathe, and there was definitely something wrong with one leg... but he was alive.

Dean sat up gingerly, stunned to find that he could even sit. He patted his legs and chest and back, still expecting to find shattered bones sticking out.

No bones were sticking out. Dean was still breathing. He was alive.
Dean looked around. He was on a huge, sloping, hillside, sitting on a soft clump of damp green moss that was shaped almost like an enormous pillow. It had broken his fall. All around him were big lumpy piles of the same soft green moss. There were no trees at all; just moss. A soft drizzle was drifting down, and Dean was rapidly getting very wet. It was cold; it was very cold, actually. Below him was a sea of gray fog, above him was more gray sky, and all around was just lumpy weird green moss.

Where was he?

Was this even Earth? Was it Jupiter or Mars or something? Or some crazy alternate "plane of existence" like Purgatory, or Oz, maybe?

Slowly Dean staggered to his feet. His left ankle instantly flared with such a blinding pain that Dean buckled over, almost throwing up all over again. But after feeling his leg carefully he concluded it was a sprained ankle. Still not good, but he could at least sort of walk on a sprained ankle. Sort of.

He looked down, taking stock. His boots were burned almost black, and parts of his jeans were burned too; he could see red, burned skin in places, and he could feel, now, the sting of quite a few other burns here and there. His feet, his legs, the back of his neck, one of his arms. But it seemed to be only first-degree burns, maybe a few second-degree blisters, nothing really critical. It was a little hard to breathe - his lungs still seemed to be hurting, maybe from the hot air of the fire. Or... from the absolute zero of outer space? Gee, let's see, thought Dean, almost laughing, did I inhale fire from a fire elemental or did I collapse a lung while I was in outer space? It's so hard to tell the difference sometimes. His eyes hurt too, and there was still something wrong with his vision, he was still coughing up blood sporadically, and there were weird waves of prickles and tingles running over his skin— frostbite? Nerve damage? Cosmic rays? And his ankle was definitely not in good shape. But it was all survivable.

But what about Sam and Cas?

Sam... He'd fallen back to the Earthly dimension five hundred feet above a burning forest...

No, no, Sam couldn't be dead. He just couldn't. Sam had... he had fallen, but he'd survive, somehow. Dean just had to find him.

Sam had just... fallen. He might be a little hurt, sure, but just a little.

Cas... What had happened to Cas? Where had Cas landed? He must have landed somewhere nearby, right?

"Cas?" Dean whispered. He looked all around, but all he saw was more lumps of moss, and distant drifts of gray fog blowing by. There were no trees at all in view; just moss.

Dean turned in a painful, slow circle, trying to yell, "Cas? ... Cas?" It came out in a dry croak.

Nobody answered. Dean limped slowly to the highest mossy green lump that he could see. It seemed to take forever to get there, for he could only take steps that were about six inches long, placing his damaged foot as carefully as he could with each step and trying not to wince or throw up at the vicious stabs of pain. He reached the top and turned in a slow circle, croaking, "Cas? Cas?" as loudly as he could.

Dean could see quite a long way in all directions. The mossy mountain slope stretched far, far down before him, into the fog. There was nobody in sight for miles.

Castiel wasn't here. He wasn't anywhere in sight.
A terrible thought rose in Dean's mind of Cas out in the blackness of space, all alone, desperately trying to steer, desperately trying to brake, watching the Sun getting bigger and bigger...

Or, possibly, headed out alone and helpless into the infinite black void.

No, no, no, no. That simply couldn't be what had happened. It just couldn't. Cas must have landed nearby. Just out of view. Just on the other side of the mountain. Dean only had to find him.

Dean staggered on, one painful step at a time, shivering now in the damp drizzle, coughing up blood, every square inch of skin burned or scalded or frozen. His thoughts began to circle around slowly, repeating themselves like a toy train running around and around a little circular track: Sam fell and might be hurt. Cas crashed and I gotta find him. Sam fell and might be hurt. Cas crashed and I gotta find him.

He didn't know which way to go, so he picked a direction at random and began to limp slowly down the hill, inching over each big mossy patch slowly. One slow, painful step at a time. One step at a time.

Sam fell and might be hurt. Cas crashed and I gotta find him. Sam fell and might be hurt. Cas crashed and I gotta find him...

The next morning, fisherman Billy Iverson heard a loud thump outside his cabin door. Shotgun ready, just on the chance it might be a big bear, Billy peered out the window cautiously. But he saw only a man sprawled on his front porch, staggering unevenly to his feet.

Drunk, Billy thought, sighing. Drunk fisherman. Nobody got nothin' to do in winter and everybody just drinks. Doesn't help that it rains all damn winter here.

But when he opened the door, he realized that the man staggering slowly to his feet, coughing up blood, wasn't any local fisherman he knew. It was somebody he'd never met before. A man looked to be a little over six feet tall, with short hair. He might've been a decent-looking guy if he hadn't been such a complete wreck. He was seriously beat up, actually. At first Billy assumed the guy'd either been in a bar fight, or in a car crash, but on closer inspection he realized the guy looked like he'd been simultaneously burned and frozen, somehow. All his clothes were singed and all his exposed skin looked burned, yet his fingertips were white with frostbite. And he was staggering, and wheezing and coughing up blood, blood dripping steadily from his nose and one ear, and his eyes weirdly bloodshot.

Billy said, "Jeez, mister, what happened to you?" He touched the man's hand gingerly and flinched to feel how cold it was. Definitely frostbite. It had been a cold night; had the guy maybe been out all night? Limping through the freezing rain?

"Is... this... Earth?" the man gasped.

Billy had to laugh. The guy either was drunk, or delirious from hypothermia. Billy informed him, "You're on Kodiak Island, bro. Gulf of Alaska. You know, middle of the North Pacific? Hold on a sec, I'll call the EMT guys down at the harbor. You better come on inside and warm up."
The man just looked at him for a moment. Then he muttered, "My brother fell... my friend crashed. I gotta find them," and he keeled over forwards, passing out facefirst into a pile of firewood.

A/N -

Those of you who have been sensing another plot twist approaching, here you go.

This entire fic was based on two linked questions that popped into my mind one day: "What if Cas broke a wing?" and "What if Cas got lost in flight, while right in the middle of 'zapping' Dean somewhere?" You all saw the first question very early on in the fic, and now at last we've reached the second one.

More next week!
Dean woke the next day in Kodiak’s little clinic. The staff fussed over him for a bit, and Dean had to listened to a whole speech from a doctor who kept droning on about irrelevant things like smoke inhalation and broken ribs and collapsed lungs and sprained ankles. Dean kept nodding obediently, paying very little attention, and as soon as the doctor went away and the staff left him alone, Dean limped out to the hall, grabbed some hospital scrubs for clothes, changed into them and headed out. To go search for Cas and Sam, of course.

But the sprained ankle was hurting so badly he could barely hobble. He had to keep one hand on the wall, limping creakily along about as fast as a 90-year-old. As he crossed the lobby he tried to stop limping and hurry up to a normal walking pace, so the reception staff wouldn't notice anything, but as soon as he sped up he started coughing. Way too audibly. Coughing up blood again.

Several annoying nurses and residents, not a single one of them as cool as Sarah or Mac, came zooming after him and dragged him back to his room.

On his second attempt, Dean figured out where the crutches were stored, stole a pair and got as far as the side door. Again the damn nurses spotted him.

On the third try, Dean stole a just a single crutch (thinking that would look much more inconspicuous), and went the opposite direction, limping downstairs and then inching through a back laboratory area as casually as he could. But the lab staff eyed him a little suspiciously as Dean scooted out a back door, which turned out to lead to a loading dock with a problematic set of little stairs down the side.

One of the more annoying nurses, a guy by the name of Toby, pounced on him just as Dean was shakily making his way down the stairs.

"You have a collapsed lung!" snapped Toby. "Why do I have to keep reminding you that you had a collapsed lung just yesterday!" He shoved Dean into a wheelchair and began wheeling him to the elevator and back to his room. "Not to mention, smoke inhalation damage to both lungs. Continued bronchial hemorrhages. Two broken ribs. Badly sprained ankle. Repeat, BADLY sprained ankle which you SHOULD NOT be walking on AT ALL for SEVERAL WEEKS. Did you not notice
how your entire lower leg is swollen up like the world's biggest sausage? Maybe you overlooked the
two-foot-long black bruise there on the side?" (They were in the elevator now, where Toby pointed
to the bruise.) "See? That jet black bruise there that's going all the way from your toes to your knee?
Just for fun, let's picture how much subcutaneous bleeding that represents, how much tissue got
torn."

Toby got Dean back into the room, halting his lecturing just long enough to manhandle Dean into the
bed. He then propped up Dean's damaged leg again, handling it surprisingly gently (Dean hissed
with pain just the same). As Toby settled the injured leg back on its pillow and nestled a set of
icepacks around it, he picked up his lecture again with, "Punctured eardrum. Nosebleeds. Your
freakin' eyes were bleeding, Mr. Winchester. Second degree burns just about every-damn-where.
You are covered with blisters and you cannot tell me those don't hurt. You have a fever off and on,
too. Maybe just from all the burns, but still. You had frostbite on your fingers, and by the way it is a
freakin’ miracle it wasn't worse, and another freakin' miracle that your fingertips thawed out okay,
and the last thing they need is to get cold again. I'm suspecting maybe a bit of nerve damage from the
frostbite— I can see you're having trouble holding stuff. And finally you were hypothermic. Did I
miss anything?" He held out the TV remote toward Dean. "All settled? Would you like the TV on?

"I have to go find my friend, and my brother," Dean said, batting the remote away. "I don't want the
damn TV. I have to go find them—" But he went into another fit of coughing. Toby rolled over an
oxygen tank for him while Dean choked out, "They're out there somewhere. I know they are,
I know they're still alive."

Toby sighed as he fiddled with the O2 tank and handed Dean the mask. Dean grudgingly put it to his
face while Toby helped with the elastic band, and Toby said, "Mr. Winchester, you never gave us a
chance to tell you we're already looking for them. Your injuries were pretty obviously due to fire and
some kind of a decompression. I don't think you remember this, but you were talking about your
friend and brother all day yesterday— all about your friend the pilot, and how he kept trying to fly
despite some kind of wing damage, and how he dropped off your brother somewhere. Your plane
must have had some kind of fire, right? And a wing was damaged? And the cabin depressurized?"

A wing was damaged. Close enough. Dean nodded, a little uncertainly, at Toby.

Toby said, "That's what we figured. So, the search-and-rescue teams are already out there. They're
making a third pass right now. They've been combing the whole island, starting from Pyramid
Mountain, where you were. Word is they even got the sniffer dogs out today, and they're going all
over all the mountain trails where you came down. Every Joe Sixpack Fisherman on the island’s got
his eye out for that plane. Everybody's heard how you came staggering down off Pyramid Mountain
from a plane crash and right to Iverson's cabin, because Iverson must've made the rounds of every
single bar on the island yesterday to tell the story. If that plane's anywhere on this island, we'll find it.
Even the fishermen and the Coast Guard are out looking at sea. But you have got to leave the search
to the pros. I'm serious. You cannot leave this bed. Okay?"

Dean thought a moment. If they were searching for a plane... they'd probably spot Cas, right?
Nobody could miss those dramatic feathered wings, not in this treeless green landscape.

He nodded slowly, and said, grudgingly, "Okay."

Toby added, "The FAA's also been by a few times. Nobody's reported a missing plane and for some
reason nobody picked the plane up on radar. So they're figuring your friend had a private plane and
didn't file a flight plan for some reason, is that right? They're coming back later to talk to you. He a
bush pilot, probably? Your friend? Alaska-cowboy-type bush pilot? What's he like?"

"Uh," said Dean. "He's..."
He's an angel. He's a BAMF. He's the best knife-fighter you ever saw. But, he likes fuzzy cows too, and cookies and dolphins. His wings fluff up when he's happy.

He broke his wing, but he tried to save us, he tried to fly anyway....

Dean cleared his throat and said, "Yeah, he's an Alaska-cowboy type."

"What type of plane? We were all guessing, maybe a Cessna 210? Cause, you know, they have pressurized cabins but they're small."

"Yeah," said Dean. "Right. A Cessna 210. That was it."

"You remember what color it was?"

"White and gray and black," said Dean immediately. "White and gray and black. Tell them to look for white and gray and black. Please?"

Dean eventually convinced Toby that he could breathe well enough to get through a few phone calls, and Toby brought him a landline phone. (Dean's cell had gotten soaked in the drizzle, during the hike down the mountain, and was completely dead.)

Dean spent the next hour placing call after call after call to Sam's cell, and call after call after call to Cas's.

Neither of them picked up. Every call went straight to voicemail.

There were all kinds of plausible reasons why neither one was picking up. First off, it seemed very likely that both of them could just be out of cell range, because neither the redwoods of California nor the mountains of Kodiak Island were exactly known for superb cell coverage. Or... maybe both phones were just dead. After all, Sarah and Mac had taken the VW, and both Sam's and Cas's phone chargers (and Dean's, actually) were in that VW. Or... maybe Sam had landed in the river and his phone had gotten wet. Similarly Cas's might have gotten wet in the Kodiak rain, just like Dean's cell had. Or... maybe Cas had dropped his phone during the flight. Or... maybe Sam had managed to grab on to the top of a tree in the non-burning part of the forest (this quickly became Dean's favorite scenario and it really did seem quite possible) and later the firefighters would find Sam while they were checking out the forest, and they'd rescue him with a helicopter, but, in the meantime, Sam's phone had probably fallen out of his pocket and it was probably lying on the ground, right under the tree where Sam was sitting.

All kinds of likely reasons, really. It didn't mean a thing that neither Sam nor Cas were answering their phone.

Dean then thought of calling Charlene, Sam's witch friend with the knack for finding people. He placed the call; she didn't pick up, but Dean left an urgent message.

But she called back half an hour later saying she "couldn't get a fix" on either Cas or Sam.

Dean managed to come up with a few more possible theories to explain that disturbing snag. Maybe Sam and Cas were just too far away from Charlene? Maybe the weather was wrong for her to pick them up? Sunspots or... something? Maybe they were... underground? Well, there were lots of
possible reasons.

The next phase involved several hours of phone calls to every California source Dean could think of, for information on the Great Redwood Fire, as the media were calling it. The fire was still underway, in turned out, two days later now, but it was under control. It had been contained only thanks to swift action by several teams of wildlands smokejumpers ("alerted by a veterinarian and a nurse who happened to be hiking locally," said one news item). After some tricky battling, the blaze had been confined to "only" a hundred square miles. Sadly, though, the entire music camp had ended up burning to the ground, along with several other nearby houses, but no deaths had been reported.

No deaths had been reported. That was good! That was excellent! That meant Sam was fine! (Otherwise a body would have been found. No body had been found, so Sam must be fine.)

Feeling a tiny bit more hopeful, Dean called the fire and police departments of the towns nearest the blaze, and told them all that his brother "Elwood" had been in the woods near the music camp and hadn't been heard from since. That got their attention in a hurry, and Dean gave them a full description.

But no six-foot-four, long-haired guys had been seen anywhere. Nobody had come limping out of the woods. Then there was a long, frustrating conversation involving Dean trying to convince some dimwitted receptionist about the obviously urgent need to send a helicopter to survey the treetops to find the tree that Sam might be sitting in.

The receptionist eventually forwarded him to some kind of fire deputy, and Dean repeated the whole helicopter request. The deputy listened patiently, but promised only to "look", whatever the hell that meant. It was soon clear they weren't going to be sending any helicopters out to inspect the redwoods treetops for possible fire survivors. The fire chief finally got on the line and explained, very gently, that it was not possible to search that large a stretch of forested wilderness— and certainly not now, when half of it was still burning.

"He might've fallen into the river," said Dean helpfully. Again they promised to "look."

Dean had to settle for that.

He finally forced himself to call the local California morgues, too. Just to be thorough.

There was nothing. No remains had been found.

Sam had completely disappeared.

Wait a sec — Sarah and Mac! Dean finally thought. They might know what happened to Sam! It seemed ridiculous he hadn't thought of calling them till now. They'd very likely be looking for Sam too! Probably Sam was with them right now! Probably all three of them were trying to find Dean!

Cas too! thought Dean, ringing the nurse's bell to get Toby to bring the landline back. I bet Cas flew back to rescue Sam— flew back in time or something!— and Cas scooped him up and they landed fine and now they're with Sarah and Mac, and none of them know where I am.

Now that Dean's own cell phone was dead, digging up Sarah's and Mac's cell numbers took a little doing. The receptionist at the Salt Lake City Zoo turned out to be maddeningly resistant to all of Dean's usual ploys for convincing people to give out private phone numbers. Finally Dean tracked down Sarah's cell number via her Jackson friend.

Sarah answered instantly, with a sharp, tight, "Yes?"
"Sarah?" Dean said. "It's Dean."

"DEAN? Dean! Oh my god!" Her shock and excitement almost vibrated through the phone. "We've been looking—we've been calling you!—What's this phone number? Are you okay? What the hell kind of area code is that? Where are you? Mac's here, I'm putting you on speaker—" Dean had to grin a little at her flood of questions, and he grinned even more when he heard Mac's voice saying "Holy moley, Dean how the ever-loving crap did you get out of there? And I really gotta say, Cas is really way more my kind of angel than Calcariel is. That guy was villain-level insane. Are you okay?"

"More or less," said Dean. He was about to ask if Sam and Cas were with them, when Mac stole the words right out of his mouth, asking, "Is Sam with you? Cas too? Are they okay too?"

Dean's question died on his lips.

"Dean? Are you still there?" said Sarah.

Dean had to force himself to say something.

"I'm in Kodiak," Dean finally managed to say.

"You're... what?" said Sarah. "Where?" said Mac.

"Kodiak, Alaska."

Silence on the other end.

Dean added, "It's an island. In the North Pacific. Cas flew me here."

"Cas... flew?" It was Mac's voice again. "Castiel... flew? With his wings? Both wings?"

Sarah added, "To Alaska?"

"Yeah."

Another little pause, and then Mac said, "And... what happened?" There was a doubtful tone in his voice; clearly Mac knew that Cas would very likely have had difficulty flying.

"It... uh...." Dean stopped. "It sort of worked. For a minute." He closed his eyes, gripping the phone tightly and gritting his teeth as the memory of the fiery inferno came over him all over again. Dean and Sam desperately ripping the bandages off Cas's wing... the searing blaze, the flames all around, the horrific sensation of the escalating heat, the sickening realization that they were trapped, that seconds were running out... Cas saying *Hold on*, soaring them upwards... and then his flight starting to falter.

"Dean, tell us what happened," said Sarah.

At this point Dean realized that if he said "Sam let go of Cas when we were five hundred feet in the air," it was going to sound as if Sam had died. And maybe the rest of the story would sound like Cas had died too. And Dean really didn't want to give Mac and Sarah the impression that Sam and Cas were both dead, because that wasn't correct. So he sat there in the bed, staring at the ice packs around his foot, holding the hospital phone to his ear while his other hand knotted up repeatedly on the edge of his blanket, trying to think how to explain about Sam letting go so that they wouldn't get the impression that Sam had died.
It dawned on him then, as if for the very first time, that the reason it was going to sound as if Sam had died was, in fact, because Sam had probably died.

The knowledge seemed to bear down on him like a ten-ton weight, almost squeezing all the air out of his lungs. *Sam was probably dead.*

Again Dean saw Sam letting go, and dropping away. Again Dean saw that small half-smile on Sam's face as he fell. Again he heard Cas shouting, felt him desperately diving, trying to reach Sam, but merely spinning out of control.

Sam had fallen into fire.

*Hunter's burial,* thought Dean, his mouth dry. Sam had fallen five hundred feet *into fire.* If the body burned, the soul could not be brought back. Why had that not occurred to Dean till now? Dad had taught them that from day one.

Sam was probably dead... and would not come back this time.

And Cas... "Cas crashed" wasn't going to cut it anymore either, was it? According to Toby, the Kodiak search team had just finished a *third* sweep of Pyramid Mountain and a complete fly-over of the entire island. If there had been an angel with an eighteen-foot wingspan anywhere on that green mossy treeless mountain, an angel with eighteen feet of those astonishingly dramatic white, grey and black feathers, they would have spotted him by now.

If Cas had been too hurt to walk and had been lying somewhere, they would have spotted him. And if he'd been able to walk, he'd have found Dean by now. There was only one real town on the whole island, and only one clinic, and Cas would have found it.

All of which meant Cas hadn't landed on Kodiak at all.

Which meant the truth, the *actual* truth, was that Castiel was most likely either lost in friggin' *outer space*— well on his way to becoming one of those miserable lonely comets for the rest of his life— or he had fallen into the *goddam Sun* and was already dead. One or the other. Lost or dead.

Sam was probably dead. Castiel was either lost forever, or dead.

Dean had been quiet for a long while now, an empty silence echoing through the phone line. He slowly became aware that he had not answered Sarah's last question, and that Mac had just said something else, but he couldn't even remember now what they had asked, and he couldn't think of anything at all to say. His whole mind seemed to have gone completely blank, so he sat there staring at his foot, hanging on to his blanket tightly with one hand.

Mac said, his voice very gentle, "Dean. Can you tell us what happened?"

Dean took a shaky breath and managed to croak out, "We got free of the tree. Got rid of Calcariel too. But we got caught in the fire."

Sarah and Mac waited. Dean drew another uneven breath. "Cas had to try to fly us out... but... he really can't fly, Mac. I mean, he can take off but he can't... he can't..."

"He can't steer," suggested Mac sadly.

"He can't steer, yeah, and his wing won't open enough and... We should've all died right there. Cas managed to fly us upwards a little bit... But we were too heavy for him. We started to fall back down. And he lost control. We were spinning. Spinning, and... falling."
Dean paused. Sarah and Mac were both still silent.

Dean had to say it. He had to. He took a breath, and forced out the words: "Sam let go."

Silence.

"On purpose," Dean made himself add. "He saw we were too heavy."

There was a soft sigh on the phone, and a murmur of someone whispering, "Oh, no..." It wasn't even clear if it was Sarah or Mac speaking; it didn't matter. Dean stumbled on through the rest of it. "Cas tried to catch him but... he couldn't, he couldn't steer well enough... but... he tried, he really tried, he tried so hard... He went zig-zagging all over. He just couldn't steer at all. It got totally out of control. He barely got me to Kodiak."

After a short, awful pause, Sarah said, her voice quiet, "How high up were you when Sam let go?"

"I'm gonna find him—"

"How high?" Sarah repeated.

Dean swallowed. "Above the trees."

Another pause.

Mac said slowly, "Just to clarify, do you mean... um... above the tops of... the redwood trees?"

The tallest trees on earth.

"Yes," Dean whispered, and after a long, awful pause he heard Sarah begin to sniffle, while Mac started muttering, "Dammit, dammit, dammit...." The sniffling sounds went on for a moment and all Dean could do was listen, helplessly. In the background, he heard Mac saying something, his voice a little muffled now, as if he wasn't trying to speak into the phone but was just saying things to Sarah... or just saying them to himself.

"If I'd just done more wing-stretching for Cas..." Mac said, slowly. "If I'd sped up the rehab for him a little more... If I hadn't cut those tertials... I could've... maybe he could've—"

"Stop that," Sarah interrupted, swallowing down her snuffles. Her voice was faint, too, and again it seemed that Dean was overhearing a private conversation between Sarah and Mac. "Stop that," she said to Mac. You did all you could. You did more than anybody else could have. You heard Dean: Cas managed to fly a little. And Dean's alive. Dean survived."

"Sam might've survived too!" Dean said. "We've gone through such crazy stuff and come out alive — you guys have no idea what that boy can survive, you have no idea the places he's been to and come out alive. He's been to Hell and come back, I mean, literally. Cas too! I'm certain Sam and Cas are both alive, I just know it, I just have to find them—"

"Cas? What?" said Sarah sharply. Mac put in, "Isn't Castiel with you?"

Oh, hell. For the entire call they'd been thinking Cas and Dean were both in Kodiak.

"No... he... dropped me here," said Dean. "He... We... kind of fell off the planet. He dropped me here on a flyby. He couldn't seem to land. He's... I don't know where he is. They've searched the whole island, but... I'm looking for him, you guys, I'll find him, I promise." Goddamnit, now Sarah was sniffling again and Mac had gone completely silent, and Dean said hopelessly, "And I'll find
Sam too, I promise, *I'll find them, both* of them, *I swear* to you—"

At that point Dean's breathing got so ragged he started to cough, and then he couldn't stop coughing, and then he was choking up blood once again. Toby the nurse came rushing back in and took the phone away and wouldn't let him use it again. Dean never got to say goodbye.

Later, as Dean lay in his bed sucking at the cool oxygen in the oxygen mask they'd stuck on him again, listening as Toby took down yet another message from Sarah (who was now apparently calling every hour to check on Dean's condition), it finally occurred to him to try praying to Castiel.

Dean began praying immediately. Praying as hard as he could, as long as he could, with all the concentration he could muster up. He begged Cas to call, or to get in touch somehow.

And finally he had the bright idea of suggesting to Cas, via the prayer, that Cas try to contact Dean in a dream. During their adventure in Wyoming last year, Castiel had managed to contact Dean in dreams many times, even while human. The dreams had been pretty confusing, of course—usually just baffling glimpses of a man in a trenchcoat who Dean had not been able to see clearly. But it had been contact. It was worth a try.

Dean sent out a new prayer about six times in a row: "Cas, if you can hear me, try to reach me in a dream!" Then he got so excited about falling asleep, so eager to start dreaming, that he ended up absolutely wide awake for two more hours, staring in mounting frustration at the ceiling while trying to will himself instantly to sleep by sheer force of will.

Fatigue finally overcame him just past midnight.

He did dream. Terrible dreams of fire. He dreamed of the forest burning, their childhood home burning, Dad's funeral pyre burning... every miserable fire Dean had ever seen, all rolled together into one.

He dreamed of Sam falling, and of the terrifying flight. He dreamed of that absolutely surreal moment out in space... the tiny white moon gliding past so serenely, while Dean, bewildered and terrified and alone, choked on mouthfuls of blood, and knew he was about to die.

He dreamed of how Cas had saved him.

He did dream of Castiel. But it wasn't a contact-dream. No man in a coat setting a hand on Dean's shoulder, no "Buddy" standing before him shaking Dean's shoulders, no Cas by a lake handing him a note. The dream was merely a memory of what had actually happened: Castiel lost in the ether, struggling to fly through the fog, his face covered with ashes and blood, his wings dragging in exhaustion. He was trying to call out something that Dean couldn't quite hear. A grey mist closed over Castiel, and he was gone.

Dean slowly healed, day by day. His breathing steadily improved; the burns and broken ribs began to heal; the frostbitten fingers began to feel more normal. Sarah and Mac almost flew out to join him
Sarah seemed convinced that no other nurse in the entire world other than herself could possibly do a good job caring for Dean's injuries (and Mac seemed to think she might be correct about that)—but Dean managed to convince them to meet him later in Seattle instead. The only reason they were remotely convinceable about this was that Mac was still, himself, healing from his own injuries. It turned out his arm had been broken, and he still had a few necessary medical appointments coming up (which Sarah seemed to be helping him with; it turned out they were both now in Salt Lake City). The two of them had also somehow gotten involved in reuniting the teenage girl with her family in Minnesota. Dean assured them he was doing fine and that he'd see them soon.

The truth was that Dean was still practically crippled. The ankle was seriously messed up, painful and dramatically swollen. He could barely even hobble. Additionally, the frostbite and the burns had, in combination, left him with a frustrating and erratic nerve damage, in the form of weird waves of tingling that kept moving down his arms and hands. It kept making him drop things. (Which really wasn't going to be all that great for little details like, oh, handling guns.) His hearing was still affected, too, because of the burst eardrum—also not really ideal for a hunter. And the sporadic fever, which seemed to be puzzling all the Kodiak doctors, kept coming and going erratically. Dean was constantly kicking off his blankets and pestering Toby to turn the room heat down.

The doctors said everything would heal eventually. Even the eardrum would heal, apparently. But it was maddening to feel so hobbled and vulnerable and weak. *I'm in no shape for solo hunting*, Dean knew.

Just when he really needed to be hunting, too. For Cas and Sam, of course. By now, after several more days in the clinic, Dean had managed convince himself all over again, that Sam was alive somehow. That he had grabbed onto a tree. Or fallen into the river. Or been scooped up by Castiel. Sam was alive, and so was Cas, and Dean was going to find them. He just had to figure out how.

The Kodiak searches ended, the California redwood fire was at last extinguished, and Dean was at last released from the clinic. He could tell, though, by the way Toby and the other staff all gave him pitying, sympathetic hugs when he left, that they all thought Cas and Sam were dead and that Dean was only deluding himself.

Dean didn't care. They didn't know Cas and Sam.

And besides, Dean had come up with a plan. It was a great plan.

Dean was going to make a deal with Crowley.

He met Mac and Sarah in Seattle, after a rough, miserably seasick ride on a Seattle-bound fishing trawler out of Kodiak. (Flying was simply not an option.) When he finally came limping off the trawler on his crutches, exhausted from the boat journey, Sarah and Mac were both waiting at the pier. Sarah assaulted him with such a teary bear-hug that Dean lost his balance and nearly fell over; Mac had to grab him by one shoulder, which wasn't all that easy given that Mac still had one arm in a sling.

Sarah apologized for the bear hug, and they all exchanged a few laughs about Mac's and Dean's respective injuries. The two of them then guided him carefully to the parking lot. There in the marina lot was the VW minivan, though it was barely recognizable. The baby-blue paint job was badly blistered; the whole van was singed and smeared dramatically with soot. Apparently the VW had had
its own close call with the fire, even just from sitting in the music camp parking lot.

The sight of the VW made Sam's and Cas's absence much more obvious. Kodiak had been so surreal, such a completely different world, that Dean felt almost as if life had been on pause there, as if the rest of the world had been frozen still. Sam's and Castiel's absence hadn't felt really all that unusual or worrisome while Dean himself had been in such a strange new place. But now, back here in the lower forty-eight at last, standing in the Seattle drizzle with the VW right smack in front of him, it was suddenly extremely obvious that Sam and Cas weren't here. The VW was here, but Sam and Cas weren't.

Dean limped up to the VW, Sarah and Mac walking closely behind him. After a little struggling with the crutches (and a little help from Sarah), Dean swung the side-door open.

There was Cas's movie-chair. Empty.

There was Sam's duffel. And Sam's jacket, neatly folded, and his books, all lined up in a cubby. But there was no Sam.

There was Cas's backpack. There was the mattress, and Cas's blankets and the two pillows; this was where Cas had slept. This was where Dean had helped him preen his feather-tips once, the tips of those long beautiful wings that Mac had tried so hard to save.

But Cas wasn't here.

Dean began poking slowly through the little piles of Sam's and Cas's possessions, trying to find somewhere to put his crutches. The whole situation began to seem unreal, as if Dean were acting out a scripted scene in a hopelessly melodramatic movie: The lone survivor sifts through the possessions of the dead. His few remaining friends look on in silence. Dean found a good spot for his crutches in between Sam's duffel and Cas's pack, set the crutches down there, and then he forgot what he was supposed to do next. He ended up standing there with one hand still on the crutches, staring vacantly at the backpack and the duffel. Mac had to take his arm and help him hobble into the passenger seat.

Dean became aware that Mac looked quite grim (which seemed very unlike him) and that Sarah was actually wiping her eyes. Yet Dean felt almost nothing, other than that his mind seemed to keep going blank now and then. He began to feel a little bad about his lack of emotion. Maybe he should be sniffling too? Or doing some heavy sighs now and then, or biting his lip at least, like Mac was doing? But it seemed very hard to concentrate, and Dean felt so extremely tired; and also he kept getting distracted by odd thoughts chasing through his mind. Sam's probably going to need another cell phone was one, and I should make a better seatbelt for Cas was another.

They both got Dean settled and insisted on checking him over. It was pleasantly relaxing to sit still in the passenger seat, after the exhausting boat journey, and just let Sarah and Mac do whatever they wanted. Both of them seemed to have switched into a professional gear now, Sarah's hands calm and cool on Dean's skin as she checked his swollen ankle, while Mac examined (with one hand) the lingering burns that were still scattered over Dean's arms and face. Dean answered their various questions as well as he could, but was also aware he was giving them only the briefest possible monosyllabic answers.

Mac and Sarah exchanged a look and soon they retreated a few feet away from the van to discuss something very quietly, out of Dean's earshot. Only a few stray phrases were audible: "...can't leave him alone," from Sarah, and "I've still got some vacation", and Mac saying something about, "...luckily the zoo knows I'll be out a few weeks anyway..."

Dean thought, They don't need any more of this shit. They've already been through so much.
So when, inevitably, Mac and Sarah tried to insist that they both come back with Dean to Kansas to watch over him for a while, Dean refused. Because Dean, of course, was going to make a deal with Crowley, and there was no way he was going to let Crowley anywhere near his few remaining friends.

"You're going back to Jackson," Dean announced to Sarah, as Sarah steered the minivan out onto I-5. Dean craned his head around a little to look at Mac, who was perched in Cas's seat. "And you're going to Salt Lake. We'll drive to Jackson first to get Sarah back to her job, and Sarah, it'd be really awesome if you could take care of Cas's cat again. Then I'll drive to Salt Lake and drop off Mac. And then I'm taking the VW and I'm going and looking for Sam and Cas. But you're both going back to your lives."

About two minutes later Dean had begun to feel very sorry for any doctor in Jackson Hospital who tried to top Sarah in any kind of an argument. By now she was well into a forcefully detailed list of the top twenty reasons that Dean absolutely needed expert medical care and absolutely should not be left alone, and Mac was being no help at all — in fact he kept chiming in, from his movie-chair seat, with additional arguments to bolster Sarah's case. Dean realized he was going to have to tell them some details.

Like... maybe even tell them the truth.

Which wasn't really one of Dean's lifelong habits exactly, but, times had changed, hadn't they?

So he said, in a brief pause while Sarah was taking a breath before launching in on her next twenty reasons, "Okay, guys, I know you want to help. And I know you both want to help me find Sam and Cas, and, I can't even tell you how grateful I am for that. But, here's what I'm going to do: there's somebody I'm going to try to contact. He might be able to find them. I don't know. But, thing is, he's dangerous, and I mean dangerous, and I am telling you flat out, there is no friggin' way I am going to let either of you get within a hundred miles of him. I don't want him to even know you two exist. Especially not after what Calcariel did to the both of you. You guys gotta stay out of this."

Sarah glanced up at the rearview mirror; she was looking at Mac. Mac met her eyes. Sarah raised an eyebrow; Mac shook his head.

"Yeah, Dean, so, no dice," said Sarah. "Now as I was saying—"

Tell them the truth, Dean thought. The actual truth.

"He's killed people who were close to us," said Dean. Sarah fell silent, and Dean went on, "I know you both want to help, but I really am not going to let you get near him. Calcariel treated you semi-decently, right? Fed you, didn't torture you?"

Mac gave a reluctant nod. "Semi-decent for an insane kidnapper, I guess," he said.

"So this next guy," said Dean, "The one I'm about to contact, he makes Calcariel look like Mother Teresa. And makes what you two went through look like a stroll in the park on a Sunday afternoon. I'm serious. He's a full-on torturer. No soul at all. And I mean that literally."

Mac let out a slow breath. There was another silent exchange of looks between him and Sarah, in the rearview mirror. (Dean began to wonder just how much practice they'd had, while in Calcariel's custody, at reading each other's expressions.)

Mac finally turned to Dean and asked, "Who is it? Who are you meeting?"
Dean sighed. *In for a penny, in for a pound.* "The King of Hell."

Sarah snorted. "Nice nickname. So who's that really?"

"The King of Hell," Dean repeated.

Mac blinked at him, and Sarah looked over with a startled glance.

"You're serious, aren't you?" said Mac.

Dean nodded, and Sarah gave a weak little half-laugh, shaking her head and saying, "You and Sam really are big league, aren't you? I kind of had that impression already, but..."

Mac broke in with, "Dammit, Dean, is this really wise?"

"Probably not," Dean admitted. "I've dealt with him before, though. Actually he was chained up in our basement for a while."

Sarah blinked. "You had the King of Hell chained up in your basement?"

"Yeah." Then Dean remembered something. "Oh. He was still there the first time you came to visit, Sarah, actually."

"The King of Hell... was... chained up in the basement? When I was there?" said Sarah.

"Yeah... I guess we forgot to mention that?" said Dean. Sarah's eyes had gotten a little wide, so Dean added, "But with special chains. And he was inside this pentacle design that we painted on the floor. He can't step outside it."

Mac said, "Wait, wait, the King of Hell can't step over paint?"

It did sound a little odd when he put it that way. Mac then added, sounding almost hopeful, "Was he there when I visited? Was I, like, walking around on top of the King of Hell? Please say yes, I'd love to put it on my CV. Does the brand of paint matter?"

Dean tried to gather his thoughts, "Sorry, Mac, he was gone when you were there. The point is, I gotta talk to him and I am not, repeat NOT, going to let you two get anywhere near. Sorry, I'm just not. And if you try to, I will fight you. I am dead serious."

"But it's not your choice," said Sarah. "I mean, not entirely yours."

Dean looked at her. She was driving along quietly, her hands on the big flat VW steering wheel, working her way southward through the Seattle traffic. It was raining lightly now, a steady drizzle, the road gleaming in the dim afternoon light. The only sounds were the hiss of the tires on the wet pavement, and the steady *whup-whup, whup-whup* of the windshield wipers.

Sarah said, "I'll admit parts haven't been fun. But... some parts haven't been all bad." She glanced here at Mac, who reached up with one hand to grip her shoulder. Sarah patted his hand, and Dean thought, *Oh, wait. Oh. Okay.*

Sarah put her hand back on steering wheel (though Mac did not remove his hand from her shoulder), and she went on with, "And now we know what the hell's going on. Part of it anyway. And if you think Mac and me would rather be in a state of blissful ignorance, like rabbits running around on a battlefield completely clueless—"

"Like cows walking to slaughter," put in Mac. "Been there, done that. Don't wanna be a cow."
Sarah nodded, and said, "Even if it's risky, I'd rather know the truth."

"Same goes for me," said Mac. "And honestly, if you think I'll ever be anything other than grateful as hell that I got to be part of this, and help fix Castiel's wing... and meet Sarah here...." (Once again they looked at each other in the mirror.) "And maybe make some kind of a difference with my life, then you are even more fucked up than I thought." He added cheerily, in something more like his normal tone, "And I already thought you were pretty fucked up."

Dean had to smile a little at that. "Okay," he conceded at last. "All right, okay. Look, guys, I'll keep you posted and if you can help, I promise I'll let you know. But for now, let me just take the van back to Kansas. Sarah, I'm not that beat up right now, really. I know I look tired, but with the crutches I'm fine. I'm just tired from the boat. But let me take the van and head back to Kansas. To be honest, I need a bit of time on my own to regroup."

Sarah tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. "Well... promise you'll go straight back to Kansas?"

"Yeah," said Dean. "I swear."

She added, "Promise you'll call and let us know before you go anywhere else to meet this King of Hell?"

"I promise." (There really seemed no need to explain that Dean was planning to summon Crowley at the bunker, without even going "anywhere else.")

The van motored on through the night. A little silence settled over the three of them for a few minutes, Sarah and Mac seemed to be thinking things over; Dean, for his part, was now struggling to keep his eyes open.

Mac finally broke the silence to say, "Okay. We'll call that a reluctant yes for now. But I got a month's sick time arranged already, because of this arm, and the arm's gonna heal way faster than four weeks. And if you try and sneak off on a mission with out us, think again, 'cause I got time now to chase you down. Also, I gotta ask, Dean, where is God in all this, anyway? Not that I've spent my entire career till now trying to save all his endangered critters that are dying out, or anything. And one of his angels too. With, like, absolutely zero assistance from above as far as I can tell."

Dean said, "Yeah so..." He sighed, running one hand through his hair. "Cas is pretty sure that Elvis left the building a while ago."

"Somehow I'm not surprised," muttered Mac. "Seems like kind of an asshole move though, I gotta say."

"You said it, not me," said Dean, with a little laugh. "But yeah... I think we're pretty much on our own. Cas and me and Sam have kind of been trying to hold things together for a while now. Usually unsuccessfully."

Mac said, "What, are you three like, the Fellowship of the Ring or something?"

"I... guess so?" said Dean.

"Well then, obviously you need some more members. And it needs to be called the Fellowship of the Wing, obviously. So which one are you? Cas is probably Gandalf, huh?" Mac thought a moment. "Are you Aragorn or something? Can I be Legolas?"

"I'm Legolas," said Sarah. "He's the only one with long enough hair. Dean and Sam are Frodo and Sam, obviously. You're, like... Gimli, maybe?"
"No, Roger is Gimli," said Mac. "I'd like to be Boromir except he dies. But Aragorn survives, right? He ends up king! I'll be Aragorn. Okay, Dean: you have my sword! Or my scalpel, at least."

Sarah jumped in with, "And my bow! Hey Mac, can I borrow your crossbow?"

"Absolutely," said Mac cheerily. "And I'm sure Roger will offer his axe. He actually has an axe, too."

They were joking, of course; they were clearly just trying to lighten the mood. But Dean found himself suddenly getting choked up nonetheless. The Fellowship of the Wing; You have my sword, and my bow, and my axe. The sense of solitude had indeed been pretty rough, the past several weeks, and the discovery now that Sarah and Mac, and maybe even Roger, might still be on board, even if just for the occasional bit of medical help, was an immense relief.

Dean managed to get out a gruff, "Thanks, guys." Mac clapped him on the shoulder. The wipers kept moving; the dim rainy night stretched out ahead. Next thing Dean knew, a wave of exhaustion was sweeping over him. He barely even noticed when Mac spread one of the blankets over him.

Maybe it wasn't quite as comfortable as sleeping on an angel's wing, but it would do.

Soon he'd drifted off to sleep... and into another of those vague, sad dreams, with Castiel reaching for him through the gray mist. Castiel seemed to be calling something, desperately, urgently, but all Dean could seem to hear was the sound of the rain pattering on the VW's windshield.

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A/N - Wow, it's kind of fun to have Mac there. (He wasn't in this scene in the Destiel version.) I can't foresee yet how heavily involved he'll get in subsequent chapters, but I may just let him carve out his own course. Trust him to suddenly speak up with the best chapter title I've had yet; Mac came up with that on his own.

Hope you enjoyed this chapter. I've learned not to promise when I can get the next one up — my job responsibilities have been so wildly unpredictable! Grant and paper deadlines appear out of nowhere and POOF, there goes all my free time for two weeks. I promise though I will indeed finish this fic; it just may take a while.

Thanks so much for reading!
The Gift

A/N - I'm back! Sorry for the long delay. I was always gonna come back but I had to catch up on my science writing first - I started falling behind on that several years ago when I started writing fics, and it's endangered-species data so I felt this increasing urgent obligation to get it out - plus was told it might help secure more funding for my job (= doesn't increase my salary at all, but would secure more years of employment). I'm mostly caught up now; six papers out or submitted in the last six months! Another two ticking along pretty well. Only to find out two weeks ago that none of the funding came through and my science job will end entirely next January!

The job market is not looking good for my kind of biology (I'll spare you the story of the job search) so I may be out of science for good at this point. So I was thinking, maybe I could try fiction writing, for real? And just keep doing the occasional bit of field research on the side? I'm thinking hard about it. It's scary but I'm so tempted.

In the meantime, at least I got most of the endangered-species papers out, and at last have a bit of time for fiction again. So I'm going to finally finish up Broken (can't stand to leave projects unfinished!). I've started a new SPN fic as well - it's for DCBB, you'll see it in the fall! It'll be my first Destiel A/U and I'm excited about it. :) I am now working on Physiology of Angels seriously too, as a stand-alone book, and I'm also chipping away at on two original fantasy series, including the one that "On The Manuvian Plains" belongs to; more on that shortly. I really hope I can finish all these things some day for you all, but first things first: Broken, the platonic re-write of Flight.

In case you'd forgotten where we were: Sam and Cas have both disappeared after the wildfire, and Dean ended up in Kodiak Island with a badly sprained ankle and some nerve damage to his hands. Mac and Sarah met him in Seattle with the VW van and Dean's dropped them off in Wyoming and Utah at their various homes, promising them that he'll go straight to Kansas afterwards, where he'll rest up at the bunker and not "go anywhere." What Mac and Sarah don't know is that Dean doesn't need to "go anywhere" to summon Crowley-- right AT the bunker. To cut a deal, of course; to try to find both Sam and Castiel.

Two days later Dean got back to the bunker.

He had to fight down an impulse to summon Crowley instantly, and instead forced himself to take the time to re-paint the devil's-trap. Sarah's comment about "The King of Hell was chained up in your basement?" and Mac's disbelieving "He can't step over paint?" had been a keen reminder of how critical it was to make sure Crowley was safely contained. Sam, Dean and Castiel had all gotten far too casual, Dean realized, about keeping a formidable enemy like Crowley right downstairs in the basement for so long.

So Dean hobbled downstairs right away to repaint the entire devil's-trap — the one he would soon be using for a summons. He went over every part carefully with fresh paint, making absolutely sure that each line was clean and unbroken. This required some awkward crawling on the floor on his hands and knees (which was surprisingly painful — his sprained ankle got bent into all kinds of bad positions), but Dean got it done. Then he added some more wards on the walls and door, just to be on
the safe side, and limped painfully upstairs to wait while the paint dried.

There were a couple hours to kill. Obviously the thing to do, while Dean waited, was to prepare for
the next road trip. The road trip that Dean would be starting tomorrow, to go pick up Sam and
Castiel, once Crowley told him where they both were.

So he limped into the garage to take a close look at the VW van. On the long drive home from
Seattle it had become clear that the VW was more damaged than Dean had realized originally. In
addition to the blistered paint, innumerable other problems had cropped up, caused not only by the
fire but by that hair-raising drive through the falling redwood trees in California just before the fire. A
couple windows were cracked, two taillights had been busted by a falling branch, the whole engine
seemed to be clogged with soot and seemed constantly on the verge of overheating (the heater kept
blasting out hot air), and the shocks and struts had taken a pretty severe beating as well.

Should he take the Impala instead? Tomorrow, when he went to get Sam and Cas from wherever
they were?

Dean limped over to the Impala to check it over.

It was dusty! Unbelievable! Unacceptable! The Impala was dusty! He wiped it down at once. This
required a lot more limping, and his sore ankle was soon aching as he moved all around the car,
hosing it off and running a damp cloth all over it with tender care, till its finish was back to its usual
beautiful gleam. Then of course it was irresistible to get in the driver's seat, for just a moment, and
set his hands on the wheel.

Good lord, it felt good. Back in the Impala. It had been months.

The garage door was open....

Moments later the car was roaring down a long empty Kansas road. Dean rolled the window all the
way down, letting the icy wind pour through the car. It felt fantastic; the VW was nice and all,
perfectly functional, lots of space, but oh, the speed, the power that the Impala had! Just the slightest
touch on the gas and it leapt forward like a rocket. The car felt positively eager to be on the road
again; it felt almost alive. This was what he was supposed to be driving. Baby.

But then Dean glanced over at the empty passenger seat.

He couldn't help thinking of Sam, of course; and he thought of Cas. A memory leapt to mind, a
memory from years ago, of Castiel sitting in that very passenger seat. Cas hadn't sat there often, but
after his first failed attempt to find God, after the hilarious whorehouse night and the confrontation
with Raphael, he'd come along with Dean in the Impala. Sam had been off somewhere else (that had
been one of those weird times when Sam had gone stomping off on his own after some dumb
argument) so for once Cas had sat in the front. Right there in the passenger seat.

He must have been wanting a friend, Dean thought now, glancing again at the empty seat. He must
have been wanting somebody to talk to.

Why else would Cas have come along in the Impala with Dean? Dean hadn't really thought this
through at the time, but, looking back on it now, it seemed odd that Cas had chosen to come along in
the car. Because, he'd still had his wings then. Cas hadn't had any particular plans for anything to do
next with Dean. He could have easily flown away, to wherever he'd wanted to go. Instead, he'd
come along with Dean.

Cas had even asked Dean about Sam's absence, and Dean had replied that it was nice being alone.
Which had been a total lie, of course, but Castiel had vanished instantly.

Well, Dean was alone now, sure enough. Empty Impala; no Castiel, and no Sam.

Empty Impala.

*Cas's wings won't fit anyway,* Dean thought. *Especially once Sam's back too. With both of them in the car, Cas's wings will never fit. We've already been through that; it doesn't work.*

He veered the Impala over to the shoulder of the road, steered it through a tight U-turn, drove back to the bunker and pulled straight into the garage. Where he clambered out, gave the Impala a loving pat, and shook a tarp out over it to keep it safely free of dust. Later, someday, there'd be time to figure out how to modify the Impala's back seat so that Cas's wings could fit. Later. But for now... Dean turned back to the VW.

He spent a while assessing the VW's various issues — adding coolant, changing the air filter (indeed it was full of soot), fixing the taillights and repairing a few other issues here and there. At last he took a critical look at the blistered, burned paint. It really was pretty conspicuous.

Dean stepped closer and fingered one of the blistered areas. A cracking polygon of peeling, charred baby-blue paint flaked off in one piece, and Dean was startled to see a different color underneath. The van had been *tan* colored once. Light brown. Somebody'd repainted it baby-blue later.

Tan-colored... it was sort of a familiar color... a tan-colored VW van... where had he seen that sort of vehicle?

A little bell rang in the back of Dean's mind.

Grabbing his crutches, Dean limped back to the library, pulled out his laptop, and pulled up the Nebraska vehicle registration database. It only took a few minutes to pull up the full record of the VW's vehicle-id number. Apparently it had passed through several owners in Nebraska, but, turned out, the VW had actually been originally sold in Kansas. In fact it had gone through a couple owners in Kansas.

A little bit more research uncovered a transaction in Lawrence, Kansas, in May of 1973. It had been sold by a dealership called Rainbow Motors.

Dean stared at the entry for a moment before it clicked.

*Lawrence, Kansas. April, 1973.* A young John Winchester, walking around the lot of a used-car dealership called Rainbow Motors, just about to buy a tan-colored VW minivan. Until a man he'd met in a diner that morning convinced him to take a look at a certain black Chevrolet Impala instead.

Dean stared at the vehicle history report for a while. Eventually he shut his laptop, limped on one crutch slowly back to the garage, and put a hand on the VW's door, thinking, *I don't believe it.*

*This was the van Dad almost bought. Sam and I could've grown up in this VW, instead of in the Impala.*
Maybe it had been supposed to be in the family all along.

It had found its way home to him in the end, though, hadn't it? Or to the Winchester family, anyway. For it was registered to a Winchester now. To Cas T.L. Winchester, anyway.

Dean spent the next hour scraping off all the blistered paint. Then he sat on an overturned bucket and looked at the van a while, thinking about colors. But there was really only one choice.

Black. Gleaming ebony black. Like the Impala, of course. But not just because of the Impala. The VW had to be black because it had been burned, just as Cas's wings had once been burned. The van had been burned while Cas had once again been trying to fly Dean (and Sam, too, this time) out of fire to safety.

Cas had said he wore the black feathers as a "badge of honor." So the van would be black too. First Dean would find Sam. And then Dean and Sam would be driving a shining black van, the same color as Cas's own feathers, when they found Castiel again.

Before painting, Dean decided to empty out the van entirely, to make no stray flecks of wet paint got on anything. The mattress came out, the blankets, the pillows... and Sam's and Cas's belongings. He dragged both their bags out, piling them on the garage floor while trying very hard not to think about when (or if...) the bags would be reclaimed by their owners. Then he lugged out the box of Sam's books. Sarah and Mac had really tidied everything up quite well, in the days that they'd had the van; all Sam's books were neatly lined up in the little box. But Dean was a little disturbed to discover that The Physiology of Angels wasn't in the box with all the other books.

Dean's forehead creased with worry as he rummaged through the books. He'd been intending to bring The Physiology of Angels along on his next road trip, the trip he'd be starting tomorrow, when he would be heading out to pick up Cas and Sam. He'd been planning to finally read the whole thing cover to cover at last. For one thing, it had occurred to him that good ol' Knut Schmidt-Nielsen just might have run across some intel about how to contact lost angels. Or how to help them molt, or how to help them steer. Or... something. Anything. Sam had been read it already, of course... but Sam was (temporarily) not here.

Dean checked the box again, looking at each book cover carefully. No Physiology of Angels. He even emptied the whole box, taking all the other books out, to see if The Physiology of Angels might be lying on the bottom of the box. Nope; it definitely wasn't in the box. It wasn't anywhere in Sam's duffel, it wasn't tucked under the front seat (where Sam sometimes stuck things), it wasn't in Cas's bag either, it wasn't in the first several cubbies that Dean looked through. But finally, when Dean got to the back of the van, to the cubby at the very back that had all of Cas's maps, Dean pulled out the maps and there was a book. A thick, black, leather-bound book, titled The Physiology of Angels.

He flipped it open and riffled through the pages. It fell open instantly to a section near the back, where Dean discovered a torn piece of paper wedged into the pages.

Dean plucked out the folded piece of paper, looking at it curiously. It seemed to be a torn-off corner of one of Cas's maps, and it was folded around something. He turned it over and saw "Sam & Dean" scribbled hastily on one side the paper. Cas's handwriting.

Dean unfolded it. Two four-inch black feathers fluttered out of the page to the floor.

Dean scrambled to snatch them up. Cas's feathers. These were Cas's feathers; Cas's two alula-feathers. One, Dean was certain, was the one from the right wing, the one Cas had given to the air-elemental in the Bahamas. The air-elemental had eventually given it back; and, later, Cas had offered
it to Dean.

*I thought maybe you could have this one,* he’d said. *And Sam could have the other, off the other wing.*

The second feather, then, which was a mirror-image of the first, must be the alula-feather from the other wing.

Something was scrawled on the inside of the torn paper. Cas had been writing in a hurry, and it was barely legible, but Dean was able to make it out:

*For my family. Yours if you want them.*

It came back to him then. That last moment by the VW, parked by the footbridge at the music camp, when Dean and Sam had been pinning the "portable banishing-sigils" to each others' backs. Meanwhile Cas had been stuffing the leftover maps, *and a book,* THIS book, into this very cubby. In fact... that's exactly when Cas had glanced over at Dean and Sam with that cryptic look, a strange expression that had seemed a little sad, a little wistful... maybe a little resigned. There had been something odd enough about his expression that Dean had even felt compelled to walk over and grip Cas on the shoulder and tell him "We'll be okay."

Dean looked back and forth between the feathers and the note:

*For my family. Yours if you want them.*

He knew he was missing something.

Finally he thought to glance down at the page Cas had tucked the feather into. The book was open to a middle of a chapter Dean had never looked at before. A little heading at the top of the page said "Ch 11 - Behavior and the Expression of Emotion," and in middle of the page was a section titled "The Gift of a Feather."

Dean sat down slowly on the rear bumper of the van, and he read.

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*The Gift of a Feather*

*Angels may on rare occasions offer an alula-feather to one or two close companions. This act has particular significance for angels, and it is related to the molt.*

*Recall that full molt occurs once a year and involves replacement of all flight feathers during a period of a mere two weeks (see Chapter 6). During a full molt, the angel is rendered flightless, is typically in a weakened state, may be in fever, and often cannot even stand. Isolated angels that must go through molt alone are very vulnerable. Therefore, most angels turn to their closest and most trusted allies for assistance and protection during molt. The first sign of impending molt is the first feather that drops from the wing. This is always one of the alula-feathers, as the alula-feathers, being on the leading edge of the wing and also employed for handling objects, always suffer heaviest wear throughout the course of a year and are therefore the first to be replaced. They always are the first feathers to drop from the wing as molt begins. Thus a loose alula-feather is a reminder, to an angel,*
of the vulnerability inherent in the state of molt.

The longest alula-feather of a seraph carries additional meaning. Only seraphs have two (not just one) alulas per wing, the longer alula being unique to this class of angels. No other angels have this second, longer alula. This seraphic alula (i.e., the second digit) bears a feather of a unique size and shape, being a full four inches long with a distinctively asymmetrical vane. This feather is more strongly rooted in the alular bones than are the other alula feathers, and is often more imbued with grace. A seraphic alula-feather, if it retains some of this grace, even has power in certain acts of magic; it can in some cases transfer life-force. Since the seraphic alula-feather is so distinctive, it has come to be a token of a seraph's self-identity. Rarely, it may be presented to the elder races to confirm that the feather-owner is in fact a seraph. Even more rarely, a seraph may offer one or both of these distinctive alula-feathers to his most trusted companions.

This act — this gift of a seraphic alula-feather — signifies several things: a request for assistance during the coming molt; a statement of trust and, by implication, of a family bond; and additionally an offer of mutual assistance in the future. It is an act indicating considerable affection and trust, and as such it is a rare gesture. The garrison training that most angels have received over the past several millennia discourages such personal ties. In the modern era (i.e., past six thousand years) angels have been trained to respect and obey a dispersonal command structure reminiscent of the human military. Personal friendships have reportedly been discouraged. Instead the Heavenly command structure prefers that angels exhibit only a dispersonal and rather vague loyalty toward all their "siblings" equally (even siblings the angel has never met; even ones who may have betrayed or abused that angel) — and, needless to say, with obedience to their commander overriding all other concerns. Angels who exhibit any tendencies toward any other personal bonds may even be "reprogrammed," in some cases repeatedly. Rumor has it, however, that certain angels, despite repeated "reprogramming," despite the official discouragement of the alula-feather tradition, sometimes still form friendships nonetheless.

Thus, the gift of an alula-feather is a highly significant gesture, connoting not only trust, respect, and affection, but further signifying a redefinition of family, i.e. with the implication that the chosen companion(s) are considered more a family than are the angel's own genetic siblings.

It is notable that an angel's primary means of communicating these nuances of trust and affection involves a feather. This is yet another indication that angels are, in their very essence, in virtually everything they do, creatures of flight.

Dean read the section three times over. The entire time he read, an image was vivid before his eyes: the memory of Castiel slowly pulling his hand back, the feather untouched (Dean had not taken it). and Cas saying, "Of course. Just thought I'd check... Never mind. Just a random thought."

Cas must have just scribbled this note right afterward, when they'd finally gotten to the parking lot. He'd scribbled the note and tucked both feathers — the one he'd offered Dean, and the one for Sam as well — in the book.

He'd known they were facing possible death. He'd meant it to be something Sam and Dean might find later.
Dean looked at the note again:

For my family. Yours if you want them.

He set the book aside, and placed both feathers in his palm.

Four inches long, both of them. The feather-shafts were way over at one side; surely that was an "asymmetrical shaft"? One of them still had some dried blood at the base; this must be the one from the left wing. Cas must have yanked it out by the root, right there by the side of the road. Probably planning to give it to Sam before the battle with Calcariel began.

Another memory, unbidden, rose to the surface: a memory of a night in Tennessee, when Cas had glanced up at him in the motel room saying, "Schmidt-Nielsen? You've read that book?" And Dean had said, "Well, the parts about feathers."

Cas thought I'd read all the parts about feathers, thought Dean, staring at the two little feathers. He thought I knew what the feather-offer meant. But I didn't know... and I turned the feather down.

And Sam didn't even get a chance.

Dean could only hang his head. "Dammit, Cas," he muttered, gently closing his hand around the little feathers. "Dammit, dammit, dammit."

A few hours later Dean was back in the dungeon, crouching in front of the freshly re-painted devil's trap. The Physiology of Angels was on the table behind him. Dean had tried to look through it for any hints about contacting angels, but had found himself unable to concentrate very much— unable to do much of anything, really, except stare every now and then at the two little feathers, which seemed to be sucking up a lot of his mental energy somehow. He'd finally buttoned both feathers into his pocket, closed the book, and had finally managed to gather his wits together enough to try to summon Crowley.

Dean sliced his palm open (yet again), and spoke the summoning incantation.

Crowley appeared right away, in a dramatic flourish of red smoke that seemed to now include a festive circle of little white sparklers in a ring around Crowley's feet. The sparklers shot showers of bright white sparks all over the room.

Crowley beamed at Dean as the sparklers fizzled out. He said, "Like my new entrance? I thought I'd upgrade a little. Shock and awe, you know— it's so important to get off on the right foot." He glanced down at some of the fizzling sparklers and said, "Too much? Not too lowbrow, are they? Though I guess that would be right up your alley."

"I need your help," Dean said bluntly, far too tired to bother with Crowley's usual game of sarcastic banter. "I need to find Sam and Castiel."

Crowley glanced to the side. He suddenly seemed to be having some trouble meeting Dean's eyes. Instead, after a slightly awkward pause, Crowley turned, rather stiffly, in a little circle, looking all around the room as if inspecting all the walls and corners of the dungeon. Dean frowned; what was
he up to?

But Crowley only stamped out a few of the fizzing sparklers, finished his odd little circle and finally brought his eyes back up to Dean's.

"Gee, Dean, whatever happened to Sam and Castiel?" Crowley asked at last, all bland concern.

*He knows exactly what happened*, thought Dean instantly. *He must know about the fire. Was he in on it? Was he working with Calcariel? What's he up to?*

"You already knew, didn't you?" said Dean. "What, were you watching or something? Wait—" A piece fell into place and Dean said, amazed he hadn't thought of it before, "You knew Calcariel was alive! Didn't you! Back when I made that deal to find Cas's grace! You knew. You knew! And you didn't tell us!"

Crowley shrugged, spreading his hands wide. "You didn't ask. Yes, Calcariel's alive. The sky is blue. Two plus two is four. Is there anything else incredibly obvious that is escaping your attention?"

Dean gave an exasperated sigh. "How did I forget how much I hate you?"

"I don't know, alcohol poisoning maybe?" said Crowley cheerfully. "They say it kills brain cells. Anyway, so what was the problem again?" He made a show of glancing at his watch.

"You know perfectly well," said Dean, struggling to keep his cool. "Sam fell into a burning forest. Cas flew off into... well... he might be lost in space."

"Lost in space. Heh... Danger, danger, Dean Winchester!" Crowley said, starting to wave his arms around like the robot from *Lost in Space*. "Danger, danger..."

Dean glared at him.

"Hey, don't give me that look," Crowley said, lowering his arms. "You're the one who stuck me in this dungeon for months on end watching old TV reruns."

"Can you find them or not?" growled Dean.

"Well... we might have a problem. Neither of those two are really all that easy to locate. Your brother's got those pesky sigil things all over his ribs, remember?"

Dammit. Crowley was right. Sam (and Dean, actually) still had the rib-sigils that Cas had given them years ago.

Dean took a breath and forged on with, "But what about Cas? You cut a deal with Ziphius, to find Calcariel. I know you did. I know you can find angels when they get lost in space."

"Danger, danger—" Crowley began, starting to wave his arms again, but he subsided after another nuclear-grade glare from Dean. Crowley sighed, folding his arms in front of chest, and said, "You know, Dean, you really used to be more fun than this. Yes, I did sell Ziphius a spell. My best locator spell. But that spell won't work for Castiel."

"Why not?"

"That one-winged flightless wonder of yours is just as hard to locate as your galumphing moose brother. Sam's got the sigils on his ribs, and your pet angel has a sigil tattoo to match. He had the inane idea of getting an Enochian tattoo on his vessel, to block location spells. Didn't he ever show
Goddammit. That tattoo. Dean had somehow managed to forget about that.

Maybe Crowley really couldn't help?

But Dean had been certain Crowley could help.

Crowley had to help. Crowley had to be able to find them.

While Dean was trying to regroup, Crowley's eyes began wandering all over the room again — his gaze kept sliding away from Dean — and eventually he noticed a certain book on the table behind Dean. Before Dean could cover it up, Crowley caught a glimpse of the author's name.

"Schmidt-Nielsen!" Crowley exclaimed, with a wide grin. "Now that's a name I haven't seen in a while. Is that Thermoregulation in Hell? That was a classic, I tell you, really shook up the field."

Crowley twisted his head sideways to read the title on the book's spine, and his face fell as he said, "Oh... no, it's just that angel book, isn't it? Not dear Knut's best work, I'm afraid. He didn't really get the best advisors he could have. I'm really not all that fond of the illustrations, either, to be honest."

Dean snatched the book up and clutched it to his chest, feeling that Crowley's gaze could somehow contaminate it. But Crowley only said, eyebrows raised, "Dean, are you actually trying to read that book? I must point out, it's more than a quarter an inch thick — a few grades above your reading level, don't you think? If you run into trouble with all the big words, don't forget there's a glossary at the back! Though... Hm..." Crowley frowned thoughtfully and added, "I suppose you'd have to know the alphabet to be able to look up words in the glossary. That won't work in your case, will it? But I'm sure you can surmount that handicap if you really work at it —"

To Dean's everlasting shame, he heard himself actually start to beg, saying, "Please. Can you help me find them?"

But Crowley was just rambling on now with his usual series of barbed insults, saying, "Here's what I recommend, just start in the glossary with the A's, go one word at a time, don't panic, and take your time. You might be able to understand some of the two-syllable words. Normally I really would recommend Thermoregulation in Hell, but it might be over your head —"

"Can you help me or not?" Dean interrupted. "Do you know any way to track them down?" He took a breath and added, "I'm willing to make a deal."

Crowley dropped the act and looked directly at Dean, his face suddenly an unreadable stony mask. "You really are desperate, aren't you," he said at last. "Such an opportunity! But... alas for me..." A theatrical sigh. "Your brother and your angel are hidden to the spells that I know, and I don't know any way to track them, and that's the truth. So, as much as I'm salivating at the chance to get my hands on that twisted, delightfully guilt-ridden soul of yours, the plain fact of the matter is, I can't make a deal if I can't give you what you asked for. Sorry, mate; them's the rules!" He gave Dean a wide grin.

Crowley couldn't help.

This had been Dean's best idea.

It had been Dean's last hope, actually. Not to put to fine a point on it.

"You can go," muttered Dean, still holding the angel book tight with one hand. His sore ankle was aching suddenly, and he felt so tired that he couldn't even bear to look at Crowley's irritating, hateful face. Instead he stared at the floor, waiting for Crowley to disappear. And trying his hardest not let
Crowley detect the wave of sinking despair that seemed to be dragging Dean's heart down into his boots.

But Crowley didn't leave. Instead he said, "You look a little glum, Dean. Hey! Here's something that might cheer you up! I might not have the spell you want, but I do seem to have a flaming sledgehammer. I haven't found exactly the right taker for it, so I'm putting it on sale! I could let it go for just three human souls. Bargain price! It's a real beauty, too—"

"I said, you can go," said Dean, scowling at him.

"You drive a tough bargain," said Crowley appreciatively. "Okay. Just for you— absolute lowest I can go is two souls."

"What is this, Pawn Shop Of Hell?" growled Dean.

"Oh," said Crowley, his eyes widening. "Oh, my. That's an idea. That's an idea. Pawn Shop Of Hell... Hey... Wait!" Suddenly he was bouncing on his toes with excitement. "It could be a TV show! And I've got just the title!" He spread both hands theatrically in front of him, and announced in a portentous voice, "Hell's Pawn!"

Crowley beamed at Dean, looking absolutely delighted with himself. "Get it? Get it? Hellspawn! It's a play on words, Dean, don't hurt yourself there trying to figure it out. Hell's Pawn! Ha! This has real potential! Hell's Pawn... maybe I could pitch it to the History Channel? It's so much classier than TruTV, don't you think?" Now he'd started to get a dreamy, distant look on his face. "Hell's Pawn..." he murmured, starry-eyed. "Featuring... Crowley, the King of Hell." He began framing an imaginary scene with his hands, swiveling around the room as if checking out the dungeon's potential as a TV set. "Best I can do, for that angel's tear," he said in an artificially gruff, stagey voice to an imaginary camera, "is a soul and a half. So sorry, but, angel's tears are a dime a dozen nowadays. But! Toss in that bloody angel-feather that I see in your hand there and we just may have a deal!"

Dean roared "Get LOST!" Crowley just laughed, but he did finally vanish, though still posing in front of the imaginary TV camera and muttering potential script lines to himself.

Another festive shower of sparklers went off as Crowley disappeared, and then Dean was alone.

Absolutely alone.

A/N -

Ah, it feels good to be working on this fic again.

And once again I'm startled by how easy it is to shift this originally-Destiel fic to a platonic fic — rather than eliminate Cas's acts of affection toward Dean, it is not only simpler, but actually works better, to simply broaden Cas's acts of affection to include Sam as well as Dean. In the Destiel version, Cas gives Dean an alula-feather. I tried eliminating the feather entirely, but it turned out to make more sense emotionally simply to have Cas give Sam a feather too. Because no matter how you cut it, these three are family, and they all care about each other.

If there was something you especially liked in the chapter, a line or an image or an idea, please let me know! I always love to hear from you.
March twentieth. Technically, the first day of spring. But really it was just a day like any other. A day like the one before, and the one before that, and the one before that. As always, Dean woke early in the bunker, several hours before dawn; and as always, he woke out of a nightmare.

Nightmares were old territory for Dean, of course, but these days the themes had changed. There were really just three types now: the "Sam dreams," the "Cas dreams," and the "combo dreams."

A Sam dream was usually a dream of that awful moment when Sam had let go. Often just that one moment, watching Sam fall. Though sometimes Dean then mysteriously teleported himself down to the forest floor just in time to watch a badly injured Sam dying in the flames. The calmest version of the Sam dream (but also the most disturbingly realistic) was a dream with Dean in the bunker, jerking awake to hear his cell phone ringing; when he answered, it was the California authorities calling to tell Dean they'd finally found some charred bones in the ashes of the burned forest.

A Cas dream was usually centered around that last memory of Castiel shoving Dean to safety: Cas's face streaked with blood and ashes, the etheric fog closing over him as he tumbled away, lost forever in that strange grey mist. But there were other varieties of Cas dreams too. A regularly occurring one had Dean stumbling around on top of the mossy mountain and finding Cas's body—both wings broken, Cas's neck broken too, his eyes staring sightlessly at the gray sky. There was also a whole other set of Cas dreams that simply involved losing the two little feathers. Dean always woke out of the feather dreams groping around in the drawer of his bedside table (where he always put the feathers for safekeeping), heaving a sigh of relief when he found they were both still there.

Then there were the "combo dreams" that involved both Sam and Castiel. These had more creative settings. Maybe the Bahamas boat sank with both of them on board, or the tornado killed them accidentally, or they were both crushed by a falling redwood, or the VW burned up with both of them inside. Dean woke one morning out of a particularly vivid nightmare in which all that had happened was that Dean had accidentally deleted a few photos on his phone while sitting at a bar. Including, dream-Dean had realized too late, the photos from Christmas: Sam laughing by his little string of popcorn, and Cas standing at the top of the tree holding the candle, his left wing still bandaged, a puzzled half-smile on his face.

Dean had scrambled out of bed after that dream, in the middle of the night, just to print out multiple copies of both the photos. (He now had copies in his wallet, and several extra copies stashed in his bedroom, the library, the Impala, and the VW, just for safekeeping.)

This morning it was a Cas dream. Fairly standard: just Cas lost in the ether, covered in blood, his face streaked with ash and tears, reaching out to Dean. Dean tried to grab for him but the fog closed over Cas and he was gone. As always.

Dean awoke alone in the empty bedroom in the dark, to hear the last echo of his own voice calling out Cas's name.

He reached out to the bedstand and fumbled for his phone to check the time. Four in the morning. Pretty standard.

He set down the phone and closed his eyes, refusing to let himself turn the light on. The rule was that he had to stay in bed till six a.m., to see if he could maybe doze off again and get a little more sleep.
Injuries healed faster with sleep, and Dean's injuries still weren't healed, and until he healed up more he couldn't really do a proper search through the redwoods.

But of course he couldn't get back to sleep. His heart was still racing from the Cas dream. Dean finally reached over to the bedside table in the dark, pulled open the drawer and patted carefully around inside it with one hand until he located the two feathers. There they were; two little slender shapes, delicate and soft and cool to the touch.

He brought them to his nose for a whiff of that fresh feathery scent and curled there on his side, both feathers still held close to his face in the dark, thinking, _At least I still have the feathers._

Just feathers, though. No Cas; no Sam.

_I'm never going to find them_, Dean thought, then, as the slow minutes ticked by.

_I'm never going to find them._

_Yes, I will. Yes, I'll find them. I won't give up. I'll keep looking._

_I'm never going to find them._

_Yes, I will. I won't give up. I just need a plan._

But what plan? By now Dean had already tried every plan he could think of. He'd been through Plans B, C, D, E, F, and was well on his way to Plan Z. He'd done several more demon-summonings, but no demon would even talk. He'd consulted all the psychics he knew; none of them seemed able to reach Sam or Castiel. In a particularly low moment he'd even searched for Sam's or Cas's ghosts — he'd dug out the old EMF meter and had scanned the whole bunker exhaustively, as well as the Impala and the VW van. Nothing. He'd even tried the Ouija board. He'd tried countless prayers to Castiel; he'd tried summoning Cas too, even adding a ring of holy-fire in case that might help snare the lost angel somehow. Nothing.

Last week, Dean had even driven all the way to the old Mississippi crossroads to try the crossroads spell in its original home. But the only entity who had shown up had been none other than good ol' Crowley.

Crowley had greeted him with a breezy "Just like old times, isn't it, Dean?" but after that he'd barely even looked Dean in the eye. He'd just shaken his head and disappeared, right in the middle of Dean's plea.

Dean had spent most of the time since waiting for his injured ankle (and his nerve-damaged hands, and his persistent fever) to heal up enough to start a search of his own through the California redwoods. This was Plan Z, and it meant a lot of lying around with ice packs, and even some consultations with doctors. ("Avoid stress," a Kansas City doctor had said, about the erratic symptoms of the nerve damage. Dean had burst into laughter.) Meanwhile he continued plodding his way through Plan Y as well, which was to while away the days with research in the library. Dean had been dutifully reading his way through _The Physiology of Angels_, along with multiple other books too— books about angels, elementals, dimensions, summoning spells, location spells, contact methods and every other book Dean had been able to unearth that seemed as if it might have even the slightest bit of useful information.

But none of it had been very useful.

Dean lay now in the dark, in his bed, thinking, _I'm never going to find them_.

Cas thought I knew what the feather meant...

Sam let go...

I'll find them. I just gotta come up with a better plan. Maybe a Plan AA?

At six the phone's alarm went off. Somehow two hours had slid by while Dean had been lying there trying to think of a Plan AA. A thin grey pre-dawn light had started to filter in under his door, from the skylight down the hallway; it was finally time to get up.

Dean set the feathers on the bedside table, flipped on the bedside light and hauled himself upright. He sat on the edge of the bed for a while testing his ankle, trying to flex it a little bit. It was still aching quite a lot, was still a bit swollen, and most annoyingly it was astonishingly hard to move, the main ankle joint seeming almost frozen. At least the nerve damage in his hands wasn't too bad this morning.

Can't even hunt anymore, Dean thought, shaking his hands out and stretching his fingers. Can't run, can barely even walk, can't hold stuff, can't hold a goddam gun straight. I'm just a goddam cripple now.

But today the nerve damage wasn't too bad. Sometimes it was downright painful, to the point where Dean could barely hold anything, but today it was just a bit of on-and-off tingling in one hand. Dean flexed his hands a couple more times, thinking, Well, then, got no excuse not to get up.

Gotta get up.

Dean began the usual routine: Walk down the silent hallway. Step into the silent bathroom. Pee, brush his teeth, get in the shower. Soap himself down. Rinse himself off. Grab the towel, dry off. Brush his teeth, shave. Deodorant. The usual routine... though as the weeks had slid by, it was starting to seem more and more pointless, and some mornings recently Dean was having to force himself to even get dressed.

The usual routine. Underwear, jeans, shirt. Button up the shirt, do up the pants. Belt. Wrap up his ankle with a long snug bandage for support. Fasten the bandage, get the sock over the bandage. Shoes. Tie the shoes. Then pick up the feathers.

This had become a routine part of getting dressed: Dean always picked up the two little feathers and tucked them in his shirt pocket, buttoning the pocket carefully closed. Next he always checked his wallet for the photos of Sam and Castiel. There were two photos of Sam, actually—the recent one from Christmas, and also a much older one that showed a ten-year-old Dean with his little brother, playing together when they were kids. Dean checked all three photos, as he always did, just to be sure they were still there: Sam laughing by the popcorn string, Cas holding the candle, and Dean and little Sammy playing with their little green G.I. Joe army men in the weedy back yard of a nameless motel.

The usual routine continued: Flip the wallet closed and stick it in a back pocket. Strap on the holster, check the pistol, shrug on the jacket. Walk down the silent hallway again. Into the silent kitchen. Start the coffee.

Maybe some toast? Dean picked up a loaf of bread, and put it back down. He didn't seem to have much appetite these days, and rarely had a real breakfast anymore. Today he decided to skip breakfast, and instead settled himself on a barstool and listened to the coffeemaker working. He sat, as he always did, on one of the barstools at the high kitchen table that he and Sam had bought back in January for Cas. There were three barstools, neatly lined up at the high-top table; Dean always sat
in the one at the end, and kept the other two ready.

He waited patiently, hands laced, while the coffeemaker did its thing. The coffeemaker's soft gurgling was the only sound in the entire bunker.

When the coffeemaker finished, the bunker went dead silent again. Dean poured a cup, and then began his patrol.

The patrol was the last part of the morning routine. Back when Cas had still been here, Dean had started patrolling the bunker occasionally to help Cas feel a little safer. (Cas had still been rather unsettled from the loss of his angelic powers, it had turned out — especially, it bothered him that he could no longer intuitively sense whether the wards were still working). Regular bunker patrols, almost always accompanied by Cas and sometimes by Sam as well, had become part of the routine. Dean had not been able to break the habit since.

First he always checked Sam's and Castiel's bedrooms. He'd readied the rooms for them long ago—washed their travel clothes, folded them, repacked the duffels in case they might want to travel right away as soon as they got back, and set the duffels on their neatly made beds. But he still checked the rooms every morning, just to be sure everything was still ready.

Also, there was always the possibility that somebody might have come home in the night and might have been too exhausted to think of waking Dean.

Both rooms were empty. Dean checked all the rest of the bunker next, limping through the long empty hallways. He checked each room, one by one. There was always the possibility that somebody might have come home in the night and been so very exhausted, or hurt or confused maybe, that they hadn't reached the bedrooms at all. It seemed wise to check all the rooms, just in case.

The bunker was empty. Time for the outside patrol and a full perimeter check.

It was a lovely sunny morning outside, bright and cool. Most of the snow had melted off early—February had been unusually warm in this little part of Kansas, and small patches of dense damp snowbanks were lingering only in a few shady spots by the sides of the bunker. Crocuses and daffodils were even poking up around the little front stoop. There also seemed to be more birds singing than usual. Dean checked the date on his phone. Oh right; March twentieth... the first day of spring.

Which meant it had been nearly two months since Sam and Cas had disappeared.

If either of them's still alive, they'd have found a way to call by now.... No, best not to think about that. Dean stuck his phone firmly back in his jacket pocket and began his perimeter patrol, limping slowly around the bunker, checking the whole driveway and the field outside the front door. There was always the possibility that someone might have driven up outside in the night and hadn't had a key to get in and had had to sleep outside. Or, suppose somebody might have flown in injured and had been unable to land smoothly, and had ended up right outside the bunker, or in the nearby fields. It was worth checking.

Dean checked, as always.

As always, there was nobody there.

The springtime birds were pretty noisy, though, singing up a storm now as the sun rose higher in the sky. Birds always drew Dean’s attention these days, and when one flew by right past him to the field
(a chunky, cheerful-looking meadowlark), Dean couldn't help watching how it flew. Its wings seemed so amazingly symmetrical, both wings open wide. And how easily the meadowlark steered! Banking and turning so nimbly... ah, how well it braked, how lightly it landed! It sailed directly to the old tippy fence on the far side of the field, alit on a fencepost in absolutely perfect balance, and started to sing, like landing was no big deal at all.

Dean hated the birds sometimes.

The usual routine continued. Back to the silent kitchen. Refill the coffee mug. Walk into the silent library. Over to the library table to start the morning's research.

Dean had been reading his way through *The Physiology of Angels*. He would have finished it long ago except that he'd developed a rule pretty early on that whenever *The Physiology of Angels* made him really, really want a drink, if it was still before noon he had to switch to another book. (If it was after noon, he could have the drink, but he never got much reading done after that.)

Today, Dean was slogging through the chapter on "Holy Fire and Other Weaknesses". None of it seemed very relevant, but he was making himself go through everything in the book, even to the point of pulling out some calculus books from the library to try to follow the math (the "dimensional travel" chapter had slowed him down quite a bit). This morning he had only been reading a little while when he got briefly excited by a description of a spell that could whisk trapped angels out of holy-fire circles and could even rescue them from the center of the earth. Could such spells possibly be used to retrieve an angel from other places too?

But then Dean noticed a little number at the end of the spell title ("Spell to Free Trapped Angels [1]") which led him to a footnote at the end of the chapter. The footnote said:

> [1] This spell cannot be used to retrieve angels from cometary orbits or any other location beyond the Earth. It is for this reason that self-tertialing is sometimes used as a form of angelic suicide or self-exile. Angels on occasion have been known to sever their own tertials with their own angel-blades, and then have flung themselves deliberately into outer space, knowing full well there is no method to retrieve them by use of magic.

At that point Dean found himself glancing over at the kitchen, where the whiskey bottle was. But it was only ten a.m. (Dean checked), so he diligently ignored the bottle, set the Schmidt-Nielsen text aside and switched over to *Ye Compleat Compendium of Angelic Sightings & Their Communiques With Mankind*.

This formidably thick tome was one that Mac had turned up. It contained a detailed list of old historical accounts of angel sightings in the past, and was probably useless, but Dean had been working his way through it diligently just the same. Who knew; it might have some clues about how angels could be contacted in (or, hopefully, retrieved from) faraway places.

It turned out to be mostly just the confused stories of illiterate, long-ago shepherds from millennia past. It seemed angels had once been in the habit of coming down to Earth pretty often. They'd come to announce prophets' births, they'd performed minor miracles, they'd "purified" towns, they'd intervened in the tiny border skirmishes of the time (which, granted, must have seemed like
apocalyptic events for those involved). And they'd issued proclamation after proclamation about the
tedious detailed requirements of Old-Testament-style religion: what to wear, what to eat, all sorts of
tiny nuances of daily life, and, of course, who to worship. (Yahweh seemed to have had his hands
full for a while there, fending off some other competing gods.) By and large the shepherds had been
easily impressed; there was story after story about people's lives being changed entirely by a brief
encounter with a bright white light and a resounding trumpet-blast or two, at most a flashy wing-
display.

(Okay, so that wing-display move actually was pretty impressive.)

Dean read it all dutifully. Just in case.

And then he saw Castiel's name. A nomadic shepherder in ancient Thrace had met a "vast winged
creature of impossible light" that had called itself "Shield-of-God", aka "Casti'el." With an
apostrophe. Huh.

Cas had apparently come down to Earth simply to deliver a set of complicated instructions about the
butchering of sheep and some rules about camel-trading.

Dean soon ran across several other mentions of Castiel. A tribe of horsemen from the Ural mountains
had an oral-history legend of a "winged spirit" called Castiel who had apparently first told their
ancestors how to tame wild horses. Castiel had shown up in Mesopotamia, too; he'd shown up in
ancient Ur; the traders along the Silk Road had known his name, as had the pyramid-builders in
ancient Egypt. He seemed to have used male and female vessels about equally (something that Dean
found both unsettling and fascinating, for it was utterly impossible to picture Cas in any other vessel
than the one Dean had always known). Cas even showed up in one of the most ancient versions of
the flood legend, the epic of Gilgamesh. He'd apparently popped down to offer some
characteristically blunt criticism about several engineering flaws in the design of the ark.

Twenty-first century America must have been so friggin' bizarre to him, thought Dean.

What had it really been like for Cas? Jumping from a world of illiterate shepherds, a world of
99.99% wilderness, where God had been a daily presence, where actual lion attacks had been a
common problem, to modern America? No wilderness left at all, damn little camel-trading, and no
sign of God. Instead, Cas had been stranded in a world of atheism and science, a world full of
computers, cell phones, movies, muscle cars, classic rock, and Gas 'n' Sip convenience stores... What
had it really been like for him?

Dean and Sam had never really asked.

Truth be told, they'd mostly just laughed at Cas's periodic befuddlement. It had seemed so funny that
Cas didn't know how cell phones worked ... that he'd never seen any movies ... that he didn't know
that cars need gas... that he didn't understand the Wincheters' stupid jokes.

Cas might even have met Jesus, Dean thought. He probably saw the pyramids getting built. Hell, he
might've talked with actual friggin' dinosaurs, and I never asked him about it. I just laughed at him
'cause he'd never heard of Led Zeppelin.

He glanced toward the kitchen.

He checked his watch. Eleven a.m., so Dean switched books and cracked open a thick old book
titled The Uses of Blood in Spells and Summonings. This was a volume he'd found just yesterday in
the piles of tornado-jumbled books that were still heaped up on one of the library's tables. It seemed
possible this one might have more details about a certain blood spell that family members could
sometimes use to find each other. Dean had already known about this spell and had tried it a few weeks ago, using some drops of his own blood. Sam, as a full-blood sibling, should have been easily locatable, but the spell hadn't worked. Maybe this new book might have some clues about what he'd done wrong.

It took a while, but it turned out *The Uses of Blood in Spells and Summonings* did indeed have a few more details. Especially, it had the little detail that the spell wouldn't work if the family member's body had been too thoroughly burned. Apparently, if the family member's blood was completely carbonized, that particular spell would not function.

Dean checked his watch: 12:05pm! He limped over to the kitchen, grabbed a glass and cracked open the whiskey.

It was the usual routine.

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Dean usually went outside for his drinking break. Today he sat on a rock by the front steps, his bad leg stretched out, an ice pack propped on his sore ankle.

He drank, and watched the distant thunderstorms roll by.

It had been an unusually warm March. (It sometimes even seemed like there was a patch of warm air centered right on the bunker.) Unusually warm also meant unusually stormy, and thunderstorm after thunderstorm kept blowing past, gusts of sudden rain pouring down, the trees tossing wildly in the wind.

Could it be the air elemental?

Dean had developed a whole new favorite theory involving the air elemental. Maybe the air elemental had saved Sam and Cas?

And had then... dumped them somewhere random, somewhere distant. Somewhere where Charlene couldn't find them. Somewhere where no spells could summon them, somewhere where the family-blood spell didn't work, somewhere where Cas couldn't hear Dean's prayers and couldn't be summoned to a holy-fire circle, and somewhere where neither Sam nor Cas had been able to find a single telephone in over a month.

Maybe the elemental had dropped them both on their heads (from a survivably short distance—a couple of feet, maybe) and they'd both gotten amnesia from the concussions.

It wasn't a perfect scenario, but it was better than nothing.

It began to rain. Unseasonably warm rain, with unusually strong winds—it *had* to be the air elemental, didn't it? Dean sat in the rain, looking up overhead, half-hoping that a tornado might come floating down out of the sky carrying both Sam and Cas, delivering them lightly and gently right to Dean's feet.

No tornado showed. No Sam or Cas. Thunder cracked and torrential rain came pouring down and Dean ended up completely drenched, as he always did. The whiskey in his glass got pretty watered
down, but Dean drank it anyway.

Things went a little downhill after that. A few more shots of whiskey later, Dean staggered back into the bunker soaking wet, tracking mud and grit and pebbles everywhere. Normally Dean stuck to a rule that he had to clean up the mud and sweep up the pebbles— this was because he had to keep the bunker tidy in case Sam and Cas showed up— but today Dean was far too drunk to do any cleaning, or even to wash his whiskey-glass, and realized soon that he was probably too drunk to even do his customary check-in calls with the Mendocino County Fire Department and the Kodiak Coast Guard (both of whom seemed to be getting rather impatient with Dean's constant check-in calls anyway). And he was definitely too drunk to craft his usual fake-cheerful reply to Sarah's and Mac's increasingly worried voicemails, emails and texts that they were each sending from Wyoming and from Salt Lake City. They always said they were just "checking in," but it was getting harder and harder to summon up the chipper and cheerful phrasing that they both seemed to want to hear. Instead, as the afternoon dragged on, Dean ended up doing something he'd sworn he wouldn't do. Something he knew was a bad idea, but something he was helplessly drawn to, time and time again.

He watched *Homeward Bound* again.

Cas's movie about the three lost animals. The two dogs and the cat.

This was always a terrible idea, but today Dean simply couldn't resist. Soon he was in the TV room, crouched down over the DVD player putting the little silver disk in, handling it with the eager fumbling care of a junkie desperate for a fix. He limped back to the sofa with the remote, and hit Play.

His breath was choking up in his throat even before the cat went over the waterfall; his heart hammered when the two dogs had to fight off a cougar alone; his hands were wringing in his lap at the porcupine scene. But he did okay — till the part near the end. The part where the friendly old retriever, which Dean always thought of as the more Sam-like of the two dogs, fell. The Sam-dog fell, goddammit. Of all the things that could happen, the Sam-dog fell, into a deep hole where the Cas-cat and the Dean-dog couldn't get him out.

Dean was clutching a sofa-pillow to his chest by now, hunched over, staring at the screen red-eyed. The Dean-dog and the Cas-cat finally made it home at the end. And then— Dean had known this would happen, but his heart nearly stopped just the same— the Sam-dog came limping out of the woods unexpectedly, miraculously still alive! The two dogs and the cat had a tearful reunion and the Dean-dog ended up concluding that it was a good thing to have a home and a family after all.

Dean didn't cry. (He had never truly cried yet, and felt increasingly bad about it.) But he was chugging slugs of booze straight from the whiskey bottle by the time the credits rolled. Long afterwards, after the DVD player and TV had both powered themselves off, Dean was lying there in the dark, curled up on the sofa, still clutching the sofa-pillow to his chest, hiccuping and snuffling.

Somehow the entire whiskey bottle had gone empty again.

Eventually Dean drifted into an uneasy, feverish sleep. He woke bleary-eyed and hungover hours later, out of a particularly bad "combo" nightmare in which Sam and Cas— and Meg-the-cat as well,
just for good measure—had all gone over the *Homeward Bound* waterfall together while Dean had run frantically along on the shore trying to throw them a rope that was far too short. Dean woke to find that his arms, shoulders, and even his face seemed practically on fire from the tingles. The hangover was also making him terrifically feverish, as well as nauseous. The whole room seemed to be overheating; for a moment it was pretty dicey whether he was going to throw up.

He managed to choke down the bile, staggered to his feet, and limped to the bathroom to chug a fistful of ibuprofen. (Six pills was about normal, wasn't it?) Then he lay back on the sofa with a cold washcloth on his head till he felt a little better — better enough, at least, to limp around and start the usual evening routine.

The usual evening routine was: Check his main cell number again, and all the burner-phone numbers. Check all his email addresses. Send a cheerful reply to Sarah's latest text, and copy it to Mac. ("Got a great lead. Sorry haven't called, out of cell range. Be in touch soon.") Check Sam's bedroom again. Check Cas's bedroom again. Check around the front door once more, in case somebody might have arrived while Dean had been asleep on the couch. Scarf down dinner. Tonight, dinner was a handful of pretzels, a stick of ancient beef jerky, and a strawberry Pop-Tart. Carbs, protein and fruit; a complete meal.

The most important part of the evening routine: Get out his wallet and look at the picture of little Sammy one more time, and Cas by the tree. Take the two feathers out from his shirt pocket, and set them carefully in the drawer of the bedside table.

Undress, put on pjs. (Dean couldn't help noticing that it had been completely unnecessary to get dressed at all today.) Brush his teeth... splash water on his face....

Sit on the edge of the bed. Put one hand on the corner of the bed, where Cas used to sit.

The first couple times Cas had wandered into Dean's room to chat, it had actually felt like a bit of an intrusion. Dean liked his alone time, after all. When he and Sam had first found the bunker, Dean had loved moving into his very own room at last. He liked having the solitude; the peace. Having Castiel, or even Sam, wandering in now and then for a late-night chat had just seemed like an unnecessary interruption of sleep. Now and then Cas had even offered to "watch over" Dean, and Sam too, while they slept, but Dean had always shooed him away. *I don't need anybody "watching over" me, he'd always thought. I'm a grown man. Hell, I'm a hunter. I can take care of myself.*

Well, he was nicely alone now. Perfectly alone. Not another person in sight. There wasn't the slightest danger now of having his sleep interrupted. Well, except by the nightmares, of course. No need to worry about late-night chats now, because Cas was friggin' gone now, and Sam was friggin' gone too. Absolutely no need to worry anymore about being "watched over".

Long minutes went by and Dean still sat there on the bed, his hand resting idly on the corner of the spreadsheets. The little bedside lamp glowed, its faint bulb casting dim yellow shadows on the empty walls. The hall outside was dark and silent. Idly, Dean wondered what time it was. Midnight, maybe? Hard to tell... well, it didn't really matter much. Whatever time it was, the hours would just drift on by, as they always did; he would sleep, or he would wake; now and again he would eat, or he would drink; now and then he'd take a shower, or wash his clothes, or go buy some food or some booze, or go drive the Impala around; maybe he'd go get a drink in some no-name bar, mechanically flirt with some generic girl, maybe even sleep with her — but always, always ditch her in the morning. He'd read his way through every book in the library eventually, and maybe his injuries would eventually heal, and maybe someday he could do the search through the redwoods, and after that he'd start hunting again, on his own. But Sam's room would still be empty, and Cas's room would still be empty, and nobody was ever going to come into Dean's room again to sit on the corner
of his bed and talk.

Certainly no angel would ever again offer to watch over Dean while he slept.

"I screwed up, Cas," Dean murmured aloud.

After a time he added, "I really wouldn't mind any more if you did that watching-over thing...."

Finally he realized he should lie down. He really was feeling pretty bad: his ankle was throbbing, his head hurt, his hands had started tingling again, everything hurt actually, and he was starting to feel pretty hot and feverish and nauseous again. He felt almost too tired and too sick to do the final last steps of actually going to bed. At last he shook out some more painkillers and sleeping pills from the big bottles of pills that were always sitting by the bedside lamp, swallowed the pills down dry, and fumbled his way under the covers. To catch a few hours of sleep, till another round of nightmares awoke him at four the next morning.

All in all, it had been a pretty routine day.

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